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The Changing Fabric of Adult Basic Education in Kansas

Jeff Zacharakis

Globalization is changing the demographic fabric of a world in which people are not only mobilizing in search of jobs and economic opportunity but so are technology and capital mobilizing in search of cheap labor. In this competitive business environment, it is often easier to transfer technology and capital to developing countries where there is cheap, unskilled labor than to invest in new infrastructure in a locale where labor and environmental costs are high (Korsgaard, 1997). Likewise, as native population growth in most Western and developed countries is either stagnant or declining, there is great demand for new immigrants to fill the workforce and maintain their industrial engines. To prove this point, one has only to drive through many Midwestern and Plains states where, if it were not for immigration, many of their towns would have dried up and faded away.

An argument can be made that immigration is revitalizing these rural communities by providing a pool of cheap labor and thereby making these communities more competitive in the global marketplace. By educating new immigrants and the undereducated, are we diminishing their ability to be employable, or are we creating opportunities so they can move up on society's economic ladder? Is the purpose of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes merely to raise the technical skills of adult learners, or is it to provide opportunities for these learners to become culturally, politically, and linguistically literate whereby they can be more self-sufficient with less opportunity of being exploited? One fundamental paradox in this scenario is whether ABE and ESL classes should be promoted for their benefits to civil society or for the individual technical goals of reading, writing, and arithmetic?

UNESCO (2006) reported that about 771 million people aged 15 and above were illiterate, and for every illiterate man there were approximately two illiterate women. Illiteracy is linked not only to poverty and exploitation, it also is a barrier to "economic, social, and political participation and development, especially in today's knowledge society" (p.2). Yet being literate and having formal education, whether high school or college, does not guarantee a pathway out of poverty. For the least educated, literacy and basic education are both a personal accomplishment and a tool of industrial development. Some argue that this industrial development, of which education and training are an integral part, has led to the degradation and erosion of communities and culture all under the guise of individual and collective emancipation (Finger and Asun, 1999). Often adult education in many communities results in out-migration as newly educated adults

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search for greater opportunity. Unfortunately, without these technical tools, people are more likely to be exploited and relegated to low wage and unskilled jobs. This is especially true for women and, more specifically, women of color.

Hence it is difficult to look at ABE and literacy education separate from local politics and economics. In Kansas as well as the rest of the United States, there is the ever present if not growing need for ABE and ESL classes. Limited funding is one of biggest hurdles to offering more classes. The vast majority of these adult learning centers have strong ties to their local community, working out of buildings where their students have easy access and feel comfortable. Though many of these centers are affiliated with the local school district or community college, their financial base is typically independent of their host institution. Anecdotally, I have never visited a well-endowed adult education center that had excess money to hire more teachers and purchase new equipment and furniture. Most operate at a shoestring level reflecting the value that society places on their mission and their students. Hence, my perspective is that in order to understand ABE and ESL education we must frame it within industrial development and its value within the context of the underclass, minority groups, and immigrants. As Youngman (2000) argued, "it is doubtful whether literacy workers, industrial training officers and lecturers of part-time university courses often consider the commonalities in their work of helping adults to develop particular skills, knowledge, values and attitudes [required for industrial development]" (p.5).

Is it the role of adult education to redress the problems of social inequality, or to affirm the status quo? Historically adult educators, dating back to Jane Addams' vision of education in settlement houses (Addams, 1892), Highlander Folk School's efforts to empower coal miners in Appalachia and train southern civil rights workers (Horton, 1989), and Freire's (1970) literacy training with indigenous people in northeast Brazil, have seen themselves as facilitators of greater social opportunity. Yet as Youngman (2000) pointed out:

In the 1980s...it was counterposed by the radical tradition which applied the theories of reproduction and resistance to adult education. From this perspective, most adult education activities reinforced class and gender inequalities but there were examples of programmes with a collective purpose which deliberately sought to overcome them through the transformation of capitalist society.

Since the mid-1980s the dominant paradigm of adult education in the North [primarily the United States and Western Europe] has been that of meeting the needs of business and industry, and the radical, social action tradition has been in retreat. (pp. 155-156)

In other words, as long as adult education focuses on individual skill building, the inherent social inequities of the status quo will be preserved. The alternative is to develop collective educational strategies and approaches that seek to enhance a community's capacity and skills.

As traditional industries such as steel and automobile factories relocate around the world, the argument is continually being made in the United States that physical labor is being replaced by intellectual labor (Friedman, 2000; Reich, 1992). Still this industrial transformation has not eliminated the need for unskilled labor to perform jobs that cannot be exported, such as farm labor, lawn care, hotel-motel service, and meatpacking. Accepting the fact that not every citizen in the United States will be able to profit from the educational panacea

in this intellectual industrial revolution, then we must ask ourselves who will fill this demand for low-skilled and low-wage labor? To fill this need, many communities need to embrace immigration of foreign workers who probably don't look like them or speak their language, and to accept the challenge to train the underclass and undereducated to fill these unskilled jobs. In order to acculturate these new immigrants into their communities and train the underemployed, educational structures need to be established and strategies developed that address the political economy of adult education and ABE and ESL classes.

The Political Economy of Immigration

Every time I eat out at a restaurant, watch a new house or commercial building being erected, drive by a packing plant or factory, or buy groceries, I can't help but notice that the cultural fabric of Kansas is changing, becoming more colorful and diverse. As I listen to people speak different languages, with different accents, it is impossible to determine whether or not they are working here legally. Yet it appears that they are industrious workers and that our economy is in need of their labor and services. For many, there are hard feelings toward anyone who does not speak English, and they argue that people should not be legal citizens until they are fluent in English and speak without accent. This problem is compounded when non-English speakers—especially Spanish speaking Latinos—are automatically assumed to be here illegally, taking jobs from citizens who would be more than willing to fix my roof, bus my table, or work in a packing plant processing my meat. Moreover, these workers appear to be docile and vulnerable, preferring to stay hidden within their communities and performing work their employers ask without any hint of dissatisfaction or complaints. Sparks (1998) attributed this learned behavior to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, or:

predominant authority, [that] helps us analyze the various ways in which the dominant society imposes its concepts of reality on all subordinate groups and the possible ways in which the oppressed can establish their own means to oppose and change it. The ideological consciousness is formed not through informal institutions, but rather through the formal apparatus, the schools. Gramsci argues that the education system appears as a privileges instrument for socialization of a hegemonic culture. (p. 248)

This analysis of oppression explains in part the docile nature of these non-English speaking and unskilled workers (in particular minority groups) who are students in our ABE and ESL classes. As these thoughts cross my mind, I realize my inherent biases and prejudices. Yet, as an adult educator, I see this changing cultural fabric in Kansas as an opportunity to strengthen and expand ABE and ESL programming to improve the lives of not only the students but the entire community.

The history of immigration parallels the growth and maturation of the United States beginning with colonial migration of British and Irish to the present migration of Latin Americans and Asians. In between, the U.S. has been the destination for Chinese between 1850 and 1882, Germans during the late 19th century, and Italians and Southern Europeans starting in 1890 and continuing to World War I. After World War II, Germans again became the dominant immigrant group, and, following the Vietnam war, new waves of immigrants came from Southeast Asia. As of 2002, there were 32.5 million foreign born residents in the United States, an increase of

13.5 million over the 1990 census. This increase is due primarily to new immigrants arriving from Asia and Latin America. (Alfred, 2001/2002). Most of these immigrants came to the United States for economic reasons—rather than political persecution—in search of greater freedom and opportunity. Today this growth in immigration is due in great part to the economic disparity that exists between the United States and developing and third world countries. In fact, the border between the United States and Mexico represents one of the greatest economic disparities between any two countries, creating a natural flow from the poorer to the richer economy until equilibrium is achieved (Bard, 2007).

Since the birth of our country, the United States along with Canada has been the most sought after destination for immigrants, both legal and illegal. This diverse cultural fabric is part of our heritage dating back to our nation's founders when George Washington (1783) declared "the bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nation and religions; whom we shall welcome to participation of all our rights and privileges" (quoted in Fitzpatrick, 1938, p. 257). While the complexities of the 21st century are not the same as those of the 18th century, this lofty expectation of franchising all citizens with the same rights and privileges still prevails, at least intellectually. The reality, though, is that most immigrants are not welcome in the United States due to their race, religion, personal wealth, and country of origin. The social contract as embodied in the iconic symbol of the Statue of Liberty has been broken as the United States puts more legal restrictions on immigration (Tienda, 2002).

Immigration rates are at all-time highs in recent history. In the period between the 1970 and 2000, U.S. census, the percentage of foreign-born more than doubled from 4.7% to 10.4% (as cited in Tienda, 2002, p. 589). These percentages do not accurately measure undocumented immigrants nor do they illustrate how higher fertility rates among immigrants groups will create long-term changes in the population fabric. Today, immigration and the changing cultural identify have become front-page news as presidential contenders call for a reduction of legal immigration, fortifying our borders, and deporting all illegal immigrants (O'Brien, 2007). Underlying the politics of immigration is President Bush's breaking ranks with his Republican base to propose immigration reform only to have Congress revert to Plato's Cave (fear of change and the unknown) and become paralyzed by political gridlock (Pear & Hulse, 2007). Yet it is probably not realistic to deport the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants and shore up our borders with fences and more border patrol officers in an effort to completely stem the flow of people into our country. Nor is it possible to ignore polls that indicate that a strong majority want comprehensive immigration reform that not only addresses citizenship issues related to illegal immigrants but also provides more effective control of our borders. Who would imagine that Senator Kennedy and President Bush would align themselves in this movement toward to comprehensive immigration reform (Jacoby, 2006)? Illegal immigrant population projections in the United States were at 10.5 million people in 2005 with 408,000 new illegal immigrants arriving each year (Hoefler, Rytina & Campbell, 2006, p.1). Though it may only be coincidence, this number compares closely to the projected labor needs of 12 million new jobs over the next decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) due to a growing economy and retiring baby boomers. The increase in both legal and illegal immigration is not going to change in the immediate future. It is

being driven by economic and industrial development that is energized by income disparities across national boundaries.

The Adult Education Opportunity

Throughout the 19th century, the formation of the underclass can be traced to state and federal legislation that limited access and opportunity for minorities, immigrants, and some working class people (Tienda, 2002). One example of how legislation formed the underclass is seen in pre-civil war legislation that made educating slaves in some states illegal (Hotchkiss, 1848). An example of how the courts contributed to formation of the underclass was the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision in 1896 that created the legal precedence for the separate but equal doctrine which profoundly affected the education of African-Americans (as cited in Cook, 2005). Historically, adult education has not always addressed the educational needs and challenges of diverse populations and new immigrants. It was not until the 20th century that adult education assumed a more remedial position, connecting social consciousness to enfranchising all Americans, regardless of economic status, race or religion. The roots of this movement can be traced to Walter Rauschenbusch (1908) and what he called the Social Gospel. Jane Addams' educational approach in the settlement houses was part of the Social Gospel and served as a practical and political strategy to educate new immigrants so they would be productive while not being exploited (Addams, 1892).

The notion of dialogue between teacher and student where curriculum is connected to the social reality, as popularized by Freire (1970, 1993), has been a part of adult education at least prior to the earliest days of Cooperative Extension when the practice was for county extension agents to live within the community they served, listen, learn, and develop programs from the bottom up (Bruner & Yang, 1949). In today's diverse culture that transcends race and ethnicity to include life style, religion, and political beliefs, issues related to learning across culture are complex and political. Rose (2000) raises these timeless questions:

Are we trying to help others learn more about themselves; are we trying to use contextual signals to help individuals acculturate and assimilate; or are we trying to create something new? Culture can be used in a variety of contexts and for different purposes. The politics of this issue are clear as in late twentieth century references to culture wars that rage over such issues as evolution, abortion, gay rights, affirmative action, etc. As we broaden the notion of culture, do we dilute the essence of learning across cultures? Additionally, what is it we are learning about? (p. 31)

In addition to these questions, we must ask why are the changing demographics in Kansas important to understanding the changing practice of adult education? In Rose's words, are we trying to "acculturate and assimilate; or are we trying to create something new" (p.31)? Developing new curriculums and best teaching practices are not enough. We must seek to deconstruct the political milieu of adult education's relationship to the undereducated, immigration, acculturation, and civil society. Therefore, curriculum needs to be connected with the social reality of our students to promote strong citizenship as well as literacy.

Sheared (1999) offered one strategy to connect curriculum and social reality. She raised the issue of giving voice to disenfranchised groups, in particular African Americans, and brought to light the lack

of research on how to give voice to adult students. She developed the concept of "polyrhythmic realities" as a way to understand and incorporate into the ABE classroom the effects of race, gender, and class. Authentic dialogue is the key methodology used to develop the voice of the student. This dialogue demands that the traditional power relation between student and teacher be forfeited. The teacher must relinquish control, both perceived and real, of the classroom and curriculum. She stated that "giving voice is not divorced from content; rather, giving voice promotes an understanding of content and seeks to underscore its significance in determining whose knowledge gets heard and acknowledged in the discourse. Giving voice means that the teacher moves from the center to the margin" (p. 43). This dialogue creates opportunities for collaborative learning where the student learns from the teacher and the teacher learns from the student. It also creates a safer and more inviting environment for students where they can be themselves and appreciate their unique strengths yet understand the importance of what they do not know and what they need to learn. It brings greater pluralism to the classroom instead of bureaucracy and autocracy. Sheared's educational approach should not be limited to the classroom and the relationship between teacher and student. "Polyrhythmic realities" and dialogical environment need to be expanded beyond the classroom to encompass the entire adult learning center within the context of the community in which it is located. This approach to educating the underclass and undereducated negates the idea of creating uniform models for adult learning institutions that can be located in any community or neighborhood. Instead, the challenge is to create unique centers that reflect and celebrate the cultures and values of students as well as that of the community.

Literacy cannot be so narrowly defined as the ability to read, write, and solve numerical problems. Being literate means more than possessing cognitive skills; it also implies having the ability to live in, interact with, and contribute to your community (Bernardo, 2000; Freire, 1970; Freire, 1993). Teaching students specific cognitive skills that can be measured by national standardized assessment tests stifles any opportunity for adult education to contribute to the socio-economic development in a community. The educational philosophy dictated in the 1998 federal legislation, Title II Part A—Adult Basic Skills and Family Literacy Education, takes a positivistic performance approach under the present federal guidelines where funding is predicated entirely upon individual student performance (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2003). This legislation forces teachers to teach to the standardized test, raising the same problems that public schools face with No Child Left Behind legislation, penalizing schools that take in higher numbers of new immigrants or students who are actively seeking work and may not stay in an ABE or ESL class long enough to show measurable improvement. Many students do not stay with their adult learning program unless they are unable to find employment. "Literacy should be seen as a continuous process that requires sustained learning and application. There are no magic lines to cross from illiteracy into literacy" (Archer, 2006, p.22). Literacy is a critical component of local economic and community development, and has the potential to contribute to the overall vitality of a community. In other words, success for adult learning centers should not solely be measured by standardized achievement tests. These centers need also to measure their impact by developing benchmarks which correlate to the needs of their community and local labor force, e.g., how many of their students—regardless of their basic skills

improvement—secure and maintain employment, are in stable living situations, and able to live above the poverty level. National standards do not take into account “variations in a person’s skill and the socio-economic environment” (Bernardo, 2000, p. 461) from community to community. The opportunity arises for adult learning centers to develop their programs within a cultural, socioeconomic framework that considers not only the student’s personal achievement but also their contribution to the entire community.

Locally and Geographically Unique

Most articles and text on multicultural issues and diversity (see Guy, 1999, as one example) are organized along ethnic and racial boundaries, which is useful when discussing generalities. But having worked and lived in the Midwest for 20 years, I have observed stark differences between states and regions, urban and rural, and by local industries. For example, when working with mushroom workers in Illinois where each farm employed approximately 100 workers, I learned that friends and family members already working at the mushroom farms often recruited new workers from their home towns and villages in Mexico. As a result, the mushroom workers formed very close-knit networks that were wary of anyone who was not from their village in Mexico or was not a close friend of someone who was part of their clique. Addressing the immigration issues or the educational issues in this specific instance required that the educator develop a trusting rapport with the entire community and that the educational program address collective issues rather than individual educational plans. In contrast, large employers such as a meatpacking plant in Kansas will hire immigrants from many countries and from many regions in a country. Each ethnic or racial group is far less insular than the mushroom farm workers and more open to outside resources. Hence communication regarding immigration or educational issues is actually somewhat easier and can be accomplished by working with the employer, local churches, and in many cases the local community college or school district which often have effective outreach programs. In urban areas, ethnic and racial groups often segregate themselves by neighborhoods as well as their workplace. The adult learning centers may have students from different neighborhoods and mix various immigrant groups and indigenous minority populations that otherwise would have little contact with each other. In this scenario, the centers must first establish a safe environment where ethnic, racial, and neighborhood differences are respected.

These examples are meant to illustrate how geographic and local differences shape the educational approach and environment as much as ethnic and racial backgrounds. For adult learning centers, these regional and local differences require that each center develop an outreach approach or marketing plan that reflects the needs of their community as well as curriculum and staff that best fits the unique characteristics of their students and clients. In Kansas, 30 adult basic education centers have started to develop individual strategic plans. Our expectation is that each center’s strategic plan will uniquely reflect the community and students it serves. The goal of these plans is to envision what the center should look like in three to five years. The first step of these strategic plans is to define who are their stakeholders, including students, funders, host institutions (typically school districts and community colleges), agencies that funnel students to their centers, and community leaders who are or might be advocates for them. The question of advocacy is also exam-

ined. How do their centers advocate for their students, and who in the community advocates for their center and mission?

Conclusion

The cultural fabric in Kansas and the United States is rapidly changing as new immigrants move to our communities and make important contributions to the local economy. The impacts of globalization can be measured in almost every town and community as old traditional jobs are relocated to a developing country or as new immigrants move into these communities to fill new, low-wage jobs. In many communities and neighborhoods, English is not the dominant language. The challenge for adult education is more than teaching reading, writing and numeracy, and it is more than teaching English. The challenge for adult education is to fully integrate each adult learning center within its community where it can be seen as an integral component to the development of local civil society and economies. There are many structural barriers to developing this integration, including issues of immigration, the political economy of low wages and docile workforce, and federal legislation that connects funding to individual achievement. Adult learning centers have the to potential to be more than just a place where ABE and ESL classes are offered, and they should be judged on more than the number of students who meet their individual learning goals. The centers should also be judged by the success they have in helping people become more productive members of society and more thoughtful and qualified citizens who are able to fully participate in our society. Granted, these criteria are hard to quantify but are essential to long-term community sustainability in the communities these centers serve.

By taking this approach, adult education will appeal not only to best practices where authentic community-based approaches are indeed more effective at helping immigrants to become more literate in English, but also will shape policy and force policymakers to represent their interests within the context of civil society. Maybe such a grassroots approach to literacy will force a more honest dialogue about cultural, political, and linguistic literacy and will force those who hold the purse strings to put their money where their democratic mouths are.

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