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# Meeting the Literacy Needs of Adult Learners through a Community-University Partnership

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What learning occurs when higher education juxtaposes with an adult literacy program? This article addresses that question by qualitatively investigating and depicting one atypical scenario, a collaborative model between a university graduate Remedial Reading class and a local adult literacy coalition. The co-researchers utilized hybrid discourse and grounded theory to gain a new perspective on a familiar situation, the learning process that occurs within a university classroom. The educational implications are that adult and higher education systems clearly need, and benefit from, the partnership. Graduate students reap great cognitive, pedagogical, and cultural learning gains and adult learners gain tutoring sessions with highly trained and motivated educators.

The graduate students filled the empty classroom; some excited to learn more to meet the needs of their students, others anxious to complete a course requirement toward graduation. Regardless of motivation, the graduate students left this course with the heightened skills of reflective practitioners. Their journey into adult tutoring created a paradigm shift from their traditional K-12 instruction that resulted in noteworthy learning gains for the graduate students, adult tutees, and college professor.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to assist postsecondary educators in their quest to meet students' needs by delineating a successful university-community

partnership (the collaborative model between a university graduate-level reading class and a local literacy coalition). The thick description portrayed in this manuscript will allow postsecondary educators the opportunity to 'view' the graduate reading course and 'borrow' aspects for their classrooms and/or university.

The authors, a professor and two graduate students, will also depict how they bridged the gap between academic and practitioner research (Huberman, 1999; Zigo, 2001) by utilizing hybrid discourse (Gallas, 2001). The traditional method of research often separates academia from the practitioners, with the professor observing, gathering and analyzing data, and writing the report about

the practitioner(s). This study purposefully chose to unite the two educational experts by considering all parties equal researchers. The methodology section will clearly delineate the elaborate hybrid discourse that occurred between the co-researchers as they moved through the cyclical process of analyzing, coding, and reflecting upon the data. While the project itself was created to share the importance of collaboration between a university and graduate students, the research process also unfolded another important point: academia and practitioners can, and should, work together because the two viewpoints bring a wider perspective to the research project.

### ***Setting the Stage: The Professor's Voice***

The idea for this partnership arose from the professor's current adult tutoring experience and her desire to differentiate instruction for her graduate reading students. The professor's recent work with Angie (all names are pseudonyms) reminded her that there was a large population of illiterate and/or struggling adults who could benefit from individualized tutoring sessions with graduate students. Angie, the professor's successful and talented financial advisor, had surprised her when she asked for reading assistance. Angie had kept her reading struggles a secret for several decades, successfully hiding behind her natural math talents and quiet demeanor. Now that Angie was a parent, she was willing to ask for literacy help in order to prevent her daughter from experiencing the same 'literacy failures.' This adult tutoring experience, the reflective process concerning the professor's positive practicum and Reading Recovery field experiences, and the course standards brought about the structure of this study.

### ***Collaboration with Community Literacy Coalition***

The first step in this partnership was to contact the local literacy coalition in order to ascertain their literacy needs and inquire about the class working within their system. The professor assured the literacy coalition that bringing in highly trained tutors would be advantageous to the resource center as well as the tutee, and the literacy coalition responded in a positive and supportive manner. The program coordinator indicated that their adult literacy program always had more tutees than tutors, which often resulted in the adults receiving instruction in a whole-class setting. The coordinator liked the idea of trained teachers tutoring the adults and was eager to implement the university-community partnership. However, she did have two areas of concern: 1) the graduate students would be tutoring for about five months and the local libraries would only accept tutors

who were willing to commit to an entire year, and 2) the graduate students and professor must attend an all-day tutor-training seminar. Both areas of concern were resolved. The professor agreed to the training seminar and adjusted the course syllabus to compensate for the all-day Saturday event, and the coordinator contacted smaller 'host' sites (churches and schools) and received permission for the graduate students to tutor for the indicated time frame.

### ***The Graduate Remedial Reading Course***

The professor's two goals for this course were to meet the needs of the graduate students by placing them in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1962) and to create an atmosphere that fosters and exhibits the process of reflection impacting practice (Schon, 1983). Vygotsky's explanation of an optimal learning environment and Schon's delineation of the impact of becoming a reflective practitioner guided the professor's practice. The class began its journey toward a heightened understanding of the remedial reading process by reading and discussing the book *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy* (Purcell-Gates, 1995). This book chronicles the story of Purcell-Gates as she tutors a mother and a son in a low socioeconomic area. As the students discussed the struggles and gains the professor and tutee were encountering, they were also preparing for their upcoming adult tutoring sessions.

The book was completed in three class sessions and then the class met for an all-day tutor-training session required by the local literacy coalition. Throughout the training, the graduate students expressed concern regarding the regimented workbook style and direct instruction of reading verbatim from the tutor's manual presented at the coalition training. The trainer indicated that the program usually recruits retired individuals who do not have any teacher training and therefore find the regimented workbooks as support met with gratitude.

The trainer also indicated that the graduate students could deviate from the workbooks. The class was relieved and anticipated meeting their tutees.

Each graduate student was responsible for at least 10 hours of tutoring, a tutoring log, a diagnostic report, an in-class presentation, and a final exam consisting of two diagnostic scenarios. While the tutoring sessions were in progress, the first hour and a half of the in-class discussions became an opportunity to discuss the tutoring process and seek the advice of each other with the second hour and a half designated to discussing the second textbook, *Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level* (Shaywitz, 2003). This book was chosen in order to heighten the graduate students' understanding of a highly misunderstood and often shunned area of remedial reading, Dyslexia. The students devoured the pages of this text and brought in current research articles concerning brain research and other pertinent areas. Collectively the text, application thereof, and on-going class discussion supported the collaborative learning project.

### ***The Collaborative Model: Co-Researchers Exploring the Fusion of University and Community***

The graduate students consistently commented, through class discussions, emails, and personal journaling, on the surprising amount of learning they were encountering through this course. Much new pedagogical learning and the high level of success that occurred with the tutees spurred this research endeavor. The co-researchers began this study by asking the following questions: "Why did the learning occur? Did the same level of learning occur for everyone? Were there circumstances that heightened and/or reduced the level of learning for students and tutees?" The authors decided to use a naturalistic approach and the qualitative method of grounded theory to decipher the accumulated data and understand the

emerging theory supporting the graduate students' learning gains.

## Research Design

### Participants

Fifteen students attended the first class session; two students dropped the course because they did not want to tutor adults. All thirteen remaining students were women ranging in ages from the early twenties to the early fifties. Every graduate student was employed in the local educational system. Eleven of the students were seeking a Reading Endorsement and/or a Master's Degree in Reading, one was taking the course as an elective toward a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and one student was in the Special Education doctoral program and chose to take this course as an elective.

The thirteen tutees ranged from the ages of twenty-three to fifty-one. Twelve of the tutees were English Language Learners (ELLs) and one was a native speaker of English. The professions represented by the tutees included physical therapist, landscaper, nanny, maintenance personnel, cook, and other service industry jobs. Their reasons for seeking help included wanting to pass the GED, to advance within their profession, and to become more fluent in the English language.

### Methods

The co-researchers embarked on this grounded theory study by first embracing the ontological notion that knowledge is a human construct generated within social contexts. The study set out to understand the 'phenomena' that occurred between tutor and tutee and the graduate students and the professor. The co-researchers, having many experiences in the graduate classroom, wanted to explore and better comprehend why this graduate experience yielded such cognitive growth and delineate the theory that emerged from the data.

The co-researchers chose to use grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;

Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as their method of analysis in order to gain a new perspective on a familiar situation: the learning process that occurs within a university classroom. The common thread throughout the data analysis was to legitimize the knowledge that was embedded or 'grounded' in the idiosyncrasies of the tutoring and classroom experiences and gain perspective on the emerging theory that supports the graduate students' noteworthy learning gains. The researchers embraced the notion that grounded theory evolves depending on one's perspective--in essence, their current reality. In order to ensure the data were interpreted without being skewed by researcher bias, the following analysis techniques were employed: triangulation, internal member checks, two-tiered coding, constant comparative analysis, and ongoing memoing.

**Triangulation.** To increase the validity of the study, each member of the research team was assigned student data (tutor logs, reading response journals, research reports, and final exam scenario essay questions) to read independently. The team members determined that they would individually look for patterns and trends noticed throughout the data, and then report the findings to one another. The three researchers then combined the information gathered and analyzed any trends or patterns that overlapped in their thinking.

The organizational system and hybrid discourse process allowed for the research process and outcomes to be viewed from different angles because each researcher was looking at the data through her own lens (Goodnough, 2004). The professor was careful not to bias the graduate students' thinking by keeping assessment and assignment grades and feedback separate from the original data. The data were gathered over a sixteen-week period as students worked through the remediation coursework.

**Internal member checks and two-tiered coding.** The co-researchers also employed the use of member checks and hybrid discourse to heighten the validity of this study. The data were randomly separated into three piles. The job of each researcher was to analyze the data through open coding methods (first tier). After independently analyzing the data, the researchers met and shared their findings. Each person listed the patterns she observed while the others added their findings. The result was a list of fourteen open-ended concepts, nine of which were identified by all three researchers: 1) motivated tutees, 2) ethnocentric behaviors-American link, 3) reflective practice, 4) talking about but not naming ESOL strategies, 5) assessment in planning instruction, 6) tutor's knowledge, 7) collaboration, 8) pride, and 9) planning. The researchers then utilized axial coding to generate main categories and subcategories. The multiple sources of data collection, coupled with multiple researchers, allow this study to view the same phenomenon from different viewpoints. Both forms of triangulation add validity to this study by allowing the researchers to engage in constant comparative analysis of both the data sources and the researchers' thoughts and observations.

**Constant comparison and memoing.** The memo-writing aspect became a critical part of the analysis process because it allowed the individual researcher to become aware of her emerging theories and to cross-check those theories with her co-researchers. Common threads began to emerge from three different educators' perspectives of the data, which served to delineate the emerging grounded theory(s).

The researchers then went back to the raw data and identified the incidents that led to the nine patterns noted above. After comparing incidents, the researchers narrowed the nine patterns into three conceptual categories: 1) assessment and planning, 2) reflection, and 3) tutor



knowledge. The next tier of the coding was to return to the raw data and color code it according to one of the three categories. After the data were color-coded, each researcher typed the tutor and tutee statements verbatim under the appropriate heading (assessment/planning, reflection, or tutor knowledge). The researchers' on-going reflections and theories (memoing comments) were also recorded by typing them in italics directly under the related data.

The next phase was to combine all of the researchers' data and memoing comments. These combined thoughts became the metaphorical brush that painted the picture of the emerging phenomena and grounded theory. The researchers discovered that the individual memoing process allowed them to form tentative theories, but viewing the memoing process of the collective group brought forth a confidence in the theories that led to this study's results and implications. In other words, the comparison and memoing process allowed the researchers to confirm their theories by honoring the individual meaning of the data while bringing a conceptual perspective to the situational and individual experience.

## Findings

### *Assessment and Planning: A Cyclical Process*

The cyclical process of assessment and planning permeated the tutor's lessons. Constant assessment and planning 'on the run' were the common threads interwoven into the majority of the graduate students' lesson plans.

Too often, educators rely on formalized tests to demonstrate academic growth. The graduate students in this study demonstrated (with over 187 quotes from all four data sources) that they deviated from this trend through their constant reliance on informal and formal assessments to determine the tutees' understanding of a concept or strategy and then appropriately plan. One graduate student wrote, "Mary Ann needs to spend

time working through the word. She would benefit from making words." Another wrote, "I noticed she had a difficult time with words that had distinct patterns (word family, phonograms), for example: -aw, -ight (as in saw, draw, right, fight). I did a mini-lesson on word families, by changing the beginning sound to say, make, and write several words." The next lesson plans reflected these changes.

Other student quotes demonstrated the graduate students' desire to learn and conform to their adult tutees' needs. "She always has an excuse why she didn't read the book. To conquer this situation, next session we will spend our time reading the book together and less time on activities." Several students wrote about the serious time constraints placed upon their adult learners and then began writing creative lesson plans to meet their tutees' needs.

Another common 'assessment and planning' theme was due to the adult learners' struggles with the English language. The graduate students were surprised to discover adults struggling with 'kindergarten issues.' For example, one graduate student wrote, "She demonstrates a significant phonological weakness, which affects her ability to decode words. She struggles with segmenting letter sounds past the first initial consonant. She excessively relies upon visual cueing when reading and does not acknowledge interior vowels and word endings. Mary Ann demonstrates extreme difficulty with the different vowel sounds, even with the simplest level of short and long sounds. Mary Ann is insensitive to rhyme. Sight word recognition is not automatic for Mary Ann."

Another graduate student wrote, "He knows how to pronounce 'night' but if 'nightmare' is there, he gets confused. That is why we are working on building the words."

The class had in-depth discussions about teachers' stereotyping learners by age and often neglecting to view all

learners as individuals. The upper-elementary teachers often wrote about how this learning experience would directly impact their classrooms; they would no longer assume their students had the fundamental literacy skills until they were certain.

### *Reflection:*

#### *Becoming Aware of our Inner Thoughts*

The memoing and constant-comparison process allowed the researchers to discover three reoccurring themes that were interwoven throughout the graduate students' reflections: 1) current adult education programs are in need of assistance, 2) the lessons were planned and implemented by following the lead of the tutee, and 3) the work with adults forced the graduate students to work outside of their comfort zone which resulted in the graduate students beginning the semester feeling scared and incompetent and ending with a greater confidence in their literacy and cultural diversity knowledge.

#### *Adult Education Programs*

In order to allow the graduate students to work in an adult education program close to their home, six different adult education centers were used. Although each adult education program had its own coordinator, instructional materials, and geographical setting, the graduate students' reflections consistently depicted two major concerns regarding the current makeup of adult education: the overuse of worksheets and its lack of differentiated instruction to meet the adult learners' needs.

The graduate students repeatedly expressed their concern about the overuse of worksheets. One student wrote, "Fernand seems enthusiastic to be here and reap some benefits. He has done many worksheets on passage reading with some basic level 1 questions, and retelling the story by numbering visuals. Worksheets on grammar and past/present tense and writing the Creole translation to visuals. Lots and lots of worksheets,

probably 60-70. Practice and repetition seemed to have a large role in these volunteer reading programs." While another wrote, "There seemed to be a great deal of worksheets in the folder that did not appear to lead to the establishment of any particular reading skill." The majority of the graduate student reflections revolved around them questioning adults merely "going through the motions" of completing worksheets without ever understanding the bigger literacy picture.

The second area of concern, lack of differentiated instruction, was described through the graduate students' reflections of the setting, instructional tools, and the tutees' lack of response to their previous tutoring experience. The graduate students commented on the large student-to-teacher ratio and the often "silent" working conditions. They described work settings in which adult learners spent their time filling out worksheets and working on computers. One graduate student was asked to work in another room because her book introduction became too animated. That graduate student spent a great deal of time reflecting on the importance of language and discussion in the literacy process, especially among adult learners who are often learning a new language. The graduate students also referred to the setting as being sterile, with tutors and tutees "going through the motions" of worksheets. One student stated, "Some of these students are not getting individualized help. I really think that these adults would benefit from that. They are all doing the same work at the same time. Not every student needs help with the same concept."

Another graduate student expressed her frustration by writing, "Mirtha's desires and goals were not understood by the adult education system. I feel her voice was not heard. I felt that her instruction at the Center was absurd and not at all appropriately matched to her goals and abilities." Many graduate students' reflections and in-class discussions depicted the adult learners as

being 'invisible' in a sea full of needy adult learners.

The tutees' lack of response to their previous work resulted in the graduate students worrying about leaving them. One student wrote, "I would have thought that he could write more, being here four years and coming to the Center (pseudonym) for three of them. I worry that after I leave he will slip back through the cracks. In the Center I did not notice a lot of one-on-one instruction with students." This student was not alone; *all* of the graduate students reflected on their worry about 'abandoning' their tutee to the adult education program.

Adult education centers are not committing a grievous crime; they are trying to help a large population of adults with a small pool of resources. The majority of their volunteers come from the retired population who want to give something back or simply need to get out of the house. In a perfect world, adult education centers become housed with highly qualified educators who not only work with tutees, but also with the professional development of volunteers. There is a bigger pool of volunteers available; they are the graduate students in every university and school setting in America! There is wisdom in the words of one graduate student: "When we have educated teachers in the (adult) classroom, we will have educated parents."

### *Following the Lead of the Tutee*

"I know Mirtha is smart, but I can't believe how many words there are in the English language! It seems almost impossible to help her know them all. She has read English minimally since she arrived—she reads Spanish mostly—just the little bits we've read together have caused her to encounter several new words—which she inquired about—and now knows. **THIS** is what she needs! To read in English with someone available to explain words to her."

The graduate students' journals contained a plethora of reflections that

clearly demonstrated their desire and trained response to continually learn about their tutee and then adjust their lesson plans and/or thinking processes. Many of the reflections, like the one above, involved the tutee's current needs and the thought process behind determining those needs.

Another area of reflection delineated the graduate students' elation over perceived academic gains. One student wrote, "She remembered the strategy I taught her from the week before, reading all choices before making a decision (progress!)." Another reflected, "He felt a little awkward being read to: 'No one has ever read me a story before.' When I asked if he liked it, he said, 'Yes, it sounds nice.'" The class was appalled that this adult had never been read to. Other quotes express joy such as, "It was the first time I heard him belly laugh! I believe he's getting it!" and, "He is beginning to see how our alphabetic system works! He is discovering letter-sound relationships and how to look for patterns in words."

These reflections clearly portray the graduate students employing the pedagogically sound practice of on-going differentiated instruction.

### *Working Outside the Comfort Zone*

In most cases, the greatest of life's lessons and rewards are achieved through hard work and a support system or during times when a personal epiphany has created a paradigm shift in one's thinking process. The graduate students' reflections demonstrated that they experienced new educational insight due to having to work outside of their comfort zone and having the support of each other and the writings of great educators and researchers. Their initial log and reading response entries indicated apprehension: "This session was scary; Wow. I'm exhausted. I'm not sure what I have gotten myself into; this is going to be a challenge for both of us! I'm definitely out of my comfort zone! I've never tutored an adult nor have I ever tutored someone starting out so low. I can't wait to get started!!!!" These highly



trained teachers expressed fear of failure and the discomfort of working under new circumstances.

About halfway through the semester, the graduate students' reflections changed from feelings of fear and exhaustion to exhaustion and elation at the learning they were providing and receiving. The following two statements are a sample of the graduate students' increase in confidence: "This adult tutoring experience forced me to work outside my comfort zone. Once I assessed Ali's literacy needs and formulated a plan for remediation, my confidence as a tutor started to take shape. The abundance of theoretical support was reinforcing!" and "When I was assigned this particular project, teaching an adult to read, I questioned my ability as a reading teacher. I found out the answers to all these questions and more when I met my tutee and entered into a new dimension in the field of teaching reading." These highly trained teachers, who were complaining about the growing pains associated with the new learning environment, now began to write about the joys of learning and making a significant difference in the lives of other adults.

The graduate students' reflections also depicted their new insight regarding cultural awareness and ELLs' specific needs. They specifically wrote about the language barrier challenges and their own language biases that they were unaware of previously.

The following two quotes are a good sample of the graduate students' feelings: "Manuel has given me a gift that I had not expected. He has shown me that things I believed about myself were not true; I have had to examine many of my own subconscious beliefs. I see our community much differently because of this experience" and "My enlightenment about ELLs and adult learners has been invaluable. I have gained a whole new realization of our culture as Americans while foreigners try to assimilate into our world."

### ***Tutor Knowledge***

The graduate students' reliance on previous training and background knowledge was the common thread interwoven throughout the graduate students' journal notes, lesson plans, and classroom presentations. The classroom consisted of a speech pathologist, several primary and upper-elementary teachers, a middle school intensive reading teacher, two high school intensive reading teachers, and one elementary reading teacher. Throughout the semester, the graduate students referred to and relied on their specific areas of strength in planning and reflecting on lessons and offering assistance during classroom discussions. For example, the speech pathologist used an auditory trainer with her tutee and taught the class about auditory bombardment. She stated, "Auditory bombardment is used with children who have a phonological disorder. Simply speaking, their speech is unintelligible and they have difficulty imitating the appropriate phonemes." Many of the graduate students began to use the auditory trainer to assist their ELLs in acquiring new English sounds.

Another example is the Wilson and Reading Recovery trained teachers. These teachers consistently brought examples from their programs to class and included parts of the program in their tutoring sessions. The primary teachers brought their knowledge of teaching phonemic awareness and phonics and other common primary methods and the upper-elementary teachers shared vocabulary-enrichment ideas.

The contrasting effect also occurred; the graduate students with only a few years of teaching and limited training continually relied on the class to help them plan and assess their tutees. Specifically, two graduate students had previously taught art. Their program was cut and, due to contractual obligations, the local school district moved them into high school intensive reading positions. This new role required them to receive a state reading endorsement. Both graduate

students worked diligently to assist their tutees, elicit help from their colleagues, and spend extra time working with the professor. These graduate students wrote about feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. More importantly, their lesson plans did not demonstrate a consistent tutoring program, rather an attempt to try whatever suggestions were currently being shared during class discussions and to rely on the materials supplied by the adult education program.

### ***Educational Implications***

Teaching an adult learner can be likened to an intricate dance—a tango over a simple waltz. Success is reliant upon partner confidence and support. Through an understanding of adult behavior, reflective practice, and on-going assessment to tailor learning needs, the tutor and tutee relationship can be valuable with implications for success.

This study produced five implications: 1) adult education systems need the support of local university literacy departments because together these institutions can create a systemic change; 2) graduate students reap incredible cognitive and pedagogical gains when they are asked to work outside of their comfort zone with the support of their colleagues and the printed resources of great educational minds; 3) graduate students appear to experience an increase in accountability and responsibility when tutoring adults due to the adult's desire to improve literacy in order to increase their vocation and life opportunities; 4) the graduate students' practice of reflection, allowing for links to background knowledge and therefore stronger learning, allowed them to delve deeper into both theory and practice to increase their pedagogical understanding regarding adult learners and ELLs. Furthermore, becoming practitioners in adult literacy illustrated to them how theory put into practice becomes messy, and how teaching anyone literacy involves the cyclical process of assess, evaluate, reflect, and plan; and 5)

differentiated instruction is implemented when the educator uses the student's strengths, a planned remediation program, and on-the-run flexibility. One of the graduate student's reflections stated this process clearly: "My philosophy as a teacher has grown into the belief that we should always look at what children can do and use their strengths to help them work through the challenges. There are all kinds of minds and we all have strengths and weaknesses. Once these are discovered, great gains can be made when we use the strengths to help us with our weaknesses."

University-community partnerships can be a powerful educational vehicle. Postsecondary educators have the great potential to seriously improve multiple environments through collaborative endeavors that are directed by educators with a vision. Literacy professors have incredible cognitive and pedagogical skills that are desperately needed in many community programs; however, these professionals are often overworked and tired. The coupling of classroom and community allows literacy professionals the opportunity to meet the community's needs while simultaneously training their students.

Postsecondary educators have the ability to create a domino effect of literacy success. This study clearly portrays the need to have students working outside their comfort zone, within or outside of the college classroom. College professors must strive to differentiate instruction for their students by continually assessing, planning, reflecting, and then revising their lesson plans. When higher education begins to model this cyclical process, this

best practice will begin to matriculate into all levels of education.

In closing, the authors would like to spur the reader to ponder the broad possibilities for systemic change via community and university partnerships. Adult education centers would have a significant increase in trained educators and universities would have an opportunity to give back to the community while simultaneously increasing their students' cognitive and pedagogical understanding. One cannot underestimate the implications suggested in regards to greater societal gains. Most important to this concept, adult learners would then be better prepared to help their friends and family members, leading to greater economic and emotional stability. The graduate students would be better prepared to differentiate instruction for all of their pupils in classrooms around the country each day. In this idea, how many hundreds of children would benefit from a greater quality of instruction? It is a question the educational community should be reflectively answering and supporting through coordination of new university and community partnership initiatives. Our hope is that one day reading will truly be a collaborative process with many layers of support.

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