

TEACHING WRITING FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract: These practices include setting clear goals for writing; encouraging students to help each other plan, draft, or revise; using self-assessment; and providing feedback on progress. Adults who want to learn how to read and write can start by finding resources such as adult literacy programs, online courses, or self-study materials. These resources can provide structured lessons and practice exercises to help build reading and writing skills. By the mid-20th century, three major adult learning techniques or theories have emerged: andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning. These methodologies are firmly lodged in the humanistic approach to learning, which emphasizes personal growth and development as the key focus of education. Great adult teachers can not only teach well, but they inspire their students. They get their learners interested in the subject. As a result, they take the effort to learn from them. They don't disregard what they say and take every additional comment and thought into.

Key words: Writing, practices, andragogy, self-directed learning, transformative learning, academic, second language, computer literacy, grammar.

Introduction. It doesn't take an advanced degree in education to understand that teaching adults is quite a bit different than teaching children. The field of education has traditionally viewed students, especially younger ones, as empty vessels into which teachers can pour knowledge. But this is obviously not the case with adult learners, whose knowledge and understanding of the world has been shaped by considerably more lived experience. Additionally, unlike younger students who are compelled to be in school whether they like it or not, adult learners typically have made a choice to continue their education. This means they may be more engaged in the material and more appreciative of your efforts to help them learn. There are other differences too, but here's the most important similarity: No matter who your students are, you'll still need to establish a connection with them and put in place effective teaching strategies that maximize their learning outcomes. Therefore, when it comes to adult learners, understanding how they access and process new information is key. Simply stated, teaching adults is most effective when educators understand and apply time-tested adult learning strategies.

Andragogy is the term used to describe a set of principles, methods and practices for teaching adult learners. Andragogy theory was developed by educator Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, who thought of it as the art and science of adult learning and set forth key principles that today are widely accepted throughout the field of education. (We'll have a lot more to say about Mr. Knowles below.)

Adult learners of English as a second or additional language need to master a variety of forms of writing, in English, to be successful in their academic and professional endeavors. In an attempt to determine whether these learners are getting the writing instruction they need in adult education programs, we surveyed the field of educators who work with this population. In our

survey, we asked teachers of adult English language learners (ESL teachers) in different types of adult education programs in the United States to identify the writing instruction they deliver, including the text types they teach, the amount of time they devote to teaching writing, and the role of writing in student placement and promotion decisions. We then interviewed a subset of the survey respondents, representing a variety of program types, student proficiency levels, and years of teaching experience, to find out more about their specific approaches to writing, the reasons for these approaches, and their views on what they need to be successful as adult educators. After reviewing the importance of academic and professional writing (referred to here as academic writing) in adult English language learners' success, the key features of academic writing, and recent concerns about writing in adult education programs, this article reports the results of the survey and the interviews and makes recommendations for future directions in writing instruction in adult English as a second language (ESL) education.

The ability to write texts that clearly state the focus and scope of the topic under discussion, the perspective(s) of the author (and others if appropriate), support for those perspectives, and clear conclusions drawn from the discussion is a critical component of literacy practices in schools, from middle school to high school. This focus has been part of education practice since the 1980s (see, for example, discussion in Spack, 1998; Street, Fox, & Ellis, 2010), although much writing in schools has focused on narrative texts (Reid, 1993; Shanahan, 2015; Zamel, 1982, 1987). The importance of this type of writing has increased significantly in importance since the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts in many states. In adult education, similar standards have been introduced through the College and Career Readiness Standards, which aim to equip adult learners for effective participation in academic and workforce settings to attain economic self-sufficiency (Pimentel, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In order to achieve these goals, adults need to understand complex processes, be problem solvers, have some degree of computer literacy, and attain both oral and writing fluency in professional English (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Elander et al., 2006; Parrish & Johnson, 2010). Even many minimum wage jobs, such as taking orders in restaurants, parking cars, or providing security, require workers to use computer software, make independent decisions, and find solutions to problems. These tasks involve high-level language skills, critical thinking skills, computer literacy, and confidence. The College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) state clearly what adults in academic, professional, and workforce settings need to be prepared to do: carry out complicated learning tasks, use academic language and complex texts, use evidence from texts to anchor their ideas, and build knowledge through non-fiction works. In response to this trend, academic writing tasks have been added to some exams used in adult education to determine the postsecondary or workforce readiness of adult learners. For example, the new General Education Development (GED) exam has an academic text-based writing section. The Accuplacer and Compass also have sections devoted to writing, although the most widely administered writing subtests assess grammar, punctuation, and spelling rather than the ability to write extended discourse.

Programs concerning literacy practices in their fields and disciplines. Their survey focused on what academic literacy practices the GRE should test in order to determine whether a candidate for admission to an MA or Ph.D. program can perform them. Survey respondents rated 36 of the 39 task statements provided as important or very important for entering students to be able to perform competently. The following 12 tasks were rated the highest (Rosenfeld, Courtney, & Fowles, 2004, pp. 14-15):

1. Credit sources appropriately;
2. Organize ideas and information coherently;
3. Use grammar and syntax that follow the rules of standard written English, avoiding errors that distract the reader or disrupt meaning;
4. Avoid errors in mechanics (e.g., spelling and punctuation);
5. Abstract or summarize essential information (e.g., from speeches, observations, or texts);
6. Analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources;
7. Integrate quoted and referenced material appropriately;
8. Develop a well-focused, well-supported discussion, using relevant reasons and examples;
9. Write clearly, with smooth transitions from one thought to the next;
10. Write precisely and concisely, avoiding vague or empty phrases;
11. Revise and edit text to improve its clarity, coherence, and correctness;
12. Work independently to plan and compose text.

Research in college and university programs for students learning English has found that students receive differing amounts of instruction in these skills in writing courses, even those that focus on academic writing. As Matsuda noted, “In many composition classrooms, ...language issues beyond simple ‘grammar’ correction are not addressed extensively, even when the assessment of student texts is based at least partly on students’ proficiency in the privileged variety of English”. If students do not receive this instruction in college composition classes, it is doubtful that they receive it in courses that meet general education requirements or in adult education courses where college and university credit is not granted.

Given the demands of academic writing and research that demonstrates that it is not always taught in college and university courses, what is the picture in adult education classes? Those who have studied these contexts have found that students are struggling and not always succeeding. For example, “In my community college work, I noticed that a lot of students were coming in, but many weren’t making it out, just out of the writing courses, and sometimes this derailed their college plans and aspirations completely.”

Conclusion. The review of the literature on shifts in educational focus to academic and professional writing and the survey of and interviews with professionals working in adult ESL education have shown us that academic writing has clearly understood features and requirements, this type of writing has not been a strong focus in adult ESL education in the United States, and there are a number of ways that we as a field could work with teachers to help them make the necessary shift. The following are some of the steps that we might take as a field: Conduct similar surveys and interviews in different states. One of the authors of this article (Rebeca Fernandez) conducted the national survey with adult education teachers in North Carolina (in the Spring 2016). Many of the national trends were similar, but there were also trends specific to

teachers in that state. A survey of teachers across a state, followed by in-depth interviews (similar to those that we conducted), would allow us to understand and provide support for teachers in a more focused way. All states and many school districts and community colleges hold professional conferences for adult education teachers. Results of such surveys and interviews could inform those professional development opportunities. significantly. Building on these efforts, identify and disseminate promising practices in terms of time spent writing, text types that students write, audiences those students write for, types of feedback given, types of assessments used, and ways that one type and level of activity can be used to build the next types and levels. Work with teachers, program administrators, and state leaders to articulate writing proficiency expectations (aligned with writing practices in university courses), ways to reach those expectations at each student proficiency level, and ways to assess student achievement.

There is a great deal to be done in the field of adult ESL education to ensure that learners in adult education programs are learning to do what they need to do to be successful in further education and work. Educators are clearly interested in participating in needed changes, but they cannot do it alone. It is time for us to work together as a field to make the needed shifts.

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