

# "I don't crave to read": School reading and adulthood

*Alisa Belzer*

**The role of past learning experiences in adult literacy is explored in this small-scale qualitative study of five African American women.**

Adult education theorists argue that, in comparison with younger learners, adult learners bring a more extensive and usable set of experiences to the learning context upon which they can build new knowledge. These experiences have been called a "rich resource for learning" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 272). In general, they are viewed uncritically and are assumed to give adult learners a "leg up" on younger ones. However, in this article, I try to problematize past experiences—specifically with school—as a resource for five female adult learners who were participants in a General Educational Development (GED) class. Through research with them, I documented some of the ways that past experiences can create potential obstacles to learning. I look in particular at how earlier school experiences with reading shape the subjects' perceptions of reading in adulthood and then discuss the implications for practice in adult basic education classrooms.

Lytle (1991) argued that "no matter how much [or little] time was actually spent in school, adult learners bring with them [to adult literacy programs] powerful images of schooling from the common culture; often these appear to function

as scripts or plans" (p. 122). While I found that the women's beliefs about reading, which are heavily dominated by images of school-like literacy practices, provide strong evidence to confirm this, I also found that their practices often contradicted their beliefs. Such tension creates challenges for instructors who try to use the previous experiences of adult literacy learners as instructional building blocks.

**Belzer teaches in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University, New Jersey (10 Seminary Place, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA).**

## Theoretical frame

This study is based on two areas of research that are not typically linked in the literature but seem logically connected. Literacy theorists in the sociocultural tradition suggest that there is often a kind of alienation from reading and writing based on a disconnect between school literacy and learners' everyday experiences with reading and writing. Reading psychologists suggest that reading fluency comes only with a great deal of practice. Without engagement, learners will eschew opportunities to read. Thus, enthusiasm and engagement are extremely important in developing proficiency (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). I argue here that images of school literacy, disconnected from these women's personal literacy practices, carry over into adulthood in lasting and meaningful ways, negatively influencing their interest in reading and their opportunity to improve fluency.

Theorists of the New Literacy studies argue that literacy practices are constructed within a

social context, that literacy acts vary depending on who engages in them and under what circumstances (Street, 1993). This concept of "multiple literacies" is useful in marking differences between school literacy and other literacy practices. For example, Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) suggested that at least three kinds of literacies coexist: school literacies, community literacies, and personal literacies. They argued that only school literacy is currently valued in school, but that if all three were fostered minority learners might be better able to bridge gaps between their own and the dominant culture. Lauren Resnick (in Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) stated that schools are "isolated from everyday ways of using the written word" (p. 27). Nespors (1991) suggested that dominant groups have "consecrated" cultural forms, of which reading is one. Here, highly differentiated forms are assumed to be unitary. Thus, she suggested that, instead of being taught to do things involving reading and writing, students are taught to read and write as an isolated set of technical (school-like) skills.

Given the argument that school teaches literacy in isolation from important social contexts of learners, and that it generally does not provide students with the opportunity to interrogate the political dimensions of literacy, Brodkey (1996) said that we have failed as educators "to make literacy an offer that just cannot be refused" (p. 3). The implication here is that school does something destructive to many students. Not only does it quickly separate the able from the less able, it also constructs a definition of reading that is monolithic and encoded in a particular discourse (Gee, 1991). "These labels and skill definitions persist even after students leave school and develop their actual reading and writing abilities in the course of the common, everyday activities they participate in as adults" (Nespor, 1991, p. 185).

Psychologists who study reading engagement and motivation contribute to our understanding of this "offer" that can so easily be refused. McKenna (2001) stated that reading attitudes are precursors to behaviors. He observed

three factors in the acquisition of reading attitudes: the direct impact of reading, beliefs about the outcomes of reading, and beliefs about cultural norms concerning reading. These are cumulative and ongoing. Thus, every experience in school (sometimes the primary site of reading and writing in the elementary years) plays a shaping role in reading attitudes. If schools fail to build bridges between various literacy practices inside and outside of school, and if they devalue learners' cultural and personal experiences, preferences, strengths, and vulnerabilities, they risk creating disengaged readers for life.

The five learners described in this study are African American women (I am European American) between the ages of 26 and 41 who were participating in a community-based General Educational Development program. Although ability to pass the GED test rests largely on the ability to read fluently and comprehend texts from a variety of content areas, these women did not report that they are not motivated to read as a way to improve their potential to pass the test. I argue here that this lack of engagement is in part due to the "scripts" of school reading, which they have carried with them into adulthood and which alienate them from the act of reading.

## Study methods

The structure of the larger study, from which this article draws, highlights the ways in which adult learners' educational experiences and expectations contrast with some of the values, goals, and assumptions of the program they attended (Belzer, 1998). I asked what differences past experiences with school make when learners enter a nontraditional learning context as adults. The study involved in-depth interviewing to construct five women's learning histories (Ginsburg, 1989). The women were invited to contrast their previous experiences with their current adult education experience in a women's community-based GED program that is consciously attempting to be nontraditional.

I recruited research participants from one of the program's three classes. Five women either volunteered or were asked and agreed to participate in the study. I met with each of them between four and eight times. Using open-ended interview questions, I tried to learn about their beliefs regarding teaching and learning and reading and writing. I also tried to learn as much as possible about their previous experiences with schooling as a way to construct a learning history that could be contrasted with their perceptions of their current adult learning context. I worked as a volunteer tutor, once a week, in their class so that we shared this common frame of reference in our discussions.

Of the five women who participated in the study, three dropped out of school in the 9th or 10th grade, one dropped out in the second semester of her senior year, and one graduated from high school but had come to the GED program wanting to brush up her skills to enhance her job prospects. The five women's length of participation in the program varied from one who was in her third year there, to one who had only been in the program for a few months. One woman dropped out of the program at about the same time I began interviewing her (see Table).

Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, I first sorted interview data chronologically. As part of this process, emergent analytic themes became evident. Next the data were coded by themes, and assertions were made based on this process. For example, to develop the analysis for this article, codes were identified

related to reading practices, processes, beliefs, and plans. These codes are derived from Lytle's (1991) so-called Four Dimensions of Adult Literacy Development. *Practices* refer to the range and variation of adults' literacy activities in their everyday lives; *processes* look at the repertoire of ways of managing reading and writing tasks and the products of these transactions; *beliefs* are the adults' theories and knowledge about language, literacy, teaching, and learning; and *plans* are what adults indicate they want to learn and ways they intend to go about meeting these goals.

### Literacy at home, early experiences

Assumptions that underlie family literacy seem to fall along a continuum from those who argue for family literacy programs that function as palliatives for deficits, presumably caused by limited or nonexistent exposure to literacy within the family, and those who argue that even the poorest families can and do create literacy environments in which their children thrive (Auerbach, 1989; Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The early literacy experiences of the five women in this study seem to fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum.

Except for Mattie who reports having no early childhood memories, all of the women remember some printed materials in their homes and recall seeing someone in their home read on a regular basis. (All five names are pseudonyms.)

**The five study participants**

Name	Age	Last grade attended	Assessed grade-level range
Diane	26	9	9th–12th
Laura	37	10	5th–8th
Mattie	41	10	5th–8th (low)
Polly	32	12	5th–8th
Tamika	30	12+	9th–12th (low)

However, their descriptions of interactions with print in their homes were extremely limited. For example, some of the women remember one parent, but not the other, reading. When asked to recall who in their homes read, some of the women looked quizzical at first. They explained that their parents worked hard all day at physically demanding jobs and had little time or energy for leisure activities like reading. When parents did read, it was typically a newspaper, almost never a book. Other than to peruse the sports page or some other specific section of the newspaper, reading and writing were used almost strictly for functional purposes. For example, Laura's mother kept the records on life insurance and payments on appliances bought "on time." There were few, if any, children's books in their homes. Laura and Tamika remember old school readers as one of their only possibilities for reading. Laura's father read her a primer so many times that she had it memorized by the time she got to school.

Obviously, recollections of events 25 to 35 years prior to the interviews cannot be considered an exact record. Yet, they do seem to imply that opportunities to engage in reading and writing in the home, both prior to and consecutive with school, were not extensive. It is possible that under these circumstances, school reading and writing have a particularly strong influence in defining literacy for these learners and that these definitions stay with them in adulthood, despite practices that may contradict them.

## Literacy in school

The following descriptions of the five women's reading in school and out indicate that the school scripts coexist with and often contradict their adult reading practices. Despite the tension between belief (I don't like to read) and experience (I use reading in meaningful ways in my day-to-day life), which could impel them to change their attitudes toward reading (McKenna, 2001), they remain steadfast in their dislike for or avoidance of reading.

**Diane** is an unemployed, 26-year-old single mother of four. She left high school during her 9th-grade year when she became pregnant with her first child. When she entered the General Educational Development program, her reading level was assessed to be in the 9th- to 12th-grade range (because the program used a test locator rather than the actual test, a more exact reading level is not available).

Diane remembered more than the other research participants about early reading instruction in school. For example, she remembered and liked that her teachers sometimes read aloud or told stories. She also remembered a primer that she especially liked. When asked why she thought this text stood out so distinctly in her memory, she surmised that she liked the way the rhyming text sounded and enjoyed the illustrations. In contrast, she described a reading activity that she particularly disliked, but that was required of those (usually herself included) who finished their work early. Although she remembers it as being called "Phonics," her description sounds like she was using SRA materials (Science Research Associates, 1978). When asked to explain why "Phonics" was so distasteful, she said,

Nothing in that box interested me. Every story I read, I don't really care for it. It wasn't what I wanted to read, and those long, drawn out stories—I didn't wanna read that.... I would have to read it, and that would be so exhausting to me because I didn't really want to be bothered.

Even at this early stage, Diane expressed an aversion to reading (at least as it was presented to her in this activity). She explained that her attention span for reading, then and now, is short. She finds she is often uninterested in what she reads, and the meaning does not sink in.

The contrast between Diane's pleasurable memories—interacting with a primer text, in which the language was particularly playful and engaging, and listening to stories read or told by her teacher—and the seemingly meaningless and empty task of completing "Phonics" cards is stark.

Although she says she disliked reading under any circumstances, there seems to be some difference between her experiences of different kinds of literacy tasks (and possibly different literacies) and their potential to have drawn her into the pleasure and promise of reading. Unfortunately, this potential was never fulfilled. Diane reported that in high school she never paid much attention in English classes because "it didn't fit with what I wanted to be in."

While Diane very clearly articulates her dislike of reading, she does a fair amount of it. She reads the Koran and *Ebony*, *Esquire*, and *Elle* magazines. She writes letters regularly and began to keep a journal after using one at the GED program. Despite her extensive array of literacy practices, Diane expressed a preference for reading very short pieces and says she would rather look at pictures. She considers herself a pretty good reader, especially when she is interested in what she is reading. However, she reports, "I don't crave to read."

At the GED program Diane attended, students are encouraged to pick a book and read it. This activity is presumably aimed at encouraging the habit of reading as a way of supporting reading development. Learners are not given guidelines or criteria for book selection, other than being encouraged to choose something that is interesting to them, and there are no tasks (e.g., book reports) associated with completing a book, other than documenting that they have done so. Diane read two books as a result. She stated she was surprised that she had completed them and that she had done so very quickly. She emphasized how important it had been to her to be allowed to choose what she would read and encouraged to pick something that would be fun and interesting to her. Consequently, she found books that were of high interest and believed this gave her more patience for reading than she usually has. Although she was engrossed by the books she chose, she said she had not changed her attitude about reading. She still disliked it. Even when I offered to help her identify more books

that might also be of interest, she declined. Although the program offered a nonschool-like literacy experience, Diane seemed unconvinced about the possibilities of reading for pleasure.

**Polly**, age 32, is a school bus driver and delivery person for a caterer. She is single and does not have children. Although she attended school through the middle of her 12th-grade year, she tested in the 5th- to 8th-grade reading range when she entered the GED program. She had been attending about a year when the study began, but she dropped out soon after our interviews together started.

Similar to Diane, Polly does not recall having any difficulty learning to read. She considers herself an able learner who rarely has difficulty catching on to new skills. Polly assumes that learning to read was just another challenge that she successfully mastered. Although not a stellar student, she reports no real difficulties in school. She attributes a drop in grades during junior high school to a lack of interest rather than ability. In high school, Polly strongly disliked English and history because they involved "too much reading." She explained how classes that required a lot of reading were difficult because she found it hard to maintain her concentration. In addition to having difficulty applying herself to the task in these classes, she reports that she was averse to reading. She says, "[I prefer] to use my head for figuring out stuff." The active stance of "figuring out stuff" here is in contrast to reading, which she evidently thinks of as passive.

In adulthood, satisfied with her reading ability, Polly reports that she reads well enough to manage her daily life but reads very little. Although she doesn't think of herself as a really good reader, her self-assessment deems her reading ability adequate. "I can read enough to get by. I can read [laughs], but I don't need no desk job in order to make it." Here, she seems to contrast her literacy practice and ability with those of an imagined other who works at a desk job. "I don't know what it is to read on a day-to-day basis. I don't read. I'm a bus driver. I don't need to be

reading no encyclopedias or nothing." In describing her reading, Polly explains, "I can read, but sometimes I have to still go over...[it to] really understand it." She does read the newspaper and some work-related materials. Polly's definition of a good reader is one who can read quickly yet still comprehend, retell what has been read, and stick to a text even when bored.

**Tamika** is a 30-year-old married mother of two young girls. Although she graduated from high school and attended some classes at the local community college, she came to the GED program to brush up her skills, which she believed inadequate for a much desired desk job. Tamika tested in the low end of the 9th- to 12th-grade range when she entered the program.

Like Diane and Polly, Tamika did not have difficult memories of learning to read in school. In fact, she had almost no memories of her early school years. However, in junior high school, English was her favorite subject, she explained, because she did well on spelling tests. Tamika disliked high school, in part, because of the reading she was expected to do. She, like the others, had never liked to read, but does not know why. She found, however, that her resistance to reading did not necessarily impede her ability to get by.

Sometimes you were suppose to read through something so you could study or highlight. I would be like, glance through it and read a couple of sentences, be like, I ain't reading this. And I guess the only reason I passed the test was because I was there every day, and I, you know, I guess I was remembering it.

In spite of her strong desire to avoid the distasteful activity of reading, it played an important role in what Tamika describes as the nearly unvarying routines of high school.

A lot of classes wasn't really interesting 'cause most of the time they would want you just open up a book, and say do that. They didn't make it interesting... Most of the time there, you would just have to open a book up, do it yourself, and that would be it. Or you take home somethin' and read all these pages by your-

self and try to figure out the main ideals and all that stuff yourself. So that was pretty boring.

As a parent and potential worker, Tamika finds her interaction with reading to be shifting. When her second child was an infant, she participated in a family literacy class at her older child's Head Start program. There, she got many ideas about supporting the literacy development of her children, which she implemented. These ideas include labeling items around the house, reading to her children, and taking them to the library. She attributes her daughter's early success in learning to read to these efforts, but she continues to dislike reading.

When Tamika entered the GED program she made it a goal to read more. Like Diane, she read two books because of the program's encouragement. She continues to read to her children, studies the Bible, and also peruses the neighborhood and city paper where she prefers to read short articles. Tamika defines herself as just an "okay" reader. Although she doesn't usually have trouble "reading the words" (i.e., decoding), she complains of difficulties in comprehension. Sometimes this manifests itself as difficulty retaining information. She also feels her vocabulary impedes her ability. She believes she needs to read more so she will encounter more new words and then look them up in the dictionary. However, she is self-incriminatory in tone when she states that she skips unknown words rather than look them up in the dictionary. She observes that the more uninteresting a text, the harder it is to read.

**Laura** is an unemployed, 37-year-old single mother. She has one adult child and one preschooler. She also has frequent responsibility for a grandchild and a godchild. Laura was not promoted from 10th to 11th grade after extensive absences following the birth of her son and death of her mother. She decided not to repeat 10th grade and left high school at that time. Laura was in her third year participating in the GED program at the time of the study. She had most recently tested in the 5th- to 8th-grade level of reading. Laura found school easy at

first, but by 2nd or 3rd grade she reports that she was beginning to fall behind. In 5th grade, she was sent to a reading therapist. She reports that her reading ability was a source of embarrassment and humiliation. Reading aloud in school was a daily task, and her teachers expected every child to participate. Laura says that her classmates began to look forward to her turn reading aloud; her humiliation became their entertainment. "I used to always be ashamed to read. And people used to make fun of you, especially the boys." When she was called on to read, Laura explained,

I'd say I don't wanna read. They'll keep pickin' with me...the class.... They would give me these big words, and I couldn't pronounce them. So I ain't never like to read...I used to be ashamed to read. I guess that was my downfall, reading.

Although Laura remembers wanting to be able to read, when she encountered difficulty she soon developed habits of avoidance. For example, when the class went to the library, she chose the thinnest, easiest books for book reports. "It gotta be short. I don't like thick books." When she ran into difficulty with unknown words her main strategy was to "break 'em down into syllables" despite her experience that these efforts often failed, especially on long words. Not only did Laura suffer constant ribbing from her classmates, but in sixth grade her teacher abused her for her difficulties.

If you couldn't pronounce a word or something...she used to make you go in the closet room, and she had these long nails, and she used to dig them in your neck.... She used to make everybody go in there that couldn't read right. If they missed a word or something, she punished them—take her nails and dig 'em in your neck.... She used to always pick on me in the class.

In junior high school, when reading aloud became voluntary Laura was able to avoid the task by never volunteering.

As an adult, Laura reads every night from a book with religious passages that are each fol-

lowed by comprehension questions. She reads to her younger son if he asks and does not find this difficult; she reads magazines, such as *Jet* and *Ebony*, and the local neighborhood newspaper. Although she does some reading, she does not read books, perhaps because of some image of books she holds in her head. As she says, "I couldn't read no Shakespeare book!" She reports that it is difficult for her to stick with a book unless she is very interested in it, and she easily forgets what she has read. When she gets stuck on a word, she tries to break it down phonetically. "That's all I know." Laura does not see reading as a very important element in her life and does not have improved or increased reading as a specific goal.

**Mattie** is a 41-year-old, single, unemployed mother of three. She dropped out, at age 18, during her first year of high school after becoming pregnant with her first child. When she entered the GED program, she tested in the lower part of the 5th- to 8th-grade reading range. She was in her first year at the program when the study began. Mattie reports that she has no memories of school before the age of about 11. Like Laura, she found reading time particularly trying.

I had to read out and I didn't want to. It would be...as though I didn't know a word, and I would try to pronounce it or either want to skip over it, and [the teacher] would pronounce it...or tell me the word and ask me to continue reading. I would want to stop reading...because I felt like I couldn't read it all the way through 'cause I was gonna make another mistake on another word. I used to get stuck like that a lot.

Reading aloud, round-robin style, was actually helpful to Mattie, as long as it was not her turn.

I used to like to hear other people read because it seemed like it was better understood if I could follow along with them. Then when it comes to me, if that word come up again, I would know...I can pick up things like that.

In junior high school, Mattie was placed in a special education class where she got help with her reading.

I remember working with them with my reading. My reading was really bad.... They would have me read—they would read and then they would have me to read right over what they had read. Most of the time, I could remember—I could rememberize words. But otherwise, just looking at 'em, like I said before, it wouldn't come to me as clear—like what that word meant or anything like that. So I had a lot of counseling with that...with reading and comprehension. 'Cause I could never remember anything after I read it.

Eventually promoted to high school, Mattie felt that much of what went on there left her in a daze of incomprehension. The practice of reading aloud in class continued, but when she was called on, Mattie refused to participate. Her teachers colluded with her by skipping her and saying, "We'll get you another time."

As an adult, Mattie still describes herself as having difficulty with reading, in particular with "pronouncing" words, knowing how to break them down, not understanding them, and having to take a lot of time to figure things out. She believes she should break down unknown words, but she also sometimes skips ahead as a way of seeing what a word could be. However, she did not report using this helpful strategy until specifically asked about it. Like the others and in spite of her difficulties, Mattie does read some. She prefers reading the Bible and craft magazines, and she likes reading about other people's lives. She reports that she learns from the experiences of others and also finds it easier to "catch on to what the word means" in that context. She has gotten into the habit of going to the library, which she describes as an "outing," where she picks up local neighborhood newspapers and uses the computer to locate information. She also likes to read from her own journal, which she recently began keeping.

## Powerful messages

The findings reported here demonstrate that the women carry powerful, not always helpful, messages about reading from their years in school into their adult lives. All of the women have a dis-

like for reading that seems to be based on the fact that reading in school was boring, had little to offer them, and was simply a task they had to get done to get by. At a quick glance, the data on the women's literacy practices suggest that they are, by and large, aliterate. Before analyzing the data, I was at first persuaded by their many statements during the interviews that they did not read and write, although I knew that they could (and did) to some degree. However, upon analysis I realized that they engage in a considerable range of literacy practices in a variety of contexts for diverse purposes and audiences. I believe the discrepancy between their words and actions relates to the definition of literacy that they internalized in school and brought with them into adulthood. As they told me, they don't read encyclopedias, dictionaries, or Shakespeare—the type of texts they associate with school and more educated and skilled readers. Like the respondents in Ziegahn's (1992) study, they seemed to equate reading and writing with school. So, when they talked about reading to me (as someone they perceived as connected with school literacy), they said they didn't read. In actuality, they do read for reasons of practicality and pleasure. Similarly, their stated reading processes and beliefs reflect their school experiences. For example, Tamika feels she should use a dictionary every time she comes to an unknown word; Laura says she tries to break words down phonetically when she is stuck. Nevertheless, Tamika rarely looks words up, and Laura sometimes reads ahead to determine an unknown word, or even skips it.

Hence, the women have two competing frameworks for thinking about reading—inside and outside of school (Resnick, 1987). Newman (1992) differentiated between *literacy* and *reading*, which she argued are defined by the individual's race, class, and sex. She defined the former as functional, the latter as pleasurable, enriching, and done by people who like to read. Although this particular distinction of multiple literacies does not fit exactly with the competing frameworks of the women in this study, it is useful for pointing out the sharp differences in the

way people think about reading due to their own life experiences. What is of particular interest here is that the women seem to operate simultaneously within at least two distinct belief systems about reading. Almost in spite of their experiences, they are readers to some extent. They use reading for entertainment and as a source of information. When they talk about it to me—the researcher and teacher figure—they position reading as a school task and replay the scripts of teachers from long ago. However, in their day-to-day lives, they have come to engage with reading in a quite different and more rewarding, practical, and pragmatic way.

For the most part, these two frames can co-exist. However, there is likely to be some tension caused by the overlap when adults reenter a school context in which reading instruction has a more outside-school feel to it, as it did at the program described. Furthermore, the women's efforts to improve their reading in adulthood may be impeded by a belief that (a) school-style reading and reading materials are the only legitimate way to improve reading and (b) school-learned behaviors are the only legitimate way to engage with texts. Given past experiences with reading in school, these beliefs seem likely to suppress a desire to read and encourage the use of reading processes that can impede fluency.

The women's descriptions of themselves as readers and writers are portrayals of adults who can read and write but mostly prefer not to do so. They all see themselves as having certain reading challenges, but they also use reading and writing every day to function in their particular contexts. Embedded, therefore, in these descriptions is implied not a reluctance to read or write, but rather a reluctance to engage in certain kinds of reading and writing—that which they associate most closely with school.

These women's earlier education experience did not teach them to use reading to read the world (Freire, 1983), nor did it give them access to the pleasures of reading. Unfortunately, the messages that schools conveyed to them about reading

were not just benign but destructive because they potentially closed off access to information, cultural capital, and the ability to use reading to make personal and social change. Possibly the negative messages about reading that school perpetrates on learners cut across class, race, and gender, but the damage done is perhaps most serious for the poor, minorities, and women, because of the many other obstacles they face and because of their lack of access to the dominant culture. Although the women in this study do not always act on these messages, clearly they have an influence on their lives that cannot be discounted.

### Implications for practice

The task, then, for adult literacy practitioners who wish to interrupt these messages is to encourage learners to explore the contradictions between inside- and outside-school and, sometimes, childhood and adult experiences with literacy. The experiences that individuals bring with them when they return to school as adults may serve as a rich resource. But, at least in the case of reading for low-literate adults, previous experiences can only serve a positive purpose when they are unpacked and examined for the messages they carry with them into adulthood. As part of this process, learners need opportunities to explore the relationship between using and creating texts that are interesting, engaging, informing, practical, and self-chosen and that have the potential to improve their literacy skills. In other words, learners need to see how reading and writing in the outside-school frame can be used effectively to improve their literacy skills inside school. More fundamentally, they need to be encouraged to examine the contradictions between their multiple frames for literacy, between their beliefs (acquired in school) and their experiences in adulthood. One important way to do this may be to encourage learners to develop "literacy autobiographies" (Dominice, 2000), which invite them to reflect on and analyze their experiences with reading in and out of school. Introducing activities like this one is often easier said than done, because they may

violate adults' expectations of school, literacy, and learning. However, they may also serve to interrupt the scripts to which Lytle referred, creating an opening for new concepts and beliefs about reading to develop.

Less complex techniques for improving reading attitudes include avoiding ability grouping, using high-quality literature, using questions to activate prior knowledge, reading aloud to learners, stressing links between literature and the lives of learners, training learners in metacognitive strategies, and having them participate in literature discussion groups (McKenna, 2001). Langer (2001) suggested that practitioners create "envisionment-building" communities in which sense making is viewed as an essential and open-ended collaborative process. Here, learners are viewed as thinkers and resources. They draw on the knowledge they have, develop it further through interactions with peers, and get help when needed from teachers as a way to develop and elaborate their understandings of text. Earl (1997) suggested that incentives can play an important role in increasing reading motivation for adults.

The reward of creating such learning opportunities in adult basic education classes can be adults who have reconciled their ability to read and write with a desire to do so. Such a reconciliation can encourage more engagement with reading, thus improving the potential to increase skills and truly make it possible to use reading as a tool for personal and social change.

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