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Position
Statement on
Rights of Adult
Readers and
Learners*

The continuing public discussion on the quality of education has nearly overlooked adult readers and learners. The College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) with a membership of over 1,000 Americans and Canadians, is well situated to furnish a position statement that will provide guidance for adult educators as they seek to improve the quality of education offered to this population. A position statement was developed over several years, using input from many CRLA members and adopted by the CRLA board on November 11, 2002. Adult students' rights in the areas of quality instructors, instruction, materials, and assessment are addressed.

Adult learners fill our college campuses and spill out onto satellite campuses and into neighborhood elementary schools for evening classes. There are more adults seeking education than at any other time in our history (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). Campuses strain to meet the needs of this influx of students, some of traditional age (18 to 22 year olds) taking their next step toward mature adulthood, others, already mature adults, seeking new career opportunities or skill development. Many of these students are placed in or seek classes that help them with basic academic skills like reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that there are 3.8 million students (30% of those in higher education) enrolled in reading and study strategy classes. Although Goal 6 of the National Education Goals Panel (1995) states that every adult American will be literate, we continue to read shocking statistics about the general lack of reading ability in the

adult population. Although considerable public and scholarly attention has been given to the quality of elementary and secondary education in the United States comparatively little has been given to the quality of postsecondary education.

The College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) is well situated to provide a leadership role in guiding adult learning programs and teachers. The CRLA members include professionals who teach adult learners and train others to work with adults in educational settings. The CRLA has about 1,000 members in both the United States and Canada. Stated goals of the CRLA include increasing “the tools available to improve students learning” and providing “information and consultants to bodies enacting legislation directly related to college reading, learning assistance, developmental education, and tutorial services” (College Reading and Learning Association Goals, 2002). A CRLA position statement on the rights of adult readers and learners can serve as a guide to members and others in the field who want to provide the best possible education for adult students.

Statement Development

The position statement project has been under development for several years. It began with an editorial written in the CRLA California Chapter's October 1999 newsletter. In that editorial, the International Reading Association's (IRA) position statement on adolescent literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) was summarized and a suggestion was posed. “Perhaps we as teachers of college reading and learning should consider our own position statement” (Angus, 1999, p.1). The statement prompted informal discussion among CRLA members at the conference

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in New Orleans. It was decided that this was a project worth pursuing. A proposal was submitted to hold an institute at the 2000 conference to explore and draft an initial statement.

In Reno, a group of CRLA members met to begin the task. The group looked at the rationale for pursuing a position statement (Fabish, 2000), characteristics of adult learners (Brookfield, 1999) and current position statements from the IRA (International Reading Association, 2000; Moore et al., 1999) and the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE), (1995). It was decided that the areas of instruction, instructors, materials, and assessment would provide a framework to guide the development of a position statement. Small groups were created to focus on each area. At the end of the three hour institute, each group presented an initial draft. In the months following the conference, the draft was sent to all group members and feedback was solicited. By employing a quasi-delphi process, a refined statement was developed.

When CRLA members convened again in Spokane, 2001, a new group met to discuss and further revise the developing document. The new version then went through the same revision process and was presented at the Developmental Education Conference in Walnut, California, January, 2001. The document that follows is the result of refinements that were made based on the feedback received at the Walnut conference and adopted by the CRLA board on November 11, 2002.

CRLA Position Statement on the Rights of Adult Readers and Learners

The term "adult" includes all students in postsecondary education, age 18 and older (traditional, nontraditional, posttraditional, reentry adults, stopouts/returning students). A distinctive characteristic of any group of adult learners is diversity; the term "adult learner" refers to a heterogeneous group of learners who are widely diverse in learning styles, motivation for learning, life transitions, life roles, learning goals, developmental tasks, prior experience, and patterns of participation in academic experience. Although adult students are an extremely diverse group, all adult readers and learners should be entitled to basic rights. These rights, described below, are presented using the following descriptors: instructors, instruction, assessment, and materials.

Adult learners have a right to instructors who:

- Engage in ongoing development and have a commitment to lifelong learning for themselves and their students
- Are knowledgeable about adult development and learning and understand the unique needs and complexities of the diverse adult learner population

- Possess expertise in their content area
- Have knowledge of learning theories, the ability to relate theory to practice, skill and confidence in methods of presentation, modeling, and facilitating learning
- Are self-reflective, solicit feedback, and make accommodations to improve instruction
- Have a repertoire of interpersonal skills necessary to establish, maintain, and develop effective relationships (instructor/student and student/student) and a secure, positive classroom environment that will promote active learning
- Understand their responsibilities in facilitating and guiding the learning activities of adult students while acknowledging that the adult learner retains the right and responsibility to manage his/her own life and learning, growth, discovery and increasing skills and knowledge.

Instructors who have appropriate training and who participate in professional development are just as necessary in adult education as they are in elementary and secondary education. Continuing professional development for educators should focus on activities that enhance the educator's effectiveness. These activities should include personal growth in content knowledge, learning strategies, and educational theory. Teachers of adult learners must develop and maintain an awareness of the resources available through professional organizations, educational literature, conferences, and colleagues in their professional network. Planning professional development activities is essential because it encourages educators to take an active role in addressing their professional self-improvement (Imel, 1990).

Educators who are aware of the cognitive levels of their students can address the unique needs and challenges of these learners. This insight can result in more appropriate interactions with students, including more challenging lessons and thoughtful discussions (Frew, 1996). Adult educators should have a thorough understanding of adult intellectual development and the ability to use that understanding to design activities that foster critical thinking. Teachers must gently guide students through the levels of intellectual development to ensure lasting growth (Kloss, 1994).

Educators of adult students need to be self-reflective. Ferraro (2000) describes reflective practice in the following manner:

The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style and ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. Other specific benefits noted in current literature include the validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect

for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice...

Research on effective teaching over the past two decades has shown that effective practice is linked to inquiry, reflection, and continuous professional growth (p. 3).

Adult learners have a right to instruction that:

- allows them to see reading as a constructive process
- encourages reflection, critical analysis, and affective response
- includes social interaction such as collaborative and cooperative group work
- promotes interest and excitement
- is personalized to meet the needs of each learner
- is based on current theory and practice
- encourages students to become learners who are independent, autonomous, lifelong planners, and problem solvers
- integrates technology and promotes information competence

Instruction for adults should be engaging, relevant, and personalized. The central business must be about learning and not about teaching (Gardner, 2000, p. 12). Engaged readers are *motivated* to read, *strategic* in using multiple approaches, *knowledgeable* in constructing new understandings, and *socially interactive* (Guthrie, McGough, Bennet, & Rice, 1996). Adult educators need to provide instruction that is consistent with these ideas. Motivation occurs when adults see connections between their classroom experiences and their lives. The lessons they participate in need to provide relevant strategies that can be readily used in various settings.

Adult learners need to be made aware that they are active participants in constructing their own personal understandings. Chall (1996) believes that reading at the adult level is "the ability to construct knowledge on a high level of abstraction and generality and to create one's 'truth' from the 'truths' of others."

Vygotsky (1978), as well as others, has provided evidence that learning is a social activity. Instruction that incorporates social contexts (discussion and cooperative and collaborative learning activities) offers students the opportunity to learn from each other (Spencer & Angus, 2000).

"Learning is not just a cognitive process, but an affective one as well" (Taylor, 1999, p.38). Providing opportunities that encourage critical and affective responses help students address questions about themselves as learners, specifically what they know, how they learn, and what motivates and interests them. Nell's (1988) research clearly established a correlation between reading ability and frequency. Instruction that encourages interaction with text for affective purposes is clearly important for adult readers.

Teaching and learning in the new millennium cannot ignore technology. Computers offer many benefits to adult learners, both as an instructional medium and source of content. But, the move toward computer-based technology in the classroom necessitates that educators understand theories that support sound instruction (Yaworski, 2000). Indeed, all instructional decisions should be soundly grounded in theory and current research.

Adult learners have a right to assessment that:

- Is appropriate—matching the level, purposes, and content of instruction
- Includes the student in the assessment process (e.g. self-assessment, peer review, interview, consultation)
- Occurs at frequent intervals with meaningful feedback
- Focuses on outcomes and informs instruction
- Involves multiple measures

Authentic, meaningful assessment is an integral part of any literacy program. “Literacy assessments that match knowledge of the reading process and current methods of teaching reading are needed at all levels of education” (Barksdale-Ladd, & Rose, 1997, p. 34). This type of meaningful assessment is the right of the adult learner. Instructors who work closely with adult students and use a variety of methods to measure student achievement and direct instruction are practicing informed assessment.

Wolf (1993) describes this process as follows:

Informed assessment refers to the process that knowledgeable teachers engage in when they systematically observe and selectively document their students' performance through multiple methods, across diverse contexts, and over time as students participate in meaningful learning activities (p. 519).

Not only are instructor assessments vital to successful adult learning, but self-assessment through metacognitive reflection is equally important. Soldner (1997) discusses the importance of metacognition, and the students' ability to reflect on the thinking strategies they use to enhance understanding and encourage cognitive development. As students engage in this self-examination they become aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Armed with this knowledge they are better equipped to accept responsibility for their learning (Porto, 2002). This self-assessment empowers adult students to gain and maintain control of their learning and thinking through increased awareness of those processes.

Adult learners have a right to materials that:

- are relevant, current, and multi-disciplinary
- reflect a variety of media, genres, and cultures
- present opportunities for self-selection

Adult learners deserve materials that are appropriate for adults. The degree to which students are motivated to engage in content learning is heavily influenced by the nature of the material they encounter (Bean, 1998). Providing students with interesting and relevant materials can lead to greater engagement of students. Engaged readers are more likely to use learning strategies to see connections to prior knowledge and to construct new information (Guthrie, Alao, & Rinehart, 1997). Thus, carefully selected materials can lead to enhanced reading achievement. Additionally, selecting texts that are reflective of the cultural diversity in the classroom promotes respect and discussion among participants (Au, 1993). When students encounter materials that are connected to their culture they are more likely to feel valued as adult learners.

Offering access to a wide variety of materials that build in opportunities for choice is ideal. Allowing students to choose reading assignments that reflect their interests makes it more likely that students will become engaged and spend more time reading (Nell, 1988). Not all students enjoy reading the same subject or genre. Providing variety makes it more likely that adult students will expend the time and effort required to read and learn.

Implications and Conclusion

At the annual CRLA conference in Minneapolis, 2002, members met to continue the dialogue on the rights of adult readers and learners, and specifically to address some of the implications and potential uses of this document. Using the document as a means of informing adult learners of their rights was among the suggestions made for use at the classroom level. Supplying students with a copy of their list of rights will make them aware of what to expect from instructors and will legitimize instructional practices for students. In terms of assessment, the measures outlined in the document can be used to evaluate not only students but instructors and materials as well. Journals and portfolios were recommended as appropriate assessment tools that meet the criteria delineated in this document.

At the department level, discussion focused on how the document should serve as a guide to sound educational practice for educators of adult students and may be useful in planning postsecondary teacher training certificate programs. Departments may recommend that new and adjunct faculty refer to the document as a model when planning classroom activities and choosing materials. Further, the document could be used to create a matrix that would encourage all faculty members to

examine the link between appropriate practice and existing practice in the areas addressed in the document.

Schools and departments can draw on the rights of adult readers and learners to develop or extend current mission statements and goals. Publishers of adult education texts might also find that the rights document provides guidance for development of new material. Finally, political action committees may be able to use the rights document to further political agendas that promote better quality adult education.

The membership of CRLA is dedicated to promoting quality education for adult students by ensuring that the rights of adult readers and learners are recognized and addressed. This position statement outlines these rights in the categories of appropriate materials, theory based instruction, authentic meaningful assessment, and knowledgeable dedicated instructors. It is essential that teachers continue to examine and discuss the rights of their students leading to progress in adult education at many levels. Accepting responsibility to move this conversation forward will help ensure growth for students and teachers alike and quality education for all.

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