

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS IN ADULT BASIC
EDUCATION: FACILITATING LEARNER SELF-ADVOCACY

by

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Rob Matsushita, for your endless support, positivity and encouragement throughout this project, and (along with Dottie) your unconditional love. To my brilliant, inspirational ABE colleagues and mentors, especially Suzanne McCurdy and my #IamABE partners, and my invaluable professors and advisors at Hamline University for your belief in me and for sharing the beautiful work we do together. You will never know how much I respect and look up to each of you. To every educator, legislator and citizen who has fought for and supported the legitimization of adult education on behalf of those who need it. And most of all, to ABE learners everywhere for improving the world through the revolutionary act of learning.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

According to a longtime colleague, “Success in ABE would look like working ourselves out of a job!” Ten years of planning lessons in adult basic education (ABE) have continually reaffirmed that the goal that my instructor colleagues and I traditionally--and perhaps increasingly--seek to facilitate is greater learner independence. Learners ranging in age from 16 to 90+ come to our programs with diverse needs, interests, abilities and backgrounds, but they all share a hope to participate in their communities more fully with less external support over time--to articulate their own barriers and skillfully advocate their way through them.

This independence can prove a huge challenge in the United States, a country that systemically disempowers and discriminates against people in poverty, people of color, immigrants and refugees, and all women (Pew Research Center, 2019). These are the demographics into which most of our learners fall. The content of ABE instruction is often shaped by stakeholders outside of our classrooms; for example, ABE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and, in my state, the Minnesota Department of Education, which as government entities often have to justify their investment of taxpayer dollars by emphasizing workforce development. Adults making use of ABE programs may not fit this mold being imposed on them; rather, they may be seeking ways to shape their own destinies through education after enduring decades of systemic

injustice. ABE learners should be in the driver's seat in their own lives, and teachers are in a unique position to help facilitate this expedition.

Based on these observations, my questions are: *What educational support do ABE learners need to develop and employ self-advocacy skills to respond to barriers in their lives? What tools will help ABE instructors facilitate that support in the classroom?*

This chapter outlines my rationale for a participatory curriculum-building project that extends the goals of another currently available multilevel ABE unit developed by Minnesota instructors, with the purpose of supporting learners' facility for self-advocacy beyond the classroom. I provide the basis for and history of this movement among ABE teachers and students in Minnesota and describe our efforts to amplify voices in ABE. I also present the premise of education as a fundamental human right and argue that learning, even if state-funded, should not be made available only to support existing systems or to bolster an economy, but as a means of personal development that puts power in the hands of the learners and allows them to use it as they choose. I describe my teaching context and the relevance of this project for learners like mine and for other ABE contexts. Finally, this chapter includes an overview of my literature review in Chapter Two, an introduction to my project description in Chapter Three, and my reflections and conclusions regarding this project in Chapter Four.

Rationale and Project

My project was inspired by and continues the work of the #IamABE advocacy movement, which started with a group of ABE educators in a living room in early 2017. We came together to discuss the effect that the then-recent presidential election had had on our learners, their families, and communities; from harassment of Muslim Americans

and “travel bans” targeting Muslims to increased ICE presence to harmful misrepresentation of immigrants and refugees by the Trump campaign/administration in the media. We realized that many people were not aware of the destructive effect that this recent legislation and the rise of far-right conservatism had on immigrant, refugee and other minority communities if they did not belong to or work directly with those communities. This meeting led to the creation of a multilevel curriculum unit around ABE student self-advocacy, where students could learn about their rights to free speech and protest in the United States and how to contact legislators; about counteracting negative stereotypes disseminated about their communities; and about posting statements to this effect safely on social media. Three small groups of educators wrote three coordinated modules each for Pre-beginning/Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced/GED-level learners focusing on these topics and taught them in our own classrooms. We had our learners post, with permission and with options to disguise their identities, statements written on mini whiteboards starting with “I am...” and completed with self-descriptions they had composed that break up cultural stereotypes with the beauty and humanity of their personal stories. I collaborated on and taught the intermediate lessons, and my students posted statements such as “I am a student,” “I am a Muslim woman,” “I am an activist for the egalitarian rights of people,” and “I am a grandmother of four. I was a teacher” (Students, personal communication, August 14, 2017).

We posted our curriculum to a Google site where educators can download them for free, adapt and teach them in their contexts and invite their students to share their own statements tagged #IamABE on Facebook and Twitter. Posting with this hashtag unites

statements written by ABE learners wherever our curriculum is taught around Minnesota and the United States. Ultimately, the idea behind the lessons was to facilitate a real-world amplification of learner voices, because as our website states, “We...didn't have outlets for our students to share their ideas, needs, and complex identities that weren't overshadowed by our own political leanings. So we set out to create that space.”

(#IamABE, n.d.)

My class and other teachers' students reacted enthusiastically to the invitation to reflect who they are using their own frames, and the #IamABE movement has grown from there. Teachers within and outside of the initial planning group have implemented the curriculum and those of us who developed it have presented about the lessons and the beliefs behind them at many professional development conferences in the years since. This collaboration connects with an ongoing discussion among many ABE educators about equity issues in our field and the need for a teacher/student-led advocacy movement that raises the profile of ABE among legislators and the general public. #IamABE became a movement to disrupt top-down decision-making about ABE funding and program structure by including teacher and learner voices, including an active Facebook page, a lobby day at the Minnesota State Capitol and other advocacy efforts.

Profile of Learners and Teaching Context

My own students are intermediate and advanced English language learners attending a small ABE program in a diverse urban neighborhood, mainly in their 30s and older. Most are East African and Latino, though there are usually several European or Asian students at any given time. Our class uses the requisite tools of a language class (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, oral and literacy skills) to move through a variety of topics of

interest to the learners. Their particular curiosity about U.S. civil rights movements inspired me to write lessons about First Amendment rights and protest, such as a sequence incorporating a reading on the southern African American bus boycotts of the 1960s for a module in #IamABE's intermediate level. My learners regularly show me their independent thinking and desire to approach U.S. systems with confidence and autonomy.

Learner and Teacher Roles in the Classroom

While learners were the inspiration and have been central to this advocacy discussion, teachers leading #IamABE have struggled with continual questions about how learners can take a role in determining its direction. My #IamABE colleagues and I led a training at the 2018 Language and Literacy conference for ABE educators that moved these concerns forward. We facilitated a three-hour workshop in which teachers brainstormed areas in our students' lives in which they might need to strengthen their self-advocacy skills (i.e. navigating the health care or public transportation systems, among other suggested topics) and incorporated College and Career Readiness Standards in backward-designing units to help develop those skills in class (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). After reflecting on the excellent ideas that teachers generated in their workshop groups, it occurred to me that this model, while it incorporates standards alignment and many best practices for unit planning, still imposes a teacher's perspective on the learners' self-advocacy needs. In the interest of supporting our students' efforts toward independence and self-determination in our society, how can we model this in the classroom? Is there a way to position teachers in the role of facilitator and learners into the role of determiners of their own self-advocacy development?

I attempt to address these goals and answer my research questions with a set of curriculum design resources that can be made available on #IamABE's website for free and as an open-access resource. ABE teachers can use these resources to prepare instruction that is aligned to required assessments and to the three sets of ABE standards required in the state of Minnesota, which include the College and Career Readiness Standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), the Transitions Integration Framework (ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System, 2013) and NorthStar Digital Literacy standards (Northstar Digital Literacy, n.d.). These resources serve as tools to emphasize self-advocacy development that is not merely student-centered, but student-driven.

Summary

Chapter One outlined my research questions *What support do ABE learners need to develop and employ self-advocacy skills to respond to barriers in their lives? What tools will help ABE instructors facilitate that support in the classroom?* Chapter One also shared the rationale and context for my project, including the basis, history and aims of the #IamABE teacher/learner self-advocacy movement, and the need to extend more opportunities to ABE learners to articulate their own ideas. I presented several obstacles to self-advocacy for the populations who attend ABE programming including systemic social and political discrimination, government funders' dehumanizing economic lens on the purpose of ABE and even teacher overinvolvement in learners' self-determination of their own education. Chapter One also included a description of my learners and how their engagement with U.S. civil rights history inspired my interest in this project. Finally, Chapter One stated the importance of teacher facilitation of student-driven

learning.

Chapter Overview

Chapter Two provides a review of literature related to learner-driven curriculum in ABE as it relates to self-advocacy, independence and other goals relevant to my learners. Chapter Two begins with an overview of ABE services and learner eligibility in my state; the chapter continues with current and historical perspectives on official motivations for supporting adult education; my analysis of literature related to education as a human right and means of personal and political liberation, what this can look like in a classroom and descriptions of the instructor's role and the impact of learner identity in this process. In addition, Chapter Two provides analysis of the performative influence on instructional preparation of accountability measures like content standards and mandated assessments.

Chapter Three describes my participatory curriculum resource tools and how they can be implemented to prepare curriculum units driven by ABE learner input, including a guiding project overview; a learner advocacy self-evaluation for instructors; a lesson plan for in-class facilitation that gathers learner input on units and objectives that will be most useful to them; a unit-planning document that incorporates learner input along with other ABE best practices for course design; a blank lesson-planning template; a tool for reflection after teaching the devised unit; and a glossary of terms used throughout the toolkit. Chapter Four explains my reflections and conclusions about the project I developed, connecting it to the literature review in Chapter Two and examining limitations of the project, considerations around its implementation and dissemination and opportunities for further research related to ABE learner self-advocacy.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

*Dehumanization is a concrete expression of alienation and domination;
humanistic education is a utopian project of the dominated and oppressed.
Obviously both imply action by people in a social reality--the first, in the sense of
preserving the status quo, the second in a radical transformation of the
oppressor's world.*

-Freire, 1985, p. 113

Conversations within the field of adult basic education often attempt to address a tension between stakeholder needs to quantify and “prove” evidence of learning and a humanistic interest in recognizing and supporting the needs and gifts of the adult learner (Bingman, Ebert & Bell, 2000). In this chapter, literature on ABE learner identity and its relationship to power, as well as on the human rights implications of learner-driven ABE education support my research questions, *What educational support do ABE learners need to develop and employ self-advocacy skills to respond to barriers in their lives? What tools will help ABE instructors facilitate that support in the classroom?*

This chapter begins by identifying the types of learners served in adult basic education, commonly identified goals of these learners for pursuing ABE instruction, and perspectives on learner individuality and identity, including my own and those shared in scholarly literature. This section looks at how power and intersectional identities interact

in ABE classrooms, both for educators and learners, and the potential within ABE instruction for ABE learners to dismantle and reimagine existing power structures. I present the idea that when learners are positioned as self-advocates both in ABE course development and in their communities, their confidence and persistence increase along with their independence.

The next section discusses the adult learner's right to education, and details the historical and current views of framers of ABE policy of the field as having a primarily economic or social value. Analysis follows that compares the views of advocates of participatory curriculum. Finally, the last section explores the impact of accountability measures on ABE instructional design and the imperative for educators to prioritize learner goals in their planning over alignment to standards and assessment preparation.

Self-Determined ABE Learners as Self-Advocates

This section consists of a profile of the ABE learner in terms of personal demographics and their varying motivations for participating in ABE courses. Scholarly literature informs my argument that the multi-layered nature of their identities and learner interests necessitates a curriculum built around their individualized needs and input that aims to further students' ability to self-advocate effectively outside of class.

Who are ABE learners? To facilitate development in ABE learners as self-advocates, it is paramount that they are seen at all times as individuals coming to our classrooms with their own goals, and that ABE educators are there to respond to them as such. As mentioned in Chapter One, ABE learners comprise a great variety of educational and language backgrounds. Based on federal 2014-15 ABE program year numbers, over 1.5 million learners were served by federal ABE funding: 56% of U.S.

adult non-postsecondary student enrollment was made up of ABE learners, whose first language (or L1) is English (or if there is more than one L1, English is among them), as well as adult secondary-level English learners. These learners worked to close gaps in their basic skills education, whether in literacy, math, digital literacy or employment readiness. The remaining 44% were English language learners (ELLs), some of whom had pursued extensive formal education in non-English-speaking countries; as well as ELLs with limited or interrupted formal education who are building literacy or numeracy skills concurrently with English language skills (though, being adults, they have many well-developed skill sets beyond a formal educational setting). Of these ELLs, 45% (or 302,936 learners) gained at least one level on a federally approved reading or math assessment within that program year (“English Literacy/English Language (EL) education in the adult basic grant program: Fact sheet”, 2016).

According to the official perspective as stated on their website, the Minnesota Adult Basic Education system serves learners “age 17 or older and not enrolled in or required to be enrolled in any school in the K-12 system,” who must meet the criteria of 1) “lack[ing] a secondary (high school) credential” or 2) “function[ing] below the 12th grade level in any of the basic academic areas including reading, math, and ability to read, write and understand English” (“About ABE in Minnesota”, n.d.). Learners are eligible to receive ABE services if they are engaged in the following activities: earning a secondary credential or building their skills to enter post-secondary education or workforce training (including digital literacy instruction); attempting to gain employment or improve their employment situation with a better job or promotion; improving their English language skills; becoming a U.S. citizen; or seeking to improve their academic

skills to help their K-12-age family members complete schoolwork. There are also more nebulous qualifying categories of eligible ABE learner, such as one who is trying to “become a more active and engaged community member” and “gain self-esteem, confidence and achieve personal educational goals” (“About ABE in Minnesota”, n.d.). Examples often given in the field include participation in neighborhood meetings, navigating the health care or transportation systems, or volunteering with a local organization; however, the latter goals are harder to assess and track, except through teachers’ informal observations or anecdotal remarks from learners.

From this apparently comprehensive list, adult learners’ personal goals can be drilled down even further into thousands of individual stories about their ambitions for their lives and the educational pathways that they intend to forge in order to realize those plans.

Power and identity in the ABE classroom. Also informing the learning experiences of ABE learners are the many facets of their identities. Norton (2000) described “identity” as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). Identities, according to Norton (2000), are not static but are continually formed, tied to both positive and negative individual experiences; in ABE settings, each person entering our programming carries a history of family life and achievements, personal trauma and illness and many other influential factors in their background that constitute a far richer story than what educators learn from the required data about race, nationality, gender, educational background, etc. that we gather from learners at program intake.

Additionally, each learner is networked to identity categories that connect them to others in ways that build community but also lead to discriminatory barriers in social mobility; Black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) term "intersectionality" provides a framework to discuss this phenomenon (pp. 139-167). Intersectionality refers to "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage" ("Intersectionality", 2015). In the context of ABE, most learners not only belong to groups or communities that disenfranchise them from social power, but they belong to several of these groups at the same time (i.e. they are people of color AND they may be poor AND they tend to be women, etc.). Thus, each individual's identity is potentially impacted by the overlapping of these categorizations; their disadvantages may be uniquely compounded and misunderstood, and living with these disadvantages informs their experiences of the learning environment. In addition to race, class, and gender, ABE learner identity is affected by sexual orientation, religion, ability, nationality, immigration status, language, age, mental health, educational history and multiple other categorizations. The fusion of multiple aspects to form identity is, of course, a source of beauty and strength that contributes immeasurably to society and humanity. However, while learners may find community in the commonalities they share with classmates or ABE staff in any of these categories, or in the intersection of multiple categories, each learner has encountered them in relationship to power in individualized personal situations. Each intersectional experience is one person's story.

Norton (2000) argued that "[Second Language Acquisition] theory needs to

develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (p. 5). She went on to claim that language is a constitutive force that people use to evoke the world and themselves, through which language users might reform received notions of their identities and build access to the spaces from which they are systematically excluded. Indeed, language is known to help create space for new ideas and marginalized voices are traditionally the ones carving out those spaces.

It is a frequently-acknowledged concern among Minnesota ABE professionals that we ourselves rarely represent the identities of our learners, especially in categories such as race, class, nationality, and language. ABE teachers are predominantly college-educated white U.S.-born women whose L1 is English and whose economic backgrounds (and often their current circumstances) are middle-class (Cronin, Yin, & Condelli, 2015). Our concern is based in awareness of our relative privilege in walking through the world with these identities, compared to the respective discrimination faced by our learners, and the educational implications of the resulting chasm in understanding between our perspectives. However, educators can refer to Norton’s assertion that language and skills instruction provides learners with the power to break down a dominant perspective (white, American, male, etc.) and begin the work of reconstructing what people see as “reality” with themselves at the center (Norton, 1997; Norton, 2000).

Learner self-efficacy and confidence. ABE educators Kozacek and Specht (2014) reflected on their experience working with ABE students preparing to take the GED and the need to help them disabuse themselves of negative self-identification before they could make progress toward their goals, Kozacek & Specht (2014) stated,

Many times, we need to start with building self-efficacy before we can focus on self-advocacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed at a task. If you have a strong sense of self-efficacy, you believe in yourself and your abilities....You see obstacles as problems to be solved, not something to stop you from achieving your goal (p. 6).

If the community members who pursue ABE services are made to feel that aspects of their identities are considered less desirable in society compared to others, or that their perspective is less valuable to others, their sense of self-efficacy and thus their progress toward goals may suffer.

Learners are likely to have an increased sense that classes are for them and represent their identities if the power dynamic is shifted to create space for their self-determination in the educational setting. Learners may form a more powerful connection to coursework in which both the topics of the course itself and the way lessons are devised reflect values of student self-advocacy; i.e. they benefit personally and educationally from being given the opportunity to help devise the content that, in turn, prepares them to advocate for themselves. They are experts in their own interests, desires and barriers (Rodriguez, 1991) and will engage with instruction with more confidence knowing their contributions to course design are being sought and put into practice by educators. The role of the teacher can shift into facilitation of these learner-determined goals rather than reflecting teachers' assumptions about their needs, which are assembled externally to their experience (Rodriguez, 1991).

Adult Learner Rights as a Lens for Framing Instructional Design

Because a great deal of state and federal funding for adult basic education is dispersed through government entities, current (and, at times, historical) discussions about the value of the field are often framed through return on investment in adult learners as a potential workforce. This economic lens neglects a more human-rights-focused discussion on education as a path to personal growth, self-actualization and access to greater social participation (Kaiper, 2017).

Background on ABE funding support: Human potential versus workforce development. This workforce development-oriented attitude toward adult education has not always characterized government rationale for ABE funding; the official motive for supporting ABE as a catalyst for national prosperity has emerged and receded throughout its lifetime as government programming (Rose, 1991). Evidence of interrupted formal education and low literacy was demonstrated through “intelligence” tests administered to U.S. soldiers, including non-native-English-speaking immigrants, during World War I, leading to intra-military educational initiatives called Development Battalions, the effectiveness of which convinced military officials that poor and foreign-born adults could, in fact, be educated (Sticht, 2005). After World War II, a need was seen by military officials, government agencies and even President Eisenhower for federal involvement in formerly locally-run literacy programs to shore up a so-called “waste of human resources” on behalf of the skilled-labor needs of the country. Concerns about the implications of low education and illiteracy lead to legislation such as the Manpower Training and Development Act of 1962, whose name reveals a clear framing of adult education for the purposes of workforce needs (Rose, 1991, pp. 6-7).

Federal support for ABE has been officially available in actual name in some

form since the federal Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Belzer & Kim, 2018), and subsequently the Adult Education Act of 1966, which moved ABE funding under the auspices of the U.S. Office of Education (Rose, 1991). Funds were allocated to adult educational programs in the initial decades to train teachers, establish and grow programming, and to support research and curriculum development. While some official funding discussion directly connected adult education to employability, Belzer and Kim (2018) identified that a 1978 revision to federal statute “explicitly framed the purpose of ABE around full human potential development and assumed that literacy skills were needed to adequately function in a range of adult roles in addition to as employee” (paragraph 3). Adult learners were recognized in this language developed by a government spending authority as whole human beings being provided the opportunity through educational options for growth in a broad sense, presumably according to their own self-identified goals.

The 1991 National Literacy Act (NLA) further defined the meaning of adult literacy, which ABE funding served; as well as federal and state roles within the ABE system and measures of program accountability (Belzer & Kim, 2018). However, within the language of the NLA, the aim of adult education was even more expansive in terms of responding to learner needs and goals than in previous stature, and did not confine progress to employability or workforce performance (Belzer & Kim, 2018).

Employability-related outcomes were first required in ABE by federal law in 1998 with the Workforce Innovation Act (WIA). Unlike the NLA, which was independent law, WIA fell under a larger workforce development law, subsuming the goals of ABE as a field under a system dedicated to employment priorities, and one of the

measures which programs became accountable to track under WIA was attaining or advancing in employment (Belzer & Kim, 2018), a goal which remains in place under the updated 2013 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Minnesota's impact report underlining the purposes of funding ABE lists in its "Key Goals and Approaches" under the topic of "Serving New Americans": "Minnesota ABE recognizes the important role that immigrants can play in helping to address Minnesota's skill shortages, and is at the forefront of efforts to prepare New Americans to be productive workers and citizens" ("Adult Basic Education in Minnesota: an Overview", 2019, p. 2). The report's first section is titled "Increasing Employment and Earnings" and subtitled "The Ultimate Goal of ABE: Putting Skills to Work" (2019, p. 3), revealing an attitude among those representing the field to legislators and donors who fund programs within Minnesota's ABE system that their foremost value is economic.

While many ABE learners list finding employment or improving their employability as a learning goal upon entering ABE programs, data does not support a narrow focus on employment-related skill-building as an indicator of future economic or professional success. The conditions that lead to better employment conditions are complicated, and transitions-focused ABE is far from unequivocal as a factor that improves employability (Belzer & Kim, 2018). What teachers and learners know is that access to education is necessary for the autonomy, dignity and full citizenship of adults (Gadotti, 2011, p. 17).

Human capital. Baptiste described the term "human capital" as referring to "knowledge, attitudes and skills that are developed and valued primarily for their

economically productive potential” (2001, p. 185). The connection made in a capitalist society between educational pursuits and increased economic success lends itself to government investment in the education of individuals, particularly adults of a working age, with the stated goal of improving national economic prosperity (Kaiper, 2017, p. 40); thus, human capital in an ABE development context refers to a view that potential learning gains in literacy, math and other skills that are transferable to employment situations raise the learner’s economic value, subscribing to what Kaiper calls “economic meritocracy” (Kaiper, 2017). Providing education with the goal of building a state’s human capital is by design inherently dehumanizing to learners in that this approach eschews the primary importance of recognizing their whole personhood, in favor of commodifying their labor and relativizing their value based on potential contributions to the labor force.

Adult basic education as a human right. However, the field of adult education is home to a number of educational theorists such as Auerbach (1992), Spener (1993), and Wallerstein (1983) who framed the holistic pursuit of education for personal growth and development as a human right (Kaiper, 2017). According to adult literacy education’s most famous advocate for liberation through education, Paulo Freire (1970), adults who may have faced limited or interrupted opportunities for formal education due to systemic barriers such as poverty or discrimination might indeed seek to dismantle these barriers with the tools gained through education (p. 18). Freire (1985) espoused a philosophy that the goal of literacy education was not to improve the learner’s position within an existing system, but rather to acquire the skills and language needed to recognize oppressive forces in a society that had limited his or her education and opportunities to begin with

and then undermine or transform them, to de-instrumentalize himself or herself (p. 68). He called this learning process, first implemented in Brazil and Chile and eventually around the world, by the name “conscientization” (Freire, 1970, p. 9; Gadotti, 2011, pp. 14-17).

Freire (1970) noted the political power dynamics at play in a classroom that “mirrors oppressive society as a whole”, which he describes as the “banking model” of education, in which learners passively receive information that is deposited into their brains by teachers, accepting its attitudes and beliefs without incorporating critical examination of the material or practicing the skills needed to do so (p. 46). Freire (1970) described that within this traditional model of education, “the teacher teaches and the students are taught”; “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing”; and, most relevant to my project, “the teacher chooses the program content and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it” (p. 46). Freire (1974) attempted to counteract this educational model, which he argued sought to keep lower-class learners in their place and maintain a political status quo, with dialogue-based literacy instruction that builds critical consciousness among learners (p. 34). Freire (1970) organized lessons around “problem-posing”, in which learners are prompted with inductive discussion, questions and images to question social and political structures and pose solutions within their reach (pp. 52-59; as cited in Spener, 1993, pp. 81-82).

Human-focused education in the adult ESL classroom. Spener (1993), along with scholars like Auerbach (1992) and Wallerstein (1983), noted that perhaps adult learners are aware of barriers that obstruct their free mobility in society and are not in need of conscientization in that sense; however, these learners nevertheless benefit from

increased literacy in order to engage with social barriers. Spener (1993) listed teaching methods that effectively adapt Freirean techniques for an American adult literacy context, including activities such as “language experience stories, oral histories, Total Physical Response, jazz chants, strip stories and sentences, cloze dictations, paired reading and dialogue journal writing” (p. 83). These common instructional activities lend themselves to creative self-expression by learners and opportunities to produce language independently. Spener (1993) noted that while Freire was teaching literacy to learners in their first languages in South America, most New North Americans lack L1 knowledge of English, which leads to an adoption of whole language instruction that replaces some of Freire’s generative activities (p. 84).

Wallerstein (1983) suggested opportunities for adult educators to emulate some of Freire’s methods for supporting learner consciousness-building in order for teachers to better understand and serve their students. Wallerstein recommends visiting learners’ neighborhoods (and homes, if possible, though some ABE programs discourage this practice) to learn about their circumstances, lives and family dynamics; in class, teachers should observe learner interactions (body language, speech) in same-culture and cross-cultural constellations, and provide many opportunities for dialogue in order to share their backgrounds, priorities and the motivations behind their educational goals. These communicative efforts help teachers and learners work to co-create learning content and objectives (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 35). As Norton (2016) stated,

What I have learnt from language learners is that *language* is not only a linguistic system of words and sentences, but also a social practice in which identities and desires are negotiated in the context of complex and

often unequal social relationships (paragraph 4).

Teachers owe it to learners to design instruction that honors their participation in the vulnerable process of learning new skills.

ABE Curriculum within Standards-Based Expectations

Methodologies of curriculum design inherently reflect the framers' perspectives toward the learners and learning (Auerbach, 1992, p. 6). It can be difficult for instructors or administrators charged with devising instructional schemes not to prioritize the requirements of stakeholders who view assessment scores or demonstration of standards alignment as the primary outcomes that determine program success, as opposed to evidence that learners can reach their own stated goals more independently. This section includes information about two state-approved assessments and three sets of content standards to which Minnesota ABE programs are accountable and how placing a primary focus on implementation of these requirements can skew priorities of curriculum design away from learner-driven determination of objectives. The section introduces scholarly analysis on the political and academic problems that arise from curriculum-planning models that emphasize performativity; in response, the section brings forth curriculum models that center learner participation in their development.

Background on instructional accountability in ABE. Prior to the introduction of federal ABE standards with the U.S. Office of Vocational and Adult Education's College and Career Readiness standards in 2013 (with professional development reaching teachers two or three years later, or longer), adult education networks across states and regions typically developed program accountability criteria for instruction based on locally devised frameworks and approved assessments. These are the items that have

helped drive curriculum planning, along with semi-formal needs assessments devised within programs and informal anecdotal discussions with students on their learning goals.

Assessment as a performative expectation in ABE. Minnesota requires ABE students to be assessed diagnostically at intake and periodically afterward to measure learning gains using the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) or Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE); these ABE assessments are commonly used throughout the U.S. These exams are designed to assess competency-based education, “a functional approach to education that emphasizes life skills and evaluates mastery of those skills according to actual learner performance” (Savage, 1993, p. 15). Students being assessed provide multiple-choice answers on paper or online through tasks requiring these “life skills”, such as (in the case of the CASAS Reading test forms) reading and interpreting examples of building and road signs, work schedules, appointment reminders and medicine labels, along with narrative scenarios and other texts. While teachers are trained to be wary of “teaching to the test” and competency-based education has drawn criticism for prescribing what learners “need” in their “real lives” as imagined by teachers and test designers (Auerbach, 1986, pp. 416-17), competency-based tests encouraged literacy and language teachers to design at least some of their instruction around practical texts related to community navigation, and set expectations for practical numeracy skills. However, the lists of competencies captured by these tests are not in themselves curricula, of course; tests may serve as one kind of motivation for learners to improve their skills and continue to a higher class level, but they are not a comprehensive source to guide instructional planning.

However, revised editions of the TABE and CASAS assessments have been

approved for use (federally and, gradually, state by state) in 2018 and 2019 respectively, and ABE test administrators, many of whom are classroom instructors, are introducing these updated tests into their learning centers. ABE educators in Minnesota were advised that, while careful oversight of assessment performance was suspended for several years by the Minnesota Department of Education because approved assessments were outdated and not aligned to federal standards, required performance targets have been reinstated in the 2018-2019 program year to coincide with the updated tests (“Performance targets and results”, 2018). Low-performing consortia or programs may be put under review by the state and ultimately lose funding (“Program improvement”, 2018). Given these accountability expectations, teachers are likely to respond to this requirement by planning instruction with increased urgency around testing performance, i.e. demonstrating learning around competencies built into required tests, rather than framing curriculum first around input provided organically by learners about their own educational goals.

ABE standards development and implementation. Another consideration impacting the way ABE instructors are planning lessons in recent years is the introduction of official content standards for the first time in U.S. adult education.

Minnesota’s ABE system adopted its own locally devised instructional guidance in 2013 in the form of Academic Career and Employability Skills (ACES). ACES is an initiative developed by Minnesota’s ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System (ATLAS), an ABE educators’ professional development organization combining resources of the Minnesota Department of Education and Hamline University School of Education. The goal of ACES is to “provide effective contextualized instruction

integrating post-secondary education and training readiness, employability skills, and career readiness at all levels” (ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System, n.d.).

ATLAS’ delivery model for implementation of transitions-focused teaching is the Transitions Integration Framework (TIF): “The TIF defines the academic, career, and employability skills essential for adult learners to successfully transition to postsecondary education, career training, the workplace, and to enrich community involvement” (ATLAS, 2013, p. 1).

The TIF was designed to support ABE instructors in embedding skill-building into their lessons, routines and classroom management related to effective communication, critical thinking, learning strategies, self-management, navigating systems and developing a future pathway (ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System, n.d.), often alongside or in addition to explicit instruction in academic and language skills. Colloquially, many educators in Minnesota ABE have described the skills and subskills outlined in the TIF as an education in the “soft skills” necessary for learners to persist and thrive in culturally specific social environments (i.e. U.S. workplaces and community spaces) that can require a certain social awareness to navigate successfully. While U.S. workplaces may privilege certain methods of communication and collaboration that fail to include styles common to non-dominant (i.e. non-white, non-native English-speaking) cultures, there is an opportunity for learners to disrupt professional and social conventions through self-representation and self-advocacy. This inventory of TIF skills lends itself easily to alignment with learner-determined instruction promoting self-advocacy and to instructional strategies that aim to shift power dynamics surrounding learners whose experiences are marginalized: why shouldn’t “effective

communication” include persuasive argumentation or discussion around one’s personal customs? Within self-management, learners may practice methods of self-empowerment and modelling of self-advocacy for others sharing the workplace. Critical thinking is certainly useful in discussions of how to identify discrimination and how to work to solve social inequities, and perhaps necessary to navigating systems is the possibility of disrupting systems.

The TIF is one of the Minnesota ABE system’s three cooperating sets of standards, along with the federal CCR standards and another homegrown resource, the NorthStar Digital Literacy (NDL) standards, which pair with digital assessments that test “the basic skills needed to use a computer and the Internet in daily life, employment, and higher education. Online, self-guided modules assess the ability of adults to perform these tasks” (Northstar Digital Literacy, n.d.). Development of an optional online curriculum will be integrated into the assessments in 2020 (Northstar Digital Literacy, n.d.). Beyond this emerging option, standards were designed as guiding frameworks for instruction, with no recognized curriculum accompanying them. The NDL standards may present an economic barrier to learners and small programs in terms of accessing technology and Internet access, but the standards themselves seem to culminate in learning that creates opportunity for widespread communication, information-sharing, advocacy and organizing.

The College and Career Readiness Standards, which ABE educators across the U.S. have slowly been learning to integrate in earnest since 2014-15, shared some overlap in skill-building with the TIF but had a more academic emphasis in some areas. They encouraged “key shifts” in instructional design toward increased complexity, knowledge

and demonstration of evidence in the English and Language Arts standards and more focus on relevant skills, coherence (or cumulative learning in progressive stages), and rigor in the Math standards. (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While the implementation of ABE standards is a significant step toward professionalizing the field and fostering consistency of instruction, Minnesota teachers have been hard at work attempting for the first time to integrate three complex frameworks into their lesson- and unit-planning within a short span of six years. As new curricula are built with alignment to standards and updated assessments in mind, learners' perspectives may often get lost in the shuffle of performative expectations. It is critical for ABE educators to remember that the learners' needs and goals are still at the center of our services.

I have made the observation several times during standards implementation trainings provided for local professional development in my area that, while unit-planning tools have been made available, the overwhelming number of standards alignment trainings have focused at the lesson level rather than the unit or comprehensive curriculum level. After multiple months of familiarizing ourselves with standards and wrapping our minds around the alignment process, teachers may feel they must answer to this priority first by creating lessons that incorporate standards; I know I have personally felt I lacked sufficient guidance to plan whole units that incorporate standards as well as test preparation, let alone engaging learner-identified input about their self-advocacy goals first and foremost, as much as literature may support the educational and social value of this participatory approach.

Considerations for ABE curriculum design. Pressures to transition learners to educational and career pathways can put the cart before the horse in the sense of setting

expectations for curriculum outcomes to reflect the expectations of ABE funders (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Kellenberg, Schmidt & Werner, 2018). Literature indicates that instead of first considering how to teach toward transitions that may be projected onto learners when designing curriculum, ABE educators can better serve learners through a participatory process which incorporates discussion and consensus within student groups or classes around the outcomes they seek. This process then supports educators in how to design units and lessons that help learners work toward overcoming challenges independently; such an approach is also known as an “emergent” curriculum (Ahlstrom, 2003; Auerbach, 1992).

Auerbach (1992) shared a framework for participatory curriculum developed and practiced at UMass Family Literacy Project, derived from a Freirean-inspired model, in which 1) teachers and learners interacted in structured and unstructured ways in order for the instructor to identify themes and concerns of the learners; 2) learners take part in a variety of multi-skill participatory activities to facilitate dialogue, develop literacy skills and practice related language connected to the themes gathered earlier, and 3) learners make changes and take actions within the classroom space and in their households and communities as a result of their learning. This model allows learners to contribute input in ways they find manageable, lends itself to meeting learners’ expressed life challenges and suggests many useful ideas that could be transferred to most ABE classrooms.

Kellenberg, Schmidt and Werner (2018) more recently created a tool for adult educators to consult when designing programming or instructional content that addresses both educator and learner perspectives, promoting a trajectory of three stages from which to view the learning experience: self-determination, self-regulation and reflection. Within

each, the tool provides questions for the “adult educator” and the “adult learner”, which ultimately do not culminate in a curriculum-writing process but rather a series of considerations to be undertaken by educators and administrators when designing programming and instruction. These questions help ABE educators recognize the learner’s identity (“What is my motivation about the task?”) and build upon his or her existing skills (“What do[es the teacher] know about the target group? What useful skills do they have or need?”), emphasize the learner’s autonomy (“What is the personal freedom of work within the required tasks?”) and check in on their learning experience (“Did I encounter any unexpected obstacles in completing the task?”; “What did I learn about myself?”) (Kellenberg, Schmidt & Werner, 2018, p. 27). This tool requires educators first to put themselves in their students’ shoes, then to develop methods calling for learner self-determination, and finally for learners and educators to track and reflect on their work together in the classroom.

Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the ABE learner, the intersectional nature of his or her identity and its relationship to power structures, both in their communities and in relationship to teacher identities, connecting to the life and learning barriers mentioned in my research questions. I provide rationale for the importance of centering learner self-advocacy in ABE instruction and increasing learner confidence through acknowledgment and encouragement of their input as the determiner of course content, with instructor as facilitator.

This chapter also outlines the lack of established curricula in Minnesota ABE and describes the material that tends to inform curriculum development at individual sites,

namely state-approved assessments and the CCR, TIF and NorthStar Digital Literacy standards, which then essentializes ABE curriculum writing as a mechanism to perform the expectations of assessments and standards rather than a process supporting greater learner autonomy. I reference other research that serves as a starting point for adaptable, participatory curriculum development framed around the learner's goals and experience of the class, which supports the rationale behind the assembly of resources presented in my project.

Next, Chapter Three includes the explanation and description of my project, a participatory curriculum resource toolkit for unit design. Chapter Three revisits research ideas from Chapter Two to explain the choices made in creating these resources, their intended use and audience, and potential limitations of the toolkit. Chapter Three also provides objectives for the resources and the built-in process through which instructors can assess their success. Chapter Three concludes with an overview of Chapter Four.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Chapters One and Two respectively provided a rationale and research basis for my project, which furnishes resources that support ABE instructors in gathering learner input and incorporating it into designing standards- and assessment-aligned curriculum units with objectives that foster learner self-advocacy. In Chapter One, I shared the work of #IamABE, in which ABE colleagues built a learner/teacher movement promoting self-advocacy in response to mounting political and social animus in the United States against ABE learners and people like them. In Chapters One and Two, I also made a case that since the recent emergence of federal and state standards in ABE, focus in instructional design has shifted to satisfying government funder expectations rather than meeting learners' stated goals, and that this fails to represent the human rights-related goals inherent in ABE. In order to counteract such attitudes, I emphasized the urgency around the need to have learners participate in curriculum development and for learning goals to feature these students' self-advocacy.

In Chapter Three, I describe my project, a set of curriculum design resources I have created to address my research questions, *What educational support do adult basic education (ABE) learners need to develop and employ self-advocacy skills to respond to barriers in their lives? What tools will help ABE instructors facilitate that support in the classroom?* I review major conclusions of the literature review in Chapter Two, explain

the overall goals of the project I have developed in response and present a list of the tools included in the project. I share details about the purpose and design of these materials and the educational theories and curriculum models that influenced how they were devised. I go on to define the intended audience for this project and settings in which the resources can be used, consider the scope of potential implementation and also provide a timeline for the project's completion. Chapter Three concludes with a reflection on the information shared within it and an overview of Chapter Four.

Research

In Chapter Two, my review of the literature guided my project in several important ways. I shared information about the parameters for serving ABE learners in Minnesota, along with mandatory assessments and content standards that can become the lenses through which instructional design is focused. Through Crenshaw's (1989) description of intersectionality and Norton's (2000) ideas about learner identity becoming reconstructed and empowered to challenge social expectations through language acquisition and learning, I proposed a re-centering of instructional design around our multifaceted learners' self-identified paths and goals. I shared analyses of education as a human right, contrasted with views of adult educational programming as an effort to build human capital for a national workforce. A look at Freire-inspired course development models by scholars such as Auerbach (1992) as well as Kellenberg, Schmidt and Werner (2018) highlighted the potential of ABE curricula to reflect the process of garnering learner input for the purpose of facilitating increased self-advocacy.

Project Overview

Project description. In response to conclusions drawn from my research and in an attempt to follow up on my research questions, I built a set of seven tools, detailed below, for use by ABE instructors to facilitate a process of learner-directed in-class activities for the purpose of designing curriculum units framed around learners' goals, with the aim of planning backward (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011) from their self-identified self-advocacy challenges.

Project materials. This project consists of the following materials:

1. A Teacher's Guide briefly explaining the purpose and rationale of this project, and providing an overview of the materials described below and how to use and adapt them in a variety of ABE teaching contexts. Each tool is described, contextualized by its purpose and how often it can be used, and further explained through tips meant to help practitioners understand and use all parts of each document. This document is fairly brief in order to be useful and approachable to busy instructors, who tend to lack a great deal of paid planning time for curriculum unit development.
2. A Teacher Reflection on Learner Self-Advocacy, which serves as a brief reflection and self-assessment for instructors to consider how important learner self-advocacy is to the ABE field in general and to them personally as instructors, how they build self-advocacy objectives into instruction already and ways it can become an even greater driving force in their classes. The rationale behind this project is framed at the beginning of this tool by posing the question "what is the purpose of ABE?" and sharing some of my research and findings before providing questions for teachers to ask themselves or discuss at a staff level.

This self-assessment explains Kellenberg, Schmidt and Werner's (2018) theory of adult learners ideally having opportunities to be self-determined, self-regulated and reflective, and encourages teachers to apply these optimal states to a vision for instructional planning and classroom management. The exercise offered through this tool will help instructors step back from the constant pressures that lead us to building curriculum units in response to educator-devised content standards and performative assessment expectations in favor of learner self-determination, self-regulation and reflection as starting points to planning. This document is just one page, making it achievable for busy instructors to complete within 10-15 minutes, or possible to work through with colleagues in a site staff meeting.

3. A Participatory Curriculum Input-Gathering Lesson Plan consisting of activities for learners such as

- a warmup activating schema around prior class units and familiarizing them with unit-planning considerations;
- a brainstorming activity in which they identify challenges they face in meeting their needs and goals;
- a facilitated discussion and note-taking exercise to prioritize and build consensus around challenges to focus on as a class for a future unit;
- and an informal small-group presentation in which learners advocate for their preferred unit by sharing ideas for activities and methods of assessment to to practice content and demonstrate learning within the proposed unit. The class then votes to choose the next unit.

The lesson plan is, of course, the tool that helps teachers listen to learners' input on challenges they want to prepare to take on independently once outside the lesson. These activities allow the whole class to collaborate with one another and with the teacher to propose unit objectives, activities and assessments that will benefit everyone. The lesson plan can be completed in one or two class periods, depending on the instructor's approach to implementation, and will therefore not appreciably disrupt planned course schedules. Materials described in the plan are included in the project toolkit.

4. A Participatory Curriculum Unit Design Tool Template that instructors can use to adapt the topics posed by learners for instruction, incorporating standards alignment, competencies assessed by state-approved testing, multiple modalities (speaking, listening, reading, writing and, when planning for English language learners, pronunciation) and a variety of activities and student groupings (whole-group, small-group, paired, individual).

The unit-planning document is a flexible tool for teachers to turn the input shared and agreed upon by learners in the collaborative lesson into a well-rounded curriculum unit that fits their program's capabilities and the students' proficiency levels, and that meets or works toward content standards and prepares learners for assessment. The unit-planning document itself is four pages unpopulated (though it may expand, depending on the level of detail that each instructor chooses to include when using it), and takes roughly 2-3 hours to complete with the opportunity for added depth. Time of completion will vary by instructor, and the

tool can potentially be reused with increasing automaticity and speed as instructors become more experienced with its implementation in their courses.

5. A Blank Participatory Curriculum Lesson Plan Template for teachers to use when creating lessons to enact their unit plans. The format is almost the same as that used for the input-gathering lesson.

6. A summative Post-Teaching Unit Evaluation and Reflection for instructors to complete after teaching their unit, with considerations around depth of engagement with learners' stated and achievements in building student self-advocacy, allowing instructors to compare their intended goals and implementation to the practical experience of teaching their unit. Teachers are able to reflect on what worked well for learners and what the instructor would tweak or add in future unit development, instruction and assessment or if repeating this unit.

This assessment document provides perspective on the expected and real experiences of this student-directed process and helps the instructor make note of necessary changes and ideas that will inform the next unit of curriculum. It consists of one page and can be completed in roughly 10-15 minutes.

7. A Glossary of Terms that provides explanations of domain-specific terms related to unit-and lesson-planning. These terms used throughout the tools in the kit will be hyperlinked to the glossary document so that teachers can easily find definitions of particular terms as they use the tools. Influential documents that helped shape this project are also linked in the glossary.

Theoretical influences and models for project

My project is influenced by Freire's (1970) adult literacy curriculum programming approach, which relies on learner "problem-posing", prompting instruction designed around preparing learners to challenge systemic and personal barriers (pp. 52-59). I also considered designs adapted from Freire's ideas, such as Auerbach's participatory curriculum in which learners and educators are seen as equals who collaborate on curriculum content, and Wallerstein's community-based participatory research, which relies on Freirean interventions that empower learners rather than reinforcing social disenfranchisement.

Intended setting and target audience

My project is intended for use by ABE instructors teaching in a variety of civics, English language and literacy-related contexts (community education programs within school districts, one-on-one tutoring programs, community-based classes). I provide a flexible format and, as much as possible within the scope of this project, multi-level adaptations so that this process can be facilitated in any class serving ELLs, from emergent to advanced learners, as well as ABE programming serving fluent English speakers with limited or interrupted formal education.

The project was designed with the goal of providing useful curriculum unit development tools for my own teaching experience, in order to serve my program's learners well, of course, and to ground the project's potential relevance and practicality for other teachers. For these reasons, a significant member of my audience is me. I teach intermediate and advanced English language learners in a small classroom in the community room of a bank in a large city. The class takes place four mornings a week for three hours per class, which helped me to make decisions about the length of the

classroom lesson plan for gathering learner input to be applied in unit development. We have very limited access to technology in our space and because of our partnership with the bank where we are located, we are not able to access wifi for security reasons. This prompts me to build flexible options into my lesson plan for contexts with various challenges. Because each adult education setting and class is unique, I attempted to incorporate ways to hold space for the variety of adaptations that instructors will need to consider as they implement my tools, including considerations such as class length and frequency, available materials, number of learners, and learner differences in terms of accessing the lesson. Teachers can determine the scope of the units they create using my unit-planning process document to suit their program.

I anticipate that in the minds of ABE teachers, the most significant concern about adaptability of my curriculum design resources may lie in providing multi-level adaptations. It is critical that this process can be adapted and facilitated by instructors in any class serving ELLs, from emergent to advanced learners, and for the resources to apply to ABE programming serving fluent English speakers with limited or interrupted formal education. The lesson plan I provide in my project toolkit is leveled to serve intermediate and advanced ELLs, but would work well for native English speakers and has potential to be adapted for lower-literacy learners.

Another aspect of my intended audience's identity relates to the instructors' roles within their respective workplaces, in that they must have discretion to plan their own curriculum units, or to suggest that their site make use of these tools to develop curriculum. These tools will not be applicable in settings in which curriculum is provided and no capacity is available to adjust or disrupt the existing model.

Timeline for Completion

My timeline for this project was two semesters of coursework, research and writing over eight months. Chapters One, Two and Three were devised, researched and drafted in one course. In the second course, I created my tools and wrote Chapter Four. In preparing the tools themselves, I sent out drafts of my materials to colleagues from a variety of ABE settings to discuss how to make these tools as useful, adaptable and relevant as possible. This design, drafting, vetting and adjustment process was completed within three months. I fully intend to use these tools in my classroom, of course, and have designed them as effective tools that will help me center learner self-advocacy in my instruction, but the results will not be part of my project.

Summary

In Chapter Three, I described the resource tools I have created for ABE instructors to design curriculum units around learner input with increased self-advocacy among the objectives. The tools allow instructors to reflect on the meaning of learner self-advocacy and participatory curriculum and their capacity to incorporate it into their classrooms; to facilitate a lesson that gathers the input needed from learners to build this type of unit and then use a tool to design a curriculum unit and lessons built around learners' ideas; and finally to assess this unit for its effective alignment to principles of increasing learner independence and self-advocacy, as well as to understand terminology used within the toolkit. I provided the scope, setting, audience and timeline for this project.

In Chapter Four, I provide a summary of my capstone research and discuss limitations of my project and plans on how I will disseminate it among colleagues in my

field. I describe the process of building the materials I created for this project and share my conclusions and reflections on how they address my research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions and Reflection

Introduction

My objective in devising this capstone project was to build a set of tools to assist ABE educators in preparing curriculum units that, while meeting required state and federal expectations for standards alignment and assessment goals, are driven first and foremost by learners' stated goals and that prioritize increasing their independence and capacity to advocate for themselves. This project endeavors to respond to my research questions: *What educational support do ABE learners need to develop and employ self-advocacy skills to respond to barriers in their lives? What tools will help ABE instructors facilitate that support in the classroom?*

In the fourth and final chapter of this capstone, I share my insights into what I learned through my experience with the capstone process. I return to the literature review from Chapter Two and highlight some of the research that most significantly impacted my project development, as well as new perspectives I have gained on the research from applying it in my project. I also describe the limitations of this project and suggest measures to remediate them and ways that the project might be developed further to reach more teachers and learners. I propose opportunities to share my research, conclusions and project itself with ABE colleagues, both online and in professional development settings, and for the principles supporting the project to be carried forward through activism that promotes the goals and dreams of ABE learners and professionals. Finally, I reflect on

the benefits I hope this project contributes to ABE education and especially to ABE learner self-advocacy, and present my closing conclusions on my capstone project.

Revisiting the Literature Review

My project was shaped by some very influential research and resources that I analyzed in detail in the literature review in Chapter Two. Like many educators, I am inspired by Freire's emphasis on learner rights and his view on literacy education as a facilitation of learner self-liberation (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1974; Freire, 1985). My project is particularly shaped by the instructional project of "problem-posing", which designs instruction around the project of supporting learner cognition and contribution, as opposed to receptive transmission of ideas or knowledge (Freire, 1970, pp. 52-59). These perspectives led me to contemplate how educators, especially those who teach disadvantaged learners, get stuck in a mindset that caters to those who hold the purse strings and oversee programming. This mindset can take a turn toward the paternalistic and become loaded with the assumption that, as teachers and administrators, we are the experts in what learners want from their time in the classroom, when in fact, learners are the authorities on their own needs and goals and should have opportunities to contribute input to learning objectives.

I was influenced by several methods of applying Freire's model to ABE settings in the United States, available in research by Auerbach (1992), Spener (1993) and Wallerstein (1983). I also relied on Norton's (1997, 2000, 2016) perspectives on the interaction of learner identity with education and the potential to use language to express one's identity and make social change--these ideas prompted me to consider the political and emotional value of education and the learners' right to have a controlling stake in its

development. My interest in building participatory curriculum tools that recognize ABE learners' expertise in their own purposes for attending courses sprung from Kaiper's (2017) discussion of education policy and funding being shaped by notions of adult learners as human capital, or a potential workforce, instead of as individuals with a right to education for whatever purpose they choose.

When applying research to my actual capstone project, a resource toolkit for participatory curriculum unit planning, I employed principles from Wiggins and McTighe's (2011) "backward design" unit-planning model from *Understanding by Design*, and their recommendations for building strong units (p. 2). I also adapted some fields and ideas from the ELA CCRS-Aligned Unit and Lesson Planning Template devised by the ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System or ATLAS (2018), which incorporates standards alignment into the planning process.

Major Learnings from Project Design Process

My hope for the professional contribution of this capstone project is to restore a learner-driven perspective to ABE curriculum design, in which adult learners have the opportunity to provide actual input that will be directly incorporated into the course objectives; objectives reflecting areas in their lives in which they seek independence, the ability to self-advocate, or the power to change systems. As I designed and wrote the tools in the educator's toolkit, I tried to put myself in the mindset of instructors with little time on their hands for curriculum planning, but who still want to respect and address ABE best practices in their instruction and planning as well as meet expectations required by stakeholders (meaning both those in charge of ABE funding and administration and, most importantly, the learners themselves). What could I do to make these tools

approachable and efficient, yet applicable and useful for ABE instructors to optimize their programming for learners?

I knew I would need a unit-planning tool to serve as the core of this toolkit, and that it would be critical to have learners' input into the objectives of the units being planned in order to achieve the learner-driven purpose of the project. So I started off with the idea of providing a unit-planning tool and participatory curriculum lesson plan to gather that input, which would also model some of the best practices meant to be built into prospective units using this toolkit. I then generated the other pieces to complete the toolkit: a self-assessment reflecting on learner self-advocacy for teachers to fill out and consider their relationship to this topic before they gather input from learners and proceed to unit design; and a post-teaching evaluation for the whole unit once implemented to reflect on its successes and deficits.

Once I had the ideas to make these tools, some late additions to the toolkit presented themselves. As I made the lesson plan, it occurred to me that teachers would find it useful to have a blank template of the lesson plan format I created for this toolkit for use when they will be writing lessons to make up their units. When I talked through how I imagined the teacher experience of using these tools with my advisor, it became clear to me through our conversation that a teacher's manual to the entire toolkit would be a very useful way of making it accessible to anyone interested in teaching it, without my having to walk them through the tools. These seem like common-sense ideas in retrospect, but at times the process itself gave me the clarity I needed to make progress on the project.

I also received some excellent advice and input from my advisor and colleagues

with whom I shared my project drafts, including the need for a glossary of curriculum development terms used throughout the project, hyperlinked within the tools so teachers could learn or revisit the meanings by linking to the glossary. I made use of colleagues' advice on formatting my tools to make them visually clear and well-organized, but also practical in terms of providing adequate space for preparation, instruction and reflection.

Another unexpected but pleasant moment in drafting my learner input-gathering lesson plan was aligning it to ABE content standards, particularly CCR (College and Career Readiness) standards and TIF (Transitions Integration Framework) skills and subskills. I feel that the lesson provides significant opportunities to practice CCR speaking and listening standards 5.1a-d and 5.4, concerning participating in respectful group discussions, sharing opinions and ideas, reporting conclusions and presenting ideas to the class around which learners had developed consensus in small groups (Pimental, 2013, pp. 29-31). And I was very pleased at how well the objectives of this lesson align to a variety of TIF skills and subskills across all six categories (Effective Communication, Learning Strategies, Critical Thinking, Self-Management, Developing a Future Pathway and Navigating Systems) (ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System, 2013).

In devising these tools, I attempted to make them applicable to as many ABE contexts as possible, but with my own Intermediate/Advanced context in mind. My input-gathering lesson plan is aimed at most learners in my class, but includes adaptations to increase the complexity of the lesson for more advanced learners and options to support intermediate learners who may need additional structure and support within the lesson sequence (i.e. sentence frames, rules for discussion). I also plan to make my tools

shareable in a format that allows teacher-users to edit and adapt them to be effective for their own contexts, classroom practices and instructional preferences.

Limitations of Project

Lack of relevance to certain ABE contexts. While I worked at making my toolkit relevant to a large variety of ABE courses, no resource can serve every situation. My tools were geared toward instruction focused on language, literacy, life skills and community navigation, citizenship and the Social Studies and Reading and Language Arts subjects of GED preparation courses; all courses using English and Language Arts standards of the CCRS. Some of the tools would need to be tweaked for courses in math, science, digital literacy or specific career pathways. The lesson was also not designed for beginning-level learners and would need considerable adaptations to the activities to accomplish the same goals for that audience.

Bias based on my own teaching context. I did not include activities in my lesson plan that depend on classroom technology or a computer lab because I lack access to those options in my own instructional setting. Teachers may want to adapt the lesson or make use of the optional ideas I included to incorporate more technology and align more significantly to NorthStar Digital Literacy standards. There are probably other aspects of the design of these resources that are more unconsciously impacted by being framed by a teacher (me) who has a particular classroom setup, certain resources available and of course, a certain set of learners in mind, given the way that ABE teachers tailor instruction to their learners' populations, ages, languages, religions, cultural backgrounds and other considerations.

Toolkit has not yet been put into practice. I have not had the opportunity to use these tools with my own learners yet, and it is likely that if I had, I would have tweaked them afterward to reflect my discoveries about aspects of the tools that need adaptations or edits to be more useful. This is something I will have time to complete in future months after submitting this capstone project. My project will continue to evolve as a living document that can be updated to reflect changes in ABE expectations for accountability or ideas that will improve or expand upon the version I submit as my capstone project.

Challenges of time and resources for some teachers. Another overall concern when providing unit-planning tools to ABE teachers is inconsistency across sites and positions when it comes to the amount of teacher discretion over curriculum development and the paid time necessary to do the work of unit-planning. Some teachers are expected to teach from provided curriculum, or are not paid for adequate (or any) time for lesson preparation, let alone advance planning at a unit level. These challenges may limit the usefulness of this toolkit for some teachers.

Opportunities for Further Projects, Research and Activism

Extensions of this project. Given the limitations I just described, I would appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues to develop adjusted versions of my toolkit resources that support unit planning for math, science, digital literacy or career pathways courses. I would also welcome advice from teachers currently teaching low-literacy or beginner English courses on a version of the input-gathering lesson plan with adaptations or alternate activities that would achieve the same goals with their learners.

Research. Long-term, it would be fascinating to find ways to conduct research on

the impact of ABE learners of being able to participate in developing instructional objectives in their courses on their success toward reaching their goals. I think it would be fascinating to look for ways to measure the effect that this kind of approach to ABE course design could have on learner confidence, but also skill-building in self-advocacy and higher learning gains. I would be glad to be part of research in this area if possible.

Policy implications. I have elaborated in my first two chapters on the human rights considerations involved in ABE funding policy, which has the opportunity to frame educational access for adults who tend to represent marginalized populations either in terms of their economic potential--a depersonalizing approach that characterizes the value of ABE in terms of capitalist success and removes power from the individual--or as support for the fundamental human right to lifelong learning and personal development. I believe that taking an approach to ABE that centers the learners' goals and facilitates their interest not just in overcoming but in dismantling barriers will promote community and political leadership among the populations who take part in ABE, and lead to transformative change in our society. Curriculum driven by learners, especially once proven by research to have strong positive effects on their success, is a responsible choice in order to influence ABE policy toward more humanistic goals and to support learners in taking political action themselves.

Sharing the Project and Communicating Project Results

Online sharing. As I mentioned in Chapter One, I hope to work with my ABE educator colleagues in the coming months to add the toolkit to our #IamABE website to make it available to other instructors everywhere. We will need to add adapted versions of the lesson plan to make the activities accessible for beginner learners and for some of

the other groups of learners I addressed in the previous section. The website already has a following and active Facebook page, so this will be an excellent platform to share a toolkit related to ABE learner self-advocacy. If it is not ultimately a good fit for the #IamABE site, I can create another independent Google site to share the toolkit digitally.

Professional development presentations. I frequently present conference sessions at annual ABE and ESL professional development events such as ABE Summer Institute, Minnesota English Learner Education conference (MELEd), Language and Literacy Institute and regional trainings. I will be submitting sessions to share my project and research over the next year and look forward to hearing feedback and responding to questions from many teachers who I hope will be able to adapt the tools to use at their sites. I also plan to share the toolkit in staff meetings with my coworkers.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter Four, I described the reasoning behind my project again and shared how I decided to address my research questions through my project. I revisited the literature review in Chapter Two and indicated the influential research that most significantly impacted and shaped my project. I summarized the process of creating the resource toolkit that makes up my project and enumerated some limitations that I was not able to address within the scope of my project. Then, I proposed some extensions of my project that would need to be developed in order to serve more learners, suggested research that could be conducted to assess the success of learner self-advocacy and participatory curriculum down the line, and how that might impact ABE policy in the future. Finally, I explained how I plan to share my project digitally, in professional development contexts and with teaching colleagues at my own site.

I learned a great deal through researching, designing and editing this project, and I believe it holds great potential to benefit ABE instruction and ensure a practitioner mindset that centers learners' perspectives as the arbiter of the purpose of the field. I look forward to seeing how the project's implementation across different classrooms helps learners be heard and supported authentically around the goals that motivated them to pursue ABE to begin with. It will be exciting to find out how well this project, put into action, answers my research questions: *What educational support do ABE learners need to develop and employ self-advocacy skills to respond to barriers in their lives? What tools will help ABE instructors facilitate that support in the classroom?*

It would be an honor to contribute to a surge in learner independence and self-advocacy through this project and related efforts. There is a very long way to go for ABE educators to work ourselves out of a job, but if we stand a chance of doing so, it will come through the powerful activism of our learners advocating for the destruction of personal and systemic barriers and obstacles that create limits in our society, and to witness this gradual process from a career in the ABE classroom is the worthiest professional pursuit I can imagine.

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