

## Taking Literacy Skills Home

**NCSALL research finds that use of authentic reading materials in class increases learners' out-of-class literacy activities**

**Victoria Purcell-Gates, Sophie Degener, Erik Jacobson, & Marta Soler**

*"Before, I would get letters from the children's school and I needed someone [to] read them to me in order to know what they were asking me to do. Now I don't need it."*

*"I can write a check now."*

*"I can look at a map now and use road signs."*

*"I just started using calendars and appointment books."*

*"I can pick up a newspaper and read the headline now."*

*"Now I can pick up my Bible, and I can read a scripture."*

*"I can go to a lunch counter and look on the bulletin board and read it now."*

These are just a few of the comments made by adult literacy students who participated in a National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) -sponsored study, Literacy Practice of Adult Learners (LPALS). The study looked at changes in the literacy practices of adults as a result of attending adult literacy classes. Results show that students who participate in classes in which real-life literacy activities and texts are used increase the frequency with which they read and write in their daily lives. Such learners also expand the variety of texts they read and write outside of school. This is in comparison to results in students who participate in classes with fewer or no real-life literacy activities and texts.

By looking at these changes, LPALS was measuring an important -- one could argue that it is the most important -- outcome of adult literacy instruction: the actual application of newly learned literacy skills. Rather than inferring from other outcome measures, such as achievement tests, that literacy skills are applied in day-to-day life, this study looked at those applications directly. It looked at whether or not the adult learners actually use their new literacy skills to achieve their own personal goals, meet their own needs, and participate more fully in their personal and family life.

The significance of the results goes beyond the adult learners to encompass issues of intergenerational literacy success and failure. Children who grow up in homes where adults read and write more, and read and write more types of texts (e.g., coupons, recipes, correspondence, documents, magazine articles, books, etc.) learn more about the conceptual bases of reading and writing than those in homes where adults read and write less..

### **The Participants**

The LPALS research team collected data on out-of-school literacy practices from 173 adults attending 83 different classes across the US. The students represented the range of students in the various types of adult literacy classes in the US today. They were both native-born and foreign-born and ranged in age from 18 to 68 years. They were currently learning in classes or with tutorial arrangements that reflected a range of configurations: ABE, preparation for GED tests, family literacy, Evenstart, and ESOL. Upon beginning the classes they were attending, the literacy levels of the participants ranged from preliterate (19.1%) to a level of 11th grade and up (7.5%). The majority of the students were reported by their teachers to be reading around the fourth to seventh grade levels (31.2%) when they first began attending the class involved in the study. Women made up 70% of the sample.

## **Dimensions of Instruction**

To relate changes in adult literacy students' literacy practices to the types of instruction they were receiving, the student participants and their current literacy class teachers were recruited to the study together. Teachers of adult literacy volunteered for the project in response to calls put out through the NCSALL network as well as through contacts known to members of the research team. A class or site was defined as one teacher and at least one student working together. Thus, among the 83 classes, about one-third of them were configured as tutor-tutee, a common instructional approach in adult basic education.

The LPALS team thought that two dimensions of adult literacy instruction might relate to change in literacy practice. The first was authenticity of instruction, or how close the activities and texts used in the class are to actual literacy practice in the world outside of formal schooling. The second dimension was the degree of collaboration that existed between the students and the teachers: the degree to which students and teachers share decision-making for all aspects of their program, including assessment, goal-setting, activities, texts, and program governance. These two dimensions were chosen because they represent best practice among many adult literacy theorists, researchers, and practitioners, and a logical argument can be made for their relationship to literacy practice change among students. Many believe that if adult students are given the opportunity to request instruction around specific texts and activities that are personally important and relevant to them, if they feel a sense of ownership in their schooling, and if they learn the skills of reading and writing through reading and writing real-world texts for real-world purposes, they will be more likely to apply their reading and writing abilities in their lives outside of school. Examples of real life texts include newspapers, driver's license manuals, recipes; real-world purposes include reading newspapers to learn about the news, reading recipes in order to actually cook something. (For a fuller description, see *Focus on Basics*, [2B, pp. 11-14](#), and [3D, pp. 26-27](#).)

Each class in the study was assigned a score that reflected the class's location along a continuum of practice for each dimension. For authenticity, the four possible scores were 1) highly authentic; 2) somewhat authentic; 3) somewhat school-only; 4) highly school-only. For collaboration, the four possible scores were 1) highly collaborative; 2) somewhat collaborative; 3) somewhat teacher-directed; 4) highly teacher-directed. These scores were used in the subsequent analysis.

## **Change**

Data collectors visited the volunteer participants in their homes at the beginning of their participation in literacy class and at the end. They asked if students were reading or writing any new types of material since they started attending the literacy class they were currently attending (and on which data had been collected). This information was gathered with the use of a structured questionnaire that asked questions about 50 different literacy practices.

Results showed that the degree of authenticity in adult literacy instruction had a moderate statistically significant effect on literacy practice change. This was true after controlling for the other factors that also showed independent significant effects on literacy practice change. These factors included literacy level of the student when beginning the program; number of days the student had attended the program; and the non-ESOL status of the student. The degree of collaboration between students and teachers showed no relationship with literacy practice change.

Independent effects are those effects that, after controlling for all other variables that were statistically significantly related to change in literacy practice, is also significantly related to change in literacy practice. The strongest independent effect was students' literacy level when they began the classes. The lower the literacy level at the beginning, the greater the change in literacy practices reported by students. This makes intuitive sense: students who are unable to read or write much at all will not be able to engage in many outside-of-school literacy practices. However, as they gain skill, they will begin to use that skill for many of the basic literacy practices - reading signs, food labels, and others - that, across all of our participants, were for the most part already engaged in by the time students began their reading classes.

Complementing this effect was the fact that the longer the students had attended their classes, the more change in literacy practices they reported. Again, this makes intuitive sense if one concludes that low-skilled students will begin to pick up basic literacy practices and then add to them over time as their skill continues to increase.

The negative effect of ESOL status on change in literacy practices means that ESOL students enrolled in ESOL classes were less likely to report changes in literacy practices than were other students. This is probably because many of the ESOL students in the participant pool were already engaging in many literacy practices in their native languages by the time they began their ESOL classes, and focused instead on learning to read and write in English. The final participant pool included relatively few ESOL students so this effect is probably more of an artifact of the data-gathering for this study rather than a finding that one would wish to generalize to all ESOL students, according to Purcell-Gates.

### **Authentic Literacy Instruction**

These results provide empirical justification for teachers to include real-life literacy activities and texts in their classes. What do these classes look like that do include authentic literacy instruction? The most authentic classes use many types of texts that occur naturally in the lives of people outside of the classroom. For example, some teachers use actual newspapers, magazines, work manuals, job applications, and coupons for literacy instruction. Furthermore, these texts are often, if not always, used for the actual purposes they are used in real life. Newspapers are read to find out about the news, the weather, or current issues of importance and

interest to the students. Driver's manuals are read to prepare for an actual driver's test. Job applications are read and filled in as part of real-life job searches. Stories or reports are written and actually published in newspapers or journals connected with the literacy program. Novels are read and discussed in response groups similar to adult book clubs that exist outside of schools.

The next most authentic classrooms used more real-life texts than published textbooks and workbooks but did not use real-life texts exclusively. While the majority of the activities in these classrooms centered on authentic texts, the texts were not always used for authentic purposes. Rather, the activities sometimes mimicked real-life uses of these texts. For example, students wrote letters to an editor of a newspaper in the form found in real newspapers, but the letters were not actually sent.

The results of this study suggest that teachers of adult literacy may want to begin to increase the degree to which they include real-life literacy activities and texts in their classes. These results do not indicate that this is an all-or-nothing change. They indicate that the degree to which authentic literacy activities and texts are included in the instruction is important to think about when teaching for actual use of reading and writing skills outside of the classroom. The LPALS team is currently preparing a teacher handbook designed to help adult literacy teachers apply the results of this study to their own practice.

### **Acknowledgments**

We thank Andrea Wilder and the Azadoutioun Foundation, and Jennifer Mott-Smith, Project Manager, for their help with this study.

### **About the Authors**

*Sophie Degener* is a doctoral student in language and literacy at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She also works as a research analyst at the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research. Her primary research focus is family literacy.

*Erik Jacobson* is a research assistant at the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). He is the director of the PEERS Project at the Center for World Languages and Cultures at UMass.-Boston, and teaches adult ESOL at the Haitian American Public Health Initiative in Mattapan, MA.

*Victoria Purcell-Gates* is Professor of literacy at Michigan State University. She is the author of *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy* (1995; Harvard University Press) and (with co-author, Robin Waterman) *Now We Read, We See, We Speak: Portrait of Literacy Development in an Adult Freirean-Based Class* (2000, Lawrence Erlbaum Press).

*Marta Soler* is a doctoral candidate in language and literacy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her primary focus is the field of adult literacy, where she has worked as both researcher and practitioner. She is currently a member of the Center for Social and Educational Research at the University of Barcelona, Spain.

Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=286>