



## Moving Toward Learner-Centered Teaching With Accountability

### Introduction

#### *Profiles in Diversity and Strength*

**S**ocorro Tinajero was born in Mexico, and she is raising her children in the “borderlands” between Mexico and the United States. Described as an energetic and efficient woman, she works long hours in the family restaurant under difficult conditions. Her fatalism is quickly revealed: “*A cada quien lo que toca* (Everyone has his lot in life),” she comments. Researcher Valdes (1996) tells us that this is a fairly common belief among those in Socorro’s community—that life simply deals different luck to different people.

Socorro remembers with some nostalgia her days in Juárez, where neighbors were able to watch out for each other. Given her hard work and determination, one thing to which Socorro will not resign herself is that her children are being held back in school and are getting into trouble. She did not have an opportunity to go to school in Mexico. She wants to develop the language and literacy she needs to be able to intervene more successfully with her children’s teachers (Valdes, 1996, p. 91).

*Pao Joua Lo* was a retired soldier and was considered a war hero in his own community. Like 70,000 Hmong refugees who resettled in the United States in the 1970s, he fled the hills of Laos in the throes of the wars of Southeast Asia. In his Philadelphia home, Pao Joua was often surrounded by his many grandchildren and guests, and until his death in 1998 was considered both an elder and a leader by many Hmong throughout the United States.

Pao Joua had attended classes at the local community college but dropped out after only one semester. His English literacy skills, while minimal, allowed him to scan the newspapers for articles about Southeast Asia, which he then passed along to more literate men in the community. Besides keeping current on events in his homeland, Pao Joua was also interested in developing literacy skills to be able to record traditional Hmong courtship songs so that first his sons and later his grandsons could find desirable brides (Weinstein, 1997).

*Michela Stone* works as an accountant at a community center serving immigrants from her native Byelorussia and from Ukraine and Lithuania (Nesbit, 1997). Many who frequent the center are university professors, busi-

nesspeople, doctors, or scientists who hope to be able to resume their professional lives when they have acquired the language needed in their new home. Michela teaches Russian on the side, both for some extra money and also for the chance to interact with Americans. She likes soap operas and reads *People* magazine. By reading up on movie stars, Michela figures she can start conversations with American friends and practice her English. Although she has little time to study between her two jobs and caring for her aging father, she hopes to prepare for American citizenship.

Adults such as these have different histories, circumstances, and purposes for wanting to develop and improve language and literacy skills. To understand the possibilities for language and literacy instruction, it is necessary to know something about learners, their resources, their needs, and their goals for learning English.

### *What Is English as a Second Language (ESL) Literacy?*

The learners described above bring different needs and resources to their desire to learn English language and literacy. Soccoro, who was born in Mexico, comes from a society with a rich literary tradition, but she herself has had little access to the formal education or native language literacy that others in her country may enjoy. Learners with this situation have been described in the literature as *nonliterate*. Pao Joua Lo, on the other hand, comes from a farming society where subsistence living posed very little need for print. In fact, the Hmong language did not have a written form until just a few decades ago, when missionaries created a writing system to teach the Bible. Learners in this situation are often called *preliterate*, because they come from a society that does not have a tradition with print. Michela illuminates yet another dimension of a complex linguistic picture; she has highly developed literacy skills in her native language but has not had prior experience with the Roman alphabet. She has many strategies for learning in formal settings and is comfortable with the format and discourse of formal teaching situations. As she adds English to her repertoire, Michela will become *biliterate*, or proficient with print in two languages.

Until fairly recently, little attention was given to the role of native-language literacy in learner acquisition of English. Research on second language learners assumed native-language literacy or did not investigate native-language literacy as a factor in learner needs and strategies. Those of us who worked closely with preliterate newcomers were struck by their resourcefulness. We learned that the Southeast Asian refugees had escaped through jungles, run through minefields, endured starvation, and crossed rivers on rubber tires at night with their children. In short, these were extraordinary survivors. If we were observant, we saw that most undocumented amnesty applicants had been living on the margins, managing to take care of their families while staying invisible from authorities who could deport them. We began to see the kinship and social networks that people relied on for solving problems and for helping one another navigate a new setting. While we became aware

of these enormous resources, it was also clear that something critical was lacking—literacy skills that would provide these adults with access to the English language, and through English, to other information and education.

### ***Many Learners, Many Literacies***

New dimensions for bilingualism and biliteracy continue to emerge. In the last decade, teachers have found that many Asian students who are highly literate in their native languages and have facility with written academic English have trouble communicating orally. In contrast, many Latino learners who are fluent in spoken English struggle with writing, particularly in academic genres. A new set of issues has begun to emerge with “Generation 1.5” (Goen, Porter, Swanson, & VanDommelen, 2002)—learners who came to the US as older children, do not speak *targetlike* (Standard) English, and are neither orally proficient nor literate in the language of their parents. We do not yet have labels to neatly name what we see. Learners vary along dimensions of proficiency in English versus another language, spoken versus written proficiency, and academic versus social varieties, among other dimensions of literacy.

While there is not yet a universally accepted definition of literacy, there is a growing consensus that to be literate entails different things in different situations. All of us, including those of us who consider ourselves to be fairly literate, encounter situations in which we must master a new literacy genre—such as learning html for web design, writing for a particular journal for the first time, or reading an article from a different discipline. While there is no agreement on one definition of literacy, there is growing recognition that there are *many literacies*, and in the case of immigrant learners, there are potentially biliteracies with many dimensions.

## **Contexts for Literacy Instruction**

### ***Literacy for What?***

The United States Congress created a set of educational goals for the nation, including Goal 6 for Literacy and Lifelong Learning: “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (as cited in Stein, 1997, p. 2). To explore what this would entail, members of the Equipped for the Future Initiative asked adult learners what they hoped to gain from formal learning opportunities. From the responses of more than 1,500 adults, four themes or purposes for language and literacy learning emerged:

- *Access*: to information [as well as jobs and resources] so adults can orient themselves in the world;
- *Voice*: to be able to express ideas and opinions with the confidence they will be heard and taken into account;
- *Independent Action*: to be able to solve problems and make decisions on one’s own, acting independently, without having to rely on others;

- *Bridge to the Future*: learning how to learn so adults can keep up with the world as it changes. (Stein, 1997, p.7)

A National Literacy Summit followed by meetings throughout the US resulted in the following “Call to Action”:

By 2010, a system of high quality adult literacy, language and lifelong learning services will help adults in every community make measurable gains toward achieving their goals as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners. (National Literacy Summit, 2000, p. 1)

For this theme issue, I have invited authors to address adult ESL literacy in the lives of learners as parents or family members, as workers and as citizens. I specifically asked each author to explore the issues facing practitioners who want to address these roles through learner-centered instruction and assessment of that instruction. To do so, we had to explore, directly and indirectly, what we meant by “learner-centered.” The “Call to Action” above mentions not only learner goals but also the notion of “measurable gains.” It was critical to link the pursuit of learner goals to concrete outcomes that can be seen by teachers, programs, funders, and most important, by learners themselves. In the next section, I look briefly at the history of instruction for adults in these roles, as well as at some of the goals found in programs designed to address those roles. Next, I briefly identify issues associated with the context and introduce the work of the authors who contribute to this volume.

### ***Adults as Parents and Family Members: Family Literacy***

The terms *family literacy* and *intergenerational literacy* are terms that have been used to describe how literacy is valued and used in the lives of children and adults. The terms have also been used to describe educational programs designed to strengthen literacy resources by involving at least two generations for a variety of stated goals (Weinstein, 1998). In the US, the term “family literacy” has gained recognition through the growth of private initiatives such as the Barbara Bush Family Literacy Foundation and Toyota Families for Learning, and through federal programs such as Even Start and Head Start.

Family literacy programs have many goals, which have evolved through the last two decades since their inception. Many initiatives state as their goal to support parents in promoting school achievement of children, with an emphasis on parental involvement with schools. Promising programs resist a model that is unilinear—that is, they recognize that it is not only the job of parents to understand and support schools, but that school personnel must also seek to understand and better respond to parents and families (McCaleb, 1994). A second set of goals articulated in many programs is to foster a love of reading among both adults and children, though there is increasing recognition that the practice of having adults read to children is not always practical in immigrant families in which children learn English far more quickly

than their parents do. A third set of goals in some programs is to provide literacy to support adults in addressing family concerns, including advocacy in the community and within the school system. Finally, other programs focus on reconnecting the generations in positive ways. It is clear that children of immigrant families who have more exposure to English are often placed in a position of translating and solving other problems for parents, reversing traditional roles and creating additional stresses for all involved. When the goal of intergenerational work is to restore channels for transmission of culture and values, children and adults can be resources for one another, such as web page projects in which adults provide stories of their past, which children illustrate and input into the computer (Hovanesian, 1999). Projects such as these draw on the resources of children (for English and computer skills), while tapping (and thereby honoring) the memories and knowledge of adults.

In my piece, "Immigrant Adults and Their Teachers: Community and Professional Development Through Family Literacy," I describe work I did over two years with a program serving Cambodian families in Long Beach, CA. I begin by contrasting mastery versus constructivist orientations to curriculum, and I argue for a model for learner-centered teaching that integrates these two orientations. The model, which I call *Learners' Lives as Curriculum*, builds on the premise that teachers must listen for learner stories to discover the most pressing issues that will bring language learning to life. I illustrate how this model was applied to themes and issues identified by the Cambodian families with whom we worked. Finally, I propose a model for connecting materials development with professional development, in family literacy or any other language or literacy program, arguing that teachers are also learners who benefit from communities of peers who solve problems together.

### ***Adults as Workers: Preemployment, Workplace, and Worker ESL***

In the 1970s, the influx of guest workers in west European countries caused British educators to reevaluate the efficacy of grammar-based and audio-lingual methods and to turn their focus to the linguistic tasks required on the job. At the same time, the US was coping with an influx of almost 200,000 refugees who needed language and literacy for work with more urgency than they needed bookish accuracy in producing carefully sequenced grammar structures. This laid the groundwork for a growing shift toward employment-related ESL, which was woven into general ESL or offered in preworkplace classes on the job, by a union, or by a consortium of several partners. Early emphasis was on language functions to get a job, to keep it, and to thrive in it. In 1992, the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) issued a report identifying five competencies and three foundation skills needed for success in the workplace. This groundwork has since been adapted for a range of workplace settings and explored further in the Equipped for the Future Initiative, which identifies skills needed by adults in their roles as workers.

In the two decades when workplace instruction was developing, the techniques used for need assessment primarily involved surveys and interviews with employers, managers, and supervisors. Information from workers generally was gathered from the most successful employees to break down the functional and linguistic components of a given task or job, in order to teach it more effectively to new workers. The implicit goal is to make employees more productive and efficient in meeting the needs of their employers.

However, the agendas of workers may be different from those of their employers. Many workers want to improve their language and literacy skills to get out of low-paying or dead-end jobs, to get better jobs within an organization, or to better support their roles in family life. In addition, workers may need skills to cope with downsizing, layoffs, and other job dislocations to find new employment. The recognition of the needs of learners themselves has fostered a distinction between “workplace education” to improve productivity in a given job, versus “workforce education,” which is more oriented toward education of the whole person in his or her roles as parent, community member, and even as union member. This approach assumes that the workplace may be a good venue to address literacy needs, but that curriculum should be driven by the needs of the learner, whether for a particular job, for upward mobility, or for other personal goals as a learner and as a human being.

In “Teaching Workers: Learner-Centered Instruction for English Acquisition and Social Change,” Licht, Maher, and Webber draw on their varied experiences in community colleges, union and nonunion workplaces, and union-based English classes. Using the example of a statewide work stoppage in December 2003, they explore the choices faced by instructors as they respond to learners’ realities. They provide many concrete examples from their experiences of ways in which instructors can learn about learners; provide authentic material that springs from learners’ lived experience; and create a classroom community that emphasizes common ground over individual difference. The authors also address some of the challenges of worker-centered teaching—including conflicting demands for accountability to different stakeholders and the familiar complaint of student resistance when the locus of responsibility is shifted to learners. The authors finish by providing readers some of their own favorite resources for pursuing this challenging but rewarding work.

### *Adults as Citizens and Community Members*

Civic education for newcomers is almost as old as immigration itself. Early in the 20th century, for example, “settlement houses” were created to assist immigrants in assimilating to life in the US and to prepare them for citizenship in their new home. What does it mean for any adult to be a “good citizen”? What skills, knowledge, or values should a person demonstrate to be accepted as a new citizen? These are questions that have been around as long as there have been neighbors and as long as there have been newcomers.

While it has long been required that new citizens be able to speak some English, it is relatively recent that literacy was added to the list of require-

ments. In 1950, a reading and writing component was added to screen procedures for prospective new citizens. Today, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) administers an exam to evaluate the applicant's knowledge of U.S. history and government, as well as basic knowledge of spoken and written English (Becker, 2000).

One set of goals of citizenship classes is simply to assist learners in preparing to take the naturalization exam. Public funds, as well as private support from sources such as the Soros Foundation's Emma Lazarus Fund, have made it possible to provide "citizenship" instruction through special classes or general ESL. A second set of goals is to encourage learners who have been naturalized to exercise their newly earned franchise with the vote. Such programs help learners through mock elections, registration procedures, and information about political parties, issues, and candidates. A third set of goals focuses more broadly on many forms of civic participation, in which learners examine their beliefs, identify and analyze issues that concern them, and build skills and strategies to take informed action (Nash, 1999).

Some poignant ironies emerge in the conflict between preparing learners to be active, engaged citizens in their communities and the stresses of preparing learners for the INS naturalization test. This conflict is exemplified in SHINE, Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders, a community service-learning project I codirect in San Francisco. Through SHINE, we train and place volunteer university student "coaches" in citizenship classes to support older learners who are preparing for naturalization, as well as in other ESL literacy classes (Weinstein, Whiteside, & Gibson, 2003).

We aim to incorporate learner-centered thematic units into our coaching curriculum through the "First Amendment Project," for which we collect narratives from learners and teachers about their personal experiences with freedom of expression. Our personal stories of standing up (or not) to parents, bosses, and other authority figures, participating in demonstrations, and suffering censorship cut to the core of civic engagement. We find enthusiasm for this initiative from participants across the ESL literacy and academic spectrum, *except for* participants in citizenship classes, where neither the learners nor the teachers think they have time for discussing civic liberties or personal experiences with civic engagement. Their overriding concern is to cram, as quickly and efficiently as possible, for the naturalization test. Given the high stakes, this comes as no surprise. It continues to be a challenge for concerned ESL teachers to prepare learners for a test that has grave consequences for their lives, while also supporting them to develop a voice and become informed and active members in their communities.

In "Thinking Beyond 'Increased Participation,'" Andy Nash challenges readers to broaden our own conceptions that have traditionally driven EL/civics efforts. Drawing on nearly a decade of civics-participation projects supported by the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC), Nash provides a model for increasing levels of civic engagement through a systematic, guided process. The five steps Nash outlines are illustrated with the rich experience of her years of civics-related instruction and her work with teach-

ers who have engaged all kinds of learners in projects that challenge their own notions of what they believe and what is possible. What is perhaps most provocative about Nash's contribution is her challenge to us as educators to examine our own conceptions of democracy while inviting learners to examine their own beliefs and attitudes—beliefs and attitudes that enable or confine our responses to our situations. In truly transformative education, those beliefs and attitudes can change, as participants explore and practice, with the support of a peer community, new ways of seeing, understanding, and taking action on their situations. I am struck by the parallels between teachers and learners, and by the notion that as teachers guide learners through the steps for increasing engagement, we have no choice but to examine our own conditions, and with other practitioners, to participate more fully in improving the conditions for teaching and learning, thereby changing what is possible not only for our learners but also for ourselves.

### *Learner-Centered Assessment: Setting Goals, Monitoring Progress*

In any language or literacy program, there are several sets of “stakeholders,” each of whom wants to know certain things about how things are going. Learners want to know how well they are doing vis-a-vis other students, and if they are moving toward their own learning goals. Teachers want to know which methods work (and which ones don't) with various learners. Program staff need information to place learners in appropriate levels or classes, decide course offerings, plan the curriculum, and generally find out if they are meeting their program goals. Funders and taxpayers are interested in the return on investment of literacy dollars, and they may be interested in comparing learner achievement across programs. Policy-makers want to know which practices are successful enough to replicate to create guidelines for allocating future funds. Stakeholders from a learner's community, family, and/or workplace may also want to know if the time spent by the learner is paying off, and if so, in what way (Van Duzer & Berdan, 2000).

Assessing success has been very problematic in the fields of both ESL and Adult Literacy Education, partly because of the different information needs of the different stakeholders, and partly because of an absence of a coherent, comparable system. Such a system would require agreement on the nature of language and literacy, the goals of instruction, and a resulting agreement on a comparable way to measure progress toward those goals. None of these agreements is yet in place, which creates enormous challenges to programs to document progress in a way that is specific to the needs of stakeholders within their programs, while providing information that is comparable with other programs for funders. With a growing emphasis on accountability, this is going to be a key area for the future of the field in the decade to come.

The Equipped for the Future Initiative provides one example of a learner-centered approach to assessment in which learner purposes drive the framework; learner roles guide the development, and skills are identified that can be taught to measurable standards. In “A Learner-Centered Approach to



Standards-Based Teaching Assessment,” Regie Stites describes *Equipped for the Future* to illustrate that it is indeed possible to combine a learner-centered approach with standards-based teaching and assessment. Beginning with a scenario in a family literacy class, Stites walks us through the assessment process, including samples of standards-based performance-level descriptions. Whether or not programs use *Equipped for the Future*, Stites’s article challenges us to think about how we can provide useful information to all of the stakeholders, not least of whom include the learners whose purposes must always be central to our efforts.

### **Unpacking the Notion of “Learner-Centered”: An Invitation to Dialogue**

For years, teachers and theorists have thrown around the term “learner-centered.” But what does it mean? In the last year, I’ve asked many graduate students and colleagues. “I don’t know, but I know it when I see it.” Is it all or nothing? Is it when students get to talk? But what if they get to say only scripted things that are not their own words? Is it when students’ needs are assessed? But what if their needs and interests change? Is it asking students what they want? What if they don’t know, or don’t know how to articulate their goals for learning English?

In this special theme issue, I asked authors to grapple with this question through their exploration of each context. By engaging with these authors and with other colleagues, I’ve come up with a list of six principles behind learner-centered teaching, none of which come in “all or nothing” packages, but rather, are expressed on a continuum, that is, as a matter of degree. These may not be the most important ones; there may be more. I propose them here as a way to start the conversation. Readers are invited to discuss with colleagues the interpretations they bring to these proposed principles; to look for how these principles are illustrated in the articles of this volume; to muse about their own teaching or program structures that do or do not reflect learner-centered practices; and to strive for approaches to teaching, curriculum, program design, and policy advocacy that have at their heart the most fundamental concerns of learners whom we seek to serve. As we learn more about the stories of the learners who walk through our doors, and the determination and resilience that they bring, how can we not be inspired? Surely, it is worth cultivating the tools we need to learn about these adults and families, celebrate them, invite them to teach us about themselves, and to direct their education to the destinations they choose for themselves.

## Some Principles of Learner-Centered Instruction

1. Learner-centered approaches:
  - Require ongoing inquiry (listening to/learning about learners);
  - Identify learners' interests and needs;
  - Identify learning styles and preferences;
  - Learn about learners' contexts: issues and challenges;
  - Learn about learners' contexts: resources and possibilities.
2. Build on what learners know.
  - Identify learners' current knowledge and skills.
  - Honor and celebrate language and culture.
  - Provide opportunities to integrate the past with the present.
  - Nurture intergenerational transmission of culture and values (for family literacy).
3. Balance skills and structures with meaning-making and knowledge creation.
  - Provide information about how the language works.
  - Develop skills for addressing learners' purposes.
  - Provide opportunities to address those purposes.
  - Provide learners opportunities to create and transmit knowledge.
4. Strive for authenticity.
  - Provide access to authentic texts and authentic tasks.
  - Move beyond "rehearsal" to authentic interactions in pursuit of real purposes.
  - Employ project-based learning.
  - Aim for measurable linguistic and nonlinguistic outcomes.
5. Entail shared responsibility for learning among students and teachers.
  - Build in learner choice over *what* to learn and *how*.
  - Create mentoring opportunities in which more proficient learners help less proficient learners.
  - Foster learner initiative in setting goals and monitoring progress.
  - Provide opportunities to apply new knowledge outside the classroom and to report/document results.
6. Build communities of learners and practitioners.
  - Create opportunities for sharing stories and experiences.
  - Provide support for analysis of situations.
  - Create opportunities to collectively develop strategies for action.
  - Provide opportunities for reflection and planning for further action.
  - Engage teachers as learners in ongoing discovery.
7. Reader's idea????? \_\_\_\_\_

### Starting the Conversation: Moving Toward Learner-Centered Practice

With colleagues, discuss each item, or the ones of most interest to you. For the first column, think of examples of each principle from your own experience as a teacher or learner. In the second column, list ideas you'd like to incorporate into your own practice as an individual or as a program.

<i>Experience, current and future practice</i> —→	<i>Your current practice</i> ( <i>examples</i> )	<i>Future practice</i> ( <i>positive directions</i> )
1. Take an inquiring stance; learn about learners and their context.		
2. Build on what learners know; provide opportunities to integrate the past with the present.		
3. Balance skills and structures with meaning-making and knowledge creation.		

<p>4. Strive for authenticity in texts and tasks and for linguistic and nonlinguistic outcomes.</p>		
<p>5. Foster learner agency through choices, learner control, and documented mastery.</p>		
<p>6. Build community among learners and practitioners.</p>		
<p>7. Your idea:</p>		

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