



Adult Education Teachers: Designing Critical Literacy Practices

Rebecca Rogers, Mary Ann Kramer, Laurence Erlbaum, 2008

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Learning is a journey, situated within a contextual landscape. In *Adult Education Teachers: Designing Critical Literacy Practices* Rogers and Kramer explore this landscape through immersive interviews with nine adult literacy teachers. Through the case studies they craft they provide a vision of teacher, students, learning communities and the learning environment and process. This book provides many insights that transcend what might appear a relatively narrow context: adult literacy in St. Louis. For teachers and facilitators of learning, it describes the teaching/learning interaction as a “dance” informed by the “wisdom of experience.” For researcher-practitioners interested in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), this book provides a comprehensive synopsis of a qualitative research study that provides thick, rich textual description built on a solid design foundation. The research design is replicable in any educational setting where the approach to teaching and its perceived impact on learners is of primary interest. For writers, this work offers a blueprint for building a research narrative that effectively and accurately unfolds, allowing readers to be drawn into the findings and insights through they eyes and minds of both researchers and the participants. For the educational developer, this book reminds one that well-chosen questions, dialogic interactions and deep listening can reveal insights into teaching that can encourage reflection and inform instructional practice and support strategies.

Of particular interest is the conceptual framework for adult education that emerges from the study. Rogers and Kramer introduce this framework in chapter 2, having first situated the context and clarified their vision of teaching/learning in the adult literacy setting as a process of designing and redesigning to responsively accommodate students, the local context and available materials. While this vision creates the possibility of their framework, it is clear that the dimensions emerge directly from and are deeply grounded in their discussions with experienced teacher-practitioners. Their framework balances literacy practices together with critical frameworks where each dimension becomes continua that intersect. Creating a four quadrant compass, this provides a tool that allows one to characterize the teaching/learning interaction at any moment. The literacy-focused continuum covers practices from accelerated/emancipatory on one end through to the more traditional approach on the other end. The second continuum addresses critical frameworks, with one end characterizing critical education (viewing education as ideological and related to issues of social justice empowerment) and the other non-critical (viewing education as value-free and oriented towards academic achievement/credential attainment). These intersecting continua delineate four fields: accelerative/critical; traditional/critical; traditional/noncritical and accelerative/noncritical; where each field defines a space that informs teaching practices at a given moment. Rogers and Kramer found that the teachers they interviewed did not fall into any single field in this framework. Rather, as exemplary teachers, they move from one location to another as influenced by their students’ needs, interests and the materials and situational context at hand. This “emergent framework” is sufficiently broad that it accommodates profiles for all teachers interviewed while simultaneously providing multiple entry points for professional development and practice.

The authors situate their story clearly in the historical and practical context that impacts adult education. Identifying key thinkers, authors, situations and events that have influenced adult education and practices the authors settle on New Literacy Studies as an anchor reference as it views the teacher as designer of learning processes and environments. Using their professional knowledge of content, learning

processes and the cultural and linguistical dynamics of the classroom, teachers draw on the “cultural tools” and available to design and redesign learning environments and imagine and implement best practices.

The nine interviewees were selected from among those nominated as exemplary teachers by members of the St. Louis adult education community. Diverse in their race, age and experiences in adult education programs, they worked with an equally diverse student population over a wide range of programs. This study is careful to document both individuals and their contexts in rich detail. In doing so, they provide a firm foundation for presenting compelling stories of teachers creating learning environments that promise, promote and generally achieve student success. Teachers’ stories are presented in triads and clustered around emergent themes. Each triad of stories is followed by a consolidating chapter that identifies a thematic and demonstrates how each teacher’s experiences, approaches and views contributes to this. Each subsequent consolidating chapter weaves in references to the previous triad, enriching and expanding the three thematics and each concludes with advice regarding how to rethink practice and build forward, providing additional resources directly related to such new directions.

Adult Education Teachers Designing Critical Literacy Practices is a well written, insightful and exemplary volume that both captures the reality encountered and provides a vision of how to use it to extend and inform practice. It offers signposts to our journey as teacher-researchers and should be of interest to anyone involved in the education of adult learners.