

Transitioning in Adult Education:

From Basic Skills to a Better Life

Jennifer King

Texas State University

Adult education helps low-level non-traditional adult students gain the skills they need to improve their employment opportunities and become better parents, and more productive members of society (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). Classes focus on basic skills such as reading, writing, mathematics, and English language acquisition, and are typically free to students. Classes range from ABE (Adult Basic Education, helping learners with basic literacy and math skills), and ASE (Adult Secondary Education, helping learners earn a high school equivalency credential, usually the GED), to ESL (English as a Second Language, helping speakers of other languages learn English). The largest and fastest growing of these groups is the third. Approximately 15 million U.S. residents have limited English proficiency and would benefit from English instruction (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004).

While many challenges plague these learners and the programs that serve them, one ubiquitous problem is the difficulty in transitioning learners from one stage in their education to the next. Many English language learners (ELLs) simply want to learn enough English to get by and help them live their daily lives. Others aspire to progress from ESL to college. Some of these learners must detour into ABE classes, earn their GED, and take more ESL classes at the college level along the way. Here we will look at who these students are and what skills they need to progress, specifically the ESL students. Then we will examine some of the key elements programs need to incorporate in order to encourage learner transition and how programs and classes may be structured to do so.

The Learners, their Backgrounds, their Goals, and their Barriers

Among ESL learners in the U.S. there is no typical student. ELLs come from countries all over the globe including our own. They have different cultural and educational backgrounds, different literacy levels in both English and their native languages and different reasons for

coming to class. Some are refugees or immigrants, others may be permanent residents or even U.S. citizens (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004). Jose and Julie may even be in the same class. Jose dropped out of school in the fifth grade and came to Texas as a teenager. He has limited literacy skills in his native Spanish and wants to learn to read and write in English. His classmate has a B.A. from her native Korea. Julie is a permanent resident on her way to citizenship and enrolled in a community college nursing program. Students like Julie see tuition-free non-credit ESL courses, whether offered by community-based organizations (CBOs) or in a community college setting, as opportunities to practice and improve their English to get ready for their next educational step (Chisman & Crandall, 2007). Jose's primary goal is to learn enough English to obtain employment with livable wages and benefits and to take care of his family.

Goals and Needs

Most adult education and ESL students have aspirations to go on to further education, particularly to college. Few, however, ever get a chance to pursue this goal (Reder, 1999; Reder, 2007; Chisman & Crandall, 2007). Jose enrolled in ESL classes with the hopes of eventually earning a GED. He even dreams of going to college some day, but knows this is not likely. Like many of his classmates his immediate goals are to fulfill his immediate needs; to learn enough English to get a better job and to help his children obtain more education than he has. The goals of many ESL and other adult education students are more job-oriented than the lofty educational goals of getting college degrees (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004).

The opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their families inspires many adults to enroll in ESL classes. Specifically they need to gain the basic skills to improve their employment opportunities, to become more independent, and to help their children in school. They may also seek education to improve their own self-worth, or to improve the way they are

viewed by themselves and others (Wiley, 1993; Wrigley, 1993; Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004). Adult education programs can help students get off to the right start by working with them to establish their own goals (Wrigley, 1994). Setting goals will help learners put together a road map of what they expect to get out of a class and monitor their own progress on achieving these goals. It can help instructors determine course content and how to best relate to students. If learners express interest in learning how to read a city map or use the phonebook, or if they need to prepare themselves for job interviews, these skills can be incorporated into the curriculum. Without knowing what a learner needs, how can an instructor provide the necessary information and support?

Hand in hand with learners' goals come learners' needs. Most ESL programs do their best to simultaneously address the needs of many learners with a wide range of English proficiency levels. These differences, however, are not the only factors in determining how to approach a class of English learners. Beginning with a needs assessment (Wiley, 1993) will allow instructors to tailor curriculum not just to the levels of English proficiency represented by students, but also to their educational backgrounds. While Julie and Jose may share a classroom, and even have similar speaking skills, their academic preparation is vastly different. Students like Julie are very comfortable sitting in a classroom and know what is expected of them. If Jose has hopes of earning a GED he has a long way to go. He will need extensive help with literacy skills, encouragement to persevere, and exposure to what is expected of him in a U.S. classroom (Wiley, 1993; Wrigley, 1994).

Very different educational backgrounds makes designing any type of ESL curriculum difficult, much less a transitional one. Some students are comfortable speaking English, but have few academic skills. Others have extensive academic skills learned in their native language, but

are unable to communicate in English (Wrigley, 1994). The idea that English or any adult education subject can be taught in a linear fashion from A to Z to all students is unrealistic. Adults bring with them into the classroom all of their past experiences (or lack there of) in education and in life. An adult class is not like a room of 25 seven-year-olds who have similarly limited life experiences being exposed for the first time to multiplication tables. “The linear model of ESL, based on a ‘one size fits all’ approach, does not meet the needs of all students equally well” (Wrigley, 1993, p.32). Jose and Julie will take different routes to different ends in their educational pursuits. Julie may finish her community college nursing program and go on to a four-year university. Jose’s current focus is on English literacy. He may become proficient enough to earn a GED, but this should not be his only option. Students like Jose may improve their personal and professional lives as much or more by pursuing vocational or technical training that leads to jobs paying livable wages with benefits.

Barriers

Many barriers stand in the way of these students seeing their dreams come true. Most adults going back to school as non-traditional students face the challenges of lack of time and money and the obligations of their family and job (Reder, 1999). In the world of adult education these problems are often compounded by a student’s low self esteem, lack of support from friends and family, lack of information about their educational options, and a feeling that they are not “college material” based on their lack of past educational success (Wrigley, 1993; Wrigley, 1995; Harrington, 2000). These students may also be surrounded by a community that places little value on education and know few people who have any postsecondary education. Adult education programs must deliver not only their curriculum, but also the support learners need to conquer these barriers and move on to the next step.

Survival English vs. Academic English

“In terms of teaching ESL, one of the greatest challenges lies in finding ways to balance fluency in English (the ability to get one’s point across, even in imperfect English) with accuracy (the ability to use English that is grammatically correct)” (Wrigley, 1993, p.2). Most ESL classes focus on survival English – what students need to get along in an English speaking community. These classes are typically offered by CBOs and community colleges and help student obtain employment, register their children in school, or make a doctor’s appointment. Academic ESL classes, on the other hand, are stepping stones to further academic pursuits. They scrutinize the grammar rules and vocabulary an ELL will need to understand in their first semester of college (Rance-Roney, 1995). Acquiring academic English, or cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), is a fundamental and necessary process for ESL students to transition into postsecondary education (Condelli & Hector-Mason, 2009).

Academic English classes place emphasis on the accurate use of language as well as the meaning of an utterance. They also require much more extensive reading and writing. Often they even teach different language skills in different classes (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Chisman & Crandall, 2007). While survival English classes often imbed reading and writing in subject matter immediately applicable to students’ lives, academic English texts tend to be more removed (Rance-Roney, 1995). Some beginning survival ESL classes focus almost exclusively on speaking and listening with minimal practice in reading and writing. This can make the transition into more advanced academic classes very challenging for students. That intermediate level transition class remains elusive (Crandall & Shepperd, 2004). For many students community college credit ESL courses fill this gap. Others with limited prior education are routed through ABE classes before they are able to handle the credit ESL classes (Chisman &

Crandall, 2007). For classes to bridge from survival ESL to academic English leading to postsecondary opportunities, they must focus specifically on academic areas needed for college with appropriately challenging reading and writing assignments as well as math and study skills.

The language immersion most immigrants experience in their daily lives in the U.S. can develop survival skills and is critical to an ELL's ability to function in an English speaking community, but immersion alone will not result in the fluency needed for postsecondary study (Rance-Roney, 1995). To succeed in college level classes an ESL student must focus much more on a careful examination of grammar and vocabulary, especially less-frequently used words that appear more in academia than in daily life, and develop more accuracy than they might need to merely survive. (Mathews-Aydinli, 2006). One way to do this is through extensive reading. Exposure to written English familiarizes ELLs with English syntax and exposes them to a constant flow of vocabulary and writing styles (Krashen, 2003). Students with plans for postsecondary education should be reading texts like those required for college-level work.

4 Keys to Encourage Transition

How do we make sure adult education students receive the education and training they want and need? Simply put, these students need access and support (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). They must become aware of their options, they must be prepared academically for the next step, and they must have a support system to get them through the bureaucracy of higher education and the challenges of their daily lives.

Make Learners Aware of their Educational Options

Before learners can be expected to make any decisions about their educational futures or any steps toward their ultimate goals, they must first become aware of what pathways are open to

them. Like GED recipients, ESL students often see two-year community college programs as their next step, but this is not necessarily their only choice. Some may need to attend ABE classes before community college becomes an option. ESL instructors and program administrators must first learn about the adult education and postsecondary programs available in their community, and then make sure their students are aware of those within their reach. Information on the next step program (be it ABE, GED, or college) may be relayed to students individually or as a group, in their ESL, ABE, or GED class or outside of classes in workshops (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006).

Programs use different means to disseminate information. Information may be offered to all students as a group or just to those who show interest. Some programs pick and choose only the most advanced or prepared students, others discuss next step programs with all students from the beginning of their enrollment. Simply sharing the information students need to get to the next step is enough assistance only for the most advanced and well-prepared students. Most will need much more advising (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). Handing out brochures on local community colleges or other next step programs, and referring students to websites is not enough. Students need individualized support, not to be left to their own initiative (Chisman & Crandall, 2007).

Information should be available through different vehicles; through personal counseling, in classroom discussions, from guest speakers, and in written form (Wrigley, 1994). In a community college adult education environment, the next step class may be right next door. In this case students should be given the opportunity to meet the instructor and see what the class is about in order to allay their fears of moving out of their current class (Harrington, 2000). Ideally all students should be given information on next step programs, but pinpointing individual needs,

interests, and goals will focus their attention on paths that are right for them.

Academic Preparation

Just because an ELL has topped out of his ESL program does not necessarily mean he is ready for a community college English class. As we have seen in the case of academic English, ESL classes frequently neglect to prepare learners for future educational opportunities. Beyond providing learners with information on next step programs, we must also give them the tools to succeed once they get there. Sending programs must address knowledge and skill gaps between their curriculum and that of the receiving program. In order to do this, relationships should be developed with those designing curriculum for the next step program (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006; Reder, 1999). Understanding what will be required of students in the future will help instructors gear their own classes toward readying students for that next step. The curriculum must incorporate needed academic material, but also study skills, time management skills, goal setting, and problem solving skills learners will need to handle the work load in the next step program (Wrigley 1994).

Understanding what is expected in the receiving program and preparing learners academically will keep them from backtracking into classes covering information they have already learned and wasting time and money on classes they do not need. All too often ESL students are placed in non-credit ESL courses or developmental classes before being admitted into credit classes, squandering their time and financial resources. They also become discouraged as their education takes longer and longer to complete (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004). They may be tempted to drop out before even enrolling in credit courses. Focusing curriculum on the skills and knowledge needed in the next step class will help conserve students' time and money. Getting them directly into college credit courses or at least at the

highest level of developmental education, and giving them credit for work they have already completed, will keep them from backtracking. (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006; Wrigley, 1993; Wrigley, 1994; Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004).

Part of preparing learners academically is making sure the curriculum of each program reflects entry level skills expected in the next step program. Despite the obvious links between adult education classes and into postsecondary programs and the call for one-stop educational centers, very little work has been done to coordinate these programs (Reder, 1999; Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). Most ESL and ABE curriculum do not teach material required for academic classes or teach the content at a lower level than needed (Wrigley, 1993; Alamprese, 2005; Chisman & Crandall, 2007). For ABE programs hoping to send GED recipients to community college, instruction should be closely aligned “with entry-level, credit courses” (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006, p.47). It is counterproductive to send a student on to the next program only to find that they are ill prepared and must backtrack into courses covering material they thought they had already mastered. Aligning curriculum shortens “the pathway to further education” keeping students from backtracking into repeating classes in the receiving program, wasting time and in the case of credit courses, money (Chisman & Crandall, 2007, p.63).

Remedial classes are offered in a large majority of postsecondary institutions, especially two-year institutions and those with high minority enrollments. Many freshmen participate in these classes and their grades and retention rates reflect the benefit they gain from doing so (Reder, 1999). However, the investment of students’ time and financial resources may outweigh the benefit and ideally the literacy and math skills that remedial classes focus on should be covered in free classes available to students before college enrollment.

Red Tape

Transitioning from any program to the next can be overwhelming for an adult learner. Knowing what form to fill out, what class to take, and where to go for help is confusing. The scary world of the college campus is a landmine of barriers for anyone not prepared for its bureaucracy and red tape (Alamprese, 2005). Once an ABE or ESL student sets his sights on an academic or vocational program he is faced with the daunting tasks of the application process, applying for financial aid, and registering for classes. Transition services need to be in place to guide students through these steps. Whether an ABE or ESL program is located on a community college campus or in the community, it must work to develop relationships with key contacts at local postsecondary institutions (Wrigley, 1993; Wrigley, 1994; Lombardo, 2004; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). Having a full range of contacts in admissions, financial aid, and counseling is more than knowing who to send a student to for help. It is giving a student a group of advocates who will keep them from falling through the cracks at a point where it would be very easy to give up. Some programs have found success in having a transition specialist or a liaison position dedicated to connecting two or more programs (Wrigley, 1993; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). Advisors or program liaisons should be brought into the classroom for face-to-face contact with prospective transition students (Harrington, 2000; Lombardo, 2004). This will begin to foster a relationship between advisors and students, not just between programs (Harrington, 2000).

Support

Supporting these students must take place before, during, and after transition. Presuming a student has enough information about next step programs, is academically prepared to succeed in a chosen program, and successfully enrolls in appropriate classes, the work of transition

support services is not yet done. As students progress into more demanding programs, they may find that their time, energy, and finances are more taxed. They need strategies for success including an orientation of how the U.S. postsecondary education works, as well as support in stress management, time management, and study skills (Alamprese, 2005; Harrington, 2000; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006; Wrigley, 1994; Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004).

Some programs have had success conducting workshops on a variety of topics such as applying to college or for financial aid, study skills, time management, test taking, and note taking (Harrington, 2000). This poses some concern for the students' already busy schedules. These workshops are voluntary, but require more of their time on top of their normal class schedule. Holding such workshops or incorporating these skills into an ABE or ESL class both have advantages and disadvantages. A Saturday workshop may not be an option for a student who has already committed his Tuesday and Thursday evenings to an ESL class. On the other hand, many ESL and ABE students would have little use for financial aid information if they never plan to attend college. Location may also be an issue. Holding workshops where students are used to attending classes provides a comfortable, safe environment. Workshops might also be held on a college campus to give students a small taste of being on campus (Jaschick, 2010). Offering the service is a start. We must also make sure it is accessible to the largest possible number of interested students.

Support may be offered through peer mentoring. This can help students become part of campus life, and provide encouragement and role models as well as academic support. This type of mentoring can be crucial during the first, most difficult year of college (Alamprese, 2005). Mentors from students' own community and program graduates, especially those who share a native language and background, can serve as examples for new students. Advanced students

servicing as mentors not only give entering students support and inspiration, but may find that servicing as a mentor enhances their own educational experience (Goldschmidt, Notzold, & Miller, 2003).

What does a peer support system look like?

Goldschmidt, Notzold, and Miller (2003) showed us how the program works at Pennsylvania State University. Underprepared students, especially ESL students, voluntarily enroll in a 30-hour program during the summer before their freshman year in college. The program covers reading, writing, math, and study skills and is designed and run by upper class students. Though mainly focused on more traditional freshman just graduating from high school, this program can be used as an example of how to set up a support program in any academic environment. At Penn State candidates for the 30-hour program are selected through placement tests and interviews. They design their own schedules and can complete their 30 hours at their convenience. Peer tutors are selected by instructors and through an application process. Many of these tutors were once in the 30-hour program themselves. They focus on addressing weaknesses an underprepared freshman might have before they become problems. The program “is not meant to replace or to ‘teach’ freshman courses; it is meant to emphasize what is important to prepare students for these courses: organizing time; following directions; understanding assignments; and mastering math, grammar, and writing skills” (Goldschmidt, Notzold, & Miller, 2003, p.14). The results of this program show that participants have both higher GPAs and higher retention rates than their classmates who have chosen not to participate. Students also find themselves a social circle of like-minded classmates intent on success.

Support can take many forms and does not end in academics. Too often the barriers that keep many from seeking an education cause others to drop out once they have enrolled.

Programs can support students by offering access to affordable childcare and transportation and through scholarships and job placement services (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004). All too often non-academic circumstances lead learners to stop out or give up completely.

How Transition Classes are Structured

A common problem in delivering these services to the learners who need them is that the adult education world is so fragmented that one hand rarely knows what the other hand is doing.

Lower level programs rarely refer students to the next step simply because instructors and administrators do not know where to send their students (Wrigley, 1993; Crandall & Shepperd, 2004). This can be true even within a community college. There may be no clear path through ESL to acquiring a GED and on to admission to credit courses (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004). Each program expects to be self-contained, doing all the work themselves, reinventing the same wheel. Many instructors and administrators don't even see themselves as part of the same system or process.

It is as if elementary school, middle school, and high school were operated by different agencies, used different funding streams, the exit competencies of each level were unrelated to the entry competencies of the next level, and each saw its mission only in terms of completing its level. (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor 2004, p.9)

This fragmentation stems from the attitudes of individuals, lack of funding, and even competition for students. Rather than seeing the program across town as the competition, programs need to coordinate services to best serve the community as a whole (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004). "Within ABE programs, ESL programs need to be linked to GED programs.... Non-credit ESL programs in community colleges need to be more explicitly linked to academic and vocational programs" (Wiley, 1993, p.21). Linking programs to create a clear pathway to secondary education must be a focus of the adult education system if students are to transition and succeed (Reder, 1999).

Vocational ESL (VESL)

In a VESL program language learning is contextualized within training for a specific career field (Wiley, 1993; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006; Chisman & Crandall, 2007,

Jaschik, 2010). Ideally this type of training will result in skills and credentials that students can take to employers, advancing their careers more quickly than the long road to a college degree (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004; Zaft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006; Chisman & Crandall, 2007). VESL meets the needs of students, employers, and the local economy (Chisman & Crandall, 2007). Programs typically include healthcare, construction, automobile maintenance, computer technology, landscaping, and others (WSBCTC, 2005; Chisman & Crandall, 2007). Using context for teaching subject matter and language at the same time can increase student motivation by making the class more interesting and useful.

Sequential, Concurrent, and Integrated Programs

English skills are often taught in conjunction with vocational training. ESL classes typically focus on teaching language skills before students are expected to move on to job training (Wrigley, 1993). This leads to a sequential system of teaching skills in isolation rather than in context. The sequential system allows all ESL students regardless of their employment or further educational goals to be placed in the same class for language acquisition. It is the easiest way to organize an ESL class, but not necessarily the most effective method for many students.

By teaching the language needed for a specific industry in one class while learners are simultaneously enrolled in the complementary job skills class, a program employs a concurrent system, or dual teaching (Wrigley, 1993; Crandall & Sheppherd, 2004). This pairing of language and vocational courses gives context to the ESL class. It also requires more coordination between the two instructors. Specifically the ESL instructor must be familiar with the language needed for the vocational training. A concurrent system may also be used in college classes by offering a separate discussion class to augment an academic class specifically aimed at

supporting the language needs of ESL students (Crandall & Shepherd, 2004).

Having one instructor well versed in the vocational/technical or academic area *and* able to teach ESL opens the door to an integrated program. In an integrated system language and basic literacy and math skills are contextualized within the skills needed for a specific job. This offers learners a short cut to job training. The information is relevant and immediately useful. Though this sounds ideal for the learner, it is certainly the most demanding of a program and the instructors.

How can different areas of study be combined?

The I-BEST program in Washington state's community and technical college system epitomizes the blending of basic skills with workforce skills. Key to this program is the presence of two instructors in each classroom; one ESL or ABE instructor and one vocational/technical instructor. The goal is to move away from teaching survival skills and to help students gain literacy skills and job skills simultaneously, working up to earning college-level credits. Specifically, by earning 45 college credits plus a vocational certificate, students are much better equipped for jobs earning a living wage (WSBCTC, 2005).

Accelerated and Individualized Learning

Perhaps the most effective tactic programs can use to support their students is to get them through the program and on to the next as quickly as possible, rather than holding them back with slower remedial classes (Reder, 1999). Helping students learn more content, and learn it quickly lowers the dropout rate and increases persistence. "The longer it takes to learn skills and complete programs, the less likely an adult is to advance from one stage to the next" (Liebowitz & Combes Taylor, 2004, p. 1). Short-term intensive programs allow learners to see their progress and gain a sense of accomplishment. For learners who need to stop out for a period of time, these shorter courses allow them to more easily stop between courses rather than in the middle of a course they will have to repeat once they return. They will also give these students a reference point so they know where they are in the program and what they still need to learn

(Wrigley, 1994). Shorter, more focused courses also allow learners to concentrate specifically on skills they need. Individualized instruction helps students learn the skills they lack without wasting time on things they already know.

Successes

Successful transition of adult education students into a next step program begins with access to information and can take many routes from there. Many organizations are helping students get ahead while also benefiting local economies. Two examples of these organizations are Jobs for the Future and McDonald's.

The College of Lake County in Illinois has developed an ESL program in conjunction with McDonald's franchise owners. As one of many providers of low-skill, entry-level jobs, McDonald's often hires ELLs with little or no knowledge of English. Their new ESL program is helping these employees do their jobs better and opening doors for their advancement, as well as improving customer service. Key to the success of this program is the franchise owners' commitment. The owners pay for the program and hand pick employees to attend classes. These are employees the owners see as management material who need language skills in order to be successful when promoted. Employees are also allowed to attend classes during work hours and get paid for doing so. The McDonald's ESL program is being expanded nationally partnering with local community colleges. By exposing a new group of learners to classes, community colleges hope to boost their own enrollment and offer further educational opportunities to these learners (Jaschik, 2010).

Jobs for the Future forms a multi-prong attack on the problems at the intersection of education and employment. JFF manages and supports programs across the country to help students succeed. Established in 1983 JFF focuses on programs that help both high school and

adult students obtain the job skills needed in a modern economy, thus not only preparing these students for the marketplace, but also benefiting the national economy and raising the U.S.'s falling status in the world market. Their team of experts ranges from educators, to economists, to policy analysts. Their current goal is to double the number of students earning postsecondary credentials that lead to jobs enabling them to support a family. To do this JFF reaches out to high school dropouts, two-year and four-year secondary institutions, employers, and policy makers (JFF, 2010).

What does it look like when a program gets it right?

Wrigley (1995) painted a picture of four service providers under the direction of one lead agency, the Arlington Adult Learning System (AALS). The key to student transition and success is close knit partnerships among four programs – in this case a CBO, an adult school, a vocational training center, and a university. The result is the continuity a learner needs to progress from lower levels to more advanced classes, then eventually on to college- level courses. Each partner contributes its strengths, expertise, and resources to the common goals of AALS and to each individual student. The coordinated, comprehensive system makes transition part of the program by planning on it early on, not just after students have shown they are ready.

For this program to work, communication and relationships are key. Each provider must know what the others can do for their students both academically and personally. The CBO (Hogar Hispano) is often the entry point for ELLs. Associated with the Catholic Charities, Hogar Hispano helps the community with much more than English classes. It can also offer assistance with food and clothing, tax preparation, immigration issues, and job hunting. The adult school (the Arlington Employment and Education Program) functions within the public schools serving immigrants and refugees in need of English and literacy skills. Another public school affiliate, the Employment Training Center, offers vocational training. Finally, for advanced students who want to further their education, Marymount University serves as the final link in this chain.

Administrators and instructors with each service provider must know what the other providers can offer their students. They must also have a way of assessing what skills their students need to acquire. A common assessment system is crucial for learner transition. Common assessment gives providers a language with which to discuss students, their weaknesses, and their achievements.

Why does this program work? Important features of AALS include its focus on individual student goals, high expectations, and a very supportive environment. In short, the focus is on the individual student. What exactly does Jose or Julie need to succeed? Sharing is another key to AALS's success. Providers share curriculum and assessment information, as well as information on individual learners. They also share a common goal of transitioning students and a common commitment to making their system work.

Connecting the Dots

As the world economy and job market evolve, postsecondary credentials are becoming more of a necessity than a luxury. Having only a high school diploma or even less severely

limits an individual's employment options and earning potential (Reder, 1999). We must find ways to support transition from adult education into postsecondary education and bridge the skills gap that inhibits this transition. "Given that the standard of living is increasing in our society only for college graduates, the importance of improving the basic skills of postsecondary students seems clear enough" (Reder, 1999, p.20). In order to maintain and improve the U.S.'s competitiveness in the world economy our education system in general and our adult education system in particular is shouldered with the responsibility of producing an educated, modern labor force.

Reder (2007) called for a dramatic restructuring of the adult education system. Historically it has served too few learners and has not taken them as far as possible. Rather than focusing on the goal of high school equivalency, Reder proposed that through a coordinated, sequential system adult education should focus on college readiness in order to promote postsecondary transition, persistence, and graduation.

Promising research is currently coming out of the American Institutes for Research (AIR). Under contract with the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), AIR has embarked upon the TELL Project – Transitioning English Language Learners. This is an effort to understand what it takes to move ELLs from basic ESL courses, into advanced ESL, then on to ABE and ASE programs and even to college. The two-year study has produced an extensive bibliography on transition strategies (available at www.air.org) and will culminate with documentation of ten successful programs and details on the learners themselves. This report will highlight the policies and programmatic and instructional strategies that facilitate language acquisition and student transition. The OVAE hopes to better understand where to invest in the adult education system in order to maximize return on their investment and move toward turning

adult education students into a modern workforce (Condelli & Hector-Mason, 2009; AIR, 2010).

Conclusion

Above all, basic adult education programs will help their students transition to the next level of education by being coordinated with their local next step programs. Instructors and administrators must be of the mindset that says their program is just one step along the path to an education and a better life for their students. It is not the be-all and end-all. Most programs do not need to be. It is far better for an individual program to concentrate on doing what it does well and successfully sending learners on to the next step, than to try to be all things to all learners. We must also keep in mind who these learners are, where they are coming from, and what they need. These are responsible adults whose time and money should not be squandered. Because many of them lack a history of academic success, however, they require more personal attention than most 18-year-old college freshmen. These students must be tended like a garden in order to grow and flourish, not treated like native English speakers just out of high school, subjected to “weed out” classes and expected to sink or swim. Their education affects not only their own lives and futures, but those of their children and communities as a whole.

Resources

- AIR. (2010). *American Institutes for Research*. Retrieved Apr. 25, 2010, from American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC. Web site: http://www.air.org/focus-area/education/index.cfm?fa=viewContent&content_id=333.
- Alamprese, J. (2005). *Helping adult learners make the transition to postsecondary*

- education*. Retrieved Feb. 14, 2010, from Abt Associates, Inc., Bethesda, MD. Web site: <http://www.c-pal.net/pdf/transition.pdf>.
- Chisman, F. P., & Crandall, J. (2007). *Passing the torch: Strategies for innovation in community college ESL*. Retrieved Mar. 7, 2010, from Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, New York. Web site: <http://www.caalusa.org/eslpassingtorch226.pdf>.
- Comings, J., Reder, S., & Sum, A. (2001). *Building a level playing field: The need to expand and improve the national and state adult education and literacy systems*. NCSALL Occasional Paper. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 459 315.)
- Condelli, L. D., & Hector-Mason, A. (2009). Transitioning English language learners to ABE programs. *Calprogress*, 8. Retrieved Apr 25, 2010 from <http://www.calpro-online.org/documents/CALPROgressSpring2009Final.pdf>.
- Crandall, J., & Sheppard, K. (2004). *Adult ESL and the community college*. Retrieved Mar 7, 2010, from Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, New York. Web site: <http://www.caalusa.org/eslreport.pdf>
- Goldschmidt, M. M., Notzold, N., & Miller, C. Z. (2003). ESL student transition to college: The 30-hour program. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 27(2), 12- 17.
- Harrington, J. (2000). *Transitioning GED and ESOL (ESL) students into community college*. Tempe, AZ: Rio Salado Community College. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 451 376).
- Jaschik, S. (2010). Special sauce for ESL. Retrieved Apr 25, 2010, from *Inside Higher Ed*, Washington DC. Web site: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/05/27/esl>.
- JFF (2010). *Jobs for the Future*. Retrieved Apr. 25, 2010, from Jobs for the Future, Washington, DC. Web site: <http://www.jff.org>.

- Krashen, S D. (2003). *Explorations in language acquisition and use*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Liebowitz, M., & Combes Taylor, J. (2004). *Breaking through: Helping low-skilled adults enter and succeed in college and careers*. Retrieved Feb. 14, 2010, from Jobs for the Future, Boston. Web site: <http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/BreakingThrough.pdf>
- Lombardo, J. (2004). *Relationships count: Transitioning ESOL students into community college takes collaboration and personalized services*. Retrieved Mar. 7, 2010, from National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Boston. Web site: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=176>.
- Mathews_Aydinli, J. (2006). *Supporting adult English language learners' transitions to postsecondary education*. Retrieved Mar. 7, 2010, from Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, Washington DC. Web site: http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/Supporting_Adult_Ell.pdf
- Rance-Rooney, J. (1995). *Transitioning adult ESL learners to academic programs*. ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 385 173).
- Reder, S. D. (1999). Adult literacy and postsecondary education students: Overlapping populations and learning trajectories. *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, 1*, 111-157. Retrieved from database.
- Reder, S. (2007). *Adult Education and Postsecondary Success*. Retrieved Mar. 25, 2010, from National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York. Web site: <http://www.national-commission-on-adult-literacy.org/content/rederpolicybriefrev10807.pdf>.
- WSBCTC [Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges]. (2005). *I-*

BEST: A program integrating adult basic education and workforce training.

Olympia, WA. Retrieved Apr 7, 2010, from

http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/d_basicskills.aspx

Wiley, T. (1993). *Access, participation, and transition in adult ESL: Implications for policy and practice.* Washington, DC: Southport Institute for Policy Analysis. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 421 897).

Wrigley, H. S., Chisman, F. P., & Ewen, D. T. (1993). *Sparks of excellence: Program realities and promising practices in adult ESL.* Washington, DC: The Southport Institute for Policy Analysis. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 373 586).

Wrigley, H. S. (1994). *Meeting the challenges of transition: Perspectives on the REEP/AALS transition project.* Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 373 596).

Wrigley, H. S. (1995). *Coordination, cohesion and continuity: Learner transition in Arlington.* Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 392 933).

Zafft, C., Kallenbach, S., & Spohn, J. (2006). *Transitioning adults to college: Adult basic education program models.* Retrieved Feb. 14, 2010, from National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Boston. Web site:
http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op_collegetransitions.pdf.