

STRENGTHENING ADULT LITERACY THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

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Abstract

This Roundtable will discuss a qualitative study that investigated how creative writing strengthens and deepens the literacy skills of adults. Specifically, the study explores two sub-questions: How can creative writing processes support students' achievement of personal and/or academic goals? How does a curricular focus on individual storytelling build literacy confidence and/or student agency? Data include: pre- and post-surveys, pre- and post-interviews, curriculum design based on best practices in writing instruction and adult learning, and student writing. The study suggests that creative writing is a viable and effective tool to promote literacy acquisition, build student voice, and support student-centred learning.

Keywords: Adult education, creative writing, high school equivalency, literacy, writing instruction

No student sets out hoping to under-achieve or leave school before earning a diploma. When a student does leave school before completing, there are usually warning signs that make their disengagement predictable (DePaoli et al., 2015, 2018; McMurrey, 2014; Promise, 2014; Rights, 2013). Students who leave high school reading or writing below their grade level understand how this affects their capacity to earn a living and take care of themselves and their families. When students return to school to earn a credential or brush up on skills they did not acquire through traditional means, they do so with great hope. What is often challenging for these determined people is that many still face barriers that impede success (Promise, 2015). Unfortunately, high school equivalency (HSE) instruction is typically focused on the skills needed to pass the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) or the General Educational Development (GED) exam (Promise, 2016).

The majority of HSE instruction happens within the adult education system. According to World Education (2018), this system encompasses programs across the U.S. that offer instruction ranging from basic literacy and numeracy to HSE instruction and college and career readiness. One in six adults (18+) in the U.S have low literacy skills (OECD, 2013), including 20% of adults with a high school diploma (Larson, 2018). The U.S. ranked 21st in numeracy and 16th in literacy out of 24 countries in a recent assessment of adults' skills (OECD). Yet the publicly-funded adult education system is able to serve around 2 million young and older adults per year, which means in all 50 states waiting lists for classes are common (World Ed., 2018).

This scarcity is one of the reasons that instruction at HSE programs focuses on the skills needed to pass the HSE exam in order to move students out quickly to make room for those waiting. Unfortunately, fewer than 5% of HSE graduates go on to enroll in college or other adult education programs where they can earn much needed credentials (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). These statistics speak to an urgent need to change the way instruction in adult education programs is delivered. This is, however, a larger problem and not one that is specific to the adult education system. Students who struggle academically in middle or

high school are more likely to drop out of school later. About 55% of adults at the lowest literacy levels did not graduate from high school and have no high school equivalency diploma (NAEP, 2018). In a 2014 report published by MDRC on writing instruction in adult education classrooms in the United States (Manno et al., 2015), the authors noted that at that time there were more than two million adults enrolled in adult education and HSE courses, and incoming assessment data collected showed that more than half were at an eighth grade writing level or below (Manno et al., 2015).

Adult education programs are expected not only to get students ready for the high school equivalency exam (namely HiSET or GED exams), but also provide pathways into college and career. Given the low literacy levels plaguing students who left secondary education before graduation, the problem is clear. Students need more and better literacy instruction to support any college and career goals and to support their overall economic well-being.

Significance of the Study

I developed this study in order to investigate whether the intentional integration of creative writing into an HSE writing curriculum contributed to students' academic confidence, strengthened and deepened writing skills, and provided a vehicle for student-defined agency through the use of student-generated narratives and student-selected mentor texts. I also considered the attitudes participants have toward their own creativity, voice, and literacy skills. The population I focused on were adults (18+) who have enrolled in an adult education program to earn an HSE diploma.

This study explores the role creative writing has as an instructional tool due to its flexible structure and its capacity to offer students the freedom to write about whatever they would like. While the structure of creative writing does allow for more student self-expression, the skills needed to write creatively, such as understanding audience and theme, developing a point of view, focusing on paragraph flow or mastering subject and verb agreement, are also the same skills needed to write academically. The findings hold promise for the transfer of skills to academic contexts with an appropriate curriculum that intentionally makes those connections for students and allows for practice and revision.

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