The Evolution of Adult Literacy Education Policy in the United States and the Erosion of Student-Empowered Learning

Thesis

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of adult literacy education policy in the United States over the past three centuries through the lens of Brian Street’s (1984) ideological and autonomous models of literacy. Until the turn of the 20th century, ideological models of literacy flourished in the United States. As a result of changing definitions of literacy and more strict federal policies, at present, the autonomous model prevails.

Economically-motivated adult literacy education policies have altered the nature and purpose of adult literacy programs. Government intrusion into adult education has forced both individuals and community-based providers to relinquish their decision-making authority. In addition, government-imposed expectations and accountability requirements often supersede the individual learners’ power to set their own goals. What was once an area of education driven by adult learners’ thirst for knowledge and self-improvement is increasingly guided by top-down, economically-motivated policies that eliminate the power of individuals to mandate their own educational pursuits in adulthood.

The autonomous model of literacy does not allow for critical engagement with social issues because it does not recognize them. Literacy in the autonomous model is tied to the dominant social structures in society. If other forms of literacy are excluded from schooling, the dominant social structures cannot be upset; social hierarchies remain in place, and non-dominant groups continue to experience oppression, even if they do not recognize it as such.
The autonomous model of literacy has become entrenched in the American adult literacy education system. However, adult literacy educators should not become complicit in this act of oppression. Instead, they should make every attempt to continue to promote ideological principles in their classrooms. Although this is clearly a different era from the colonial period and industrialization, educators in the Information Age must encourage their students to engage in controversial social issues and explore the power differentials in society tied to different forms of literacy so that they can take back their power in the adult literacy classroom and use educational endeavors to solve their own problems and fulfill their own purposes.
Dedication

Dedicated to lifelong learners everywhere.
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The United States has a longstanding tradition of adult education. Since the 17th century, American adults have sought out educational opportunities to fulfill a variety of purposes. Unlike education for youth, adult education was rarely regulated until the early 20th century. For the first 300 years of American history, adult education remained locally organized and controlled, if at all, and differed among communities depending on their own perceived needs. Industrialization, immigration, and the first international war in the early 20th century, however, compelled the federal government to begin addressing the need for better educated adults in order to improve the economy and become competitive in a progressively more global marketplace. In the 1960s, when there was more widespread interest in adult literacy and basic skills education, the federal government began to fully regulate the field.

Each time the government increased its involvement in adult literacy education, the “crisis” of adult illiteracy became more visible to all citizens. As a result, public policies regulating adult literacy education changed the organization, delivery, and rationale of adult education programming. Without government regulation, communities established and administered adult education programs at their will; instruction was learner-initiated and learner-centered. However, during the last three centuries, the demands of society, economy, and democracy have increased the need for more literate citizens, citizens more capable of contributing to a changing economy and participating in democracy. As the United States
has moved from an agricultural to an industrial and now to an informational society, fewer and fewer jobs are available for low-skilled workers (Reid, 1999). According to Canada (1998), “The decline of the mass production system, the decreasing availability of lower-skilled blue-collar jobs, and the growing importance of training and education in the higher-growth industries” calls for more educational preparation than was necessary in earlier U.S. economies (as cited in Barry, 1999, p. 649). In response to these economic changes, the federal government, through various policies, has caused both the definitions of “literacy” and the delivery of literacy instruction for adults to change over time.

A look at the long history of adult education, particularly literacy and basic skills education, in the United States demonstrates that when the federal government becomes involved in adult literacy education initiatives, the nature and purpose of the programs are altered. Government intrusion into adult education has forced community-based providers to relinquish their decision-making authority. In addition, government-imposed expectations and accountability requirements often supersede the individual learners’ power to set their own goals. What was once an area of education driven by adult learners’ thirst for knowledge and self-improvement is increasingly guided by top-down, economically-motivated policies that eliminate the power of communities and individuals to mandate their own educational pursuits in adulthood.

The Evolution of “Literacy” in the U.S.: From a Moral Value to a Functional Imperative

Many of the changes that have taken place in adult basic education since the colonial period coincide with a changing definition of “literacy,” as purported by the federal government. Ehringhaus (1990) explained: “Evolving definitions of adult literacy… have stressed the relative and fluctuating nature of society’s demands upon individuals” (p. 187).
Throughout U.S. history, “literacy tasks have been perceived alternatively as self-determined, imposed by society, and representative of externally imposed means to a freely chosen end” (Ehringhaus, 1990, p. 188). As the federal government assumed a larger role in defining literacy, what makes an individual “literate” became less “self-determined” and more “imposed by society.”

The concept of “functional literacy” is a commonly accepted definition of literacy used by policymakers today. “Functional literacy” is generally defined as the level of reading and writing ability necessary for “survival” by the standards of a particular culture. In the United States, the cultural shifts that have accompanied its changing economic state have likewise necessitated shifts in the level of literacy deemed necessary to “function” in an increasingly information-based society. However, as a result of the “functional literacy” movement, literacy practices considered “necessary” and the ability to “function” in U.S. society are no longer determined by individuals themselves. Rather, U.S. society has imposed standards for “literacy” and “functioning” that adult Americans are forced to achieve.

From 1840 to 1930, the U.S. Bureau of the Census determined literacy levels by asking individuals whether they were able “to read and to write a simple message either in English or any other language” (1971, as cited in Stedman & Kaestle, 1987, p. 11)(emphasis added). Thus, whether a person was “literate” was self-determined, implying that whether one was able to “function” in society was also self-determined. The fact that people could be considered “literate” even when their literacy existed in languages other than English likewise demonstrates that the government did not necessarily see one’s inability to read and write in English as an impediment to their daily living. However, this perception changed in the early 20th century, because the federal government began to establish its own criteria for
determining literacy, consequently eliminating much of the individuals’ ability to determine literacy for themselves.

The turn of the century marked a significant shift, not only in the understanding of what literacy is, but also what literacy is for. Prior to industrialization, literacy was seen as a moral value. Americans generally considered the ability to read and write as an attribute of a “good” person. However, with the changing workplace demands of industrialization, the influx of non-English speaking immigrants between 1880 and 1924, and the impact of the first international war, the ability to read and write English for the purposes of fulfilling civic and economic responsibilities took precedence.

Literacy was irrevocably transformed from a nineteenth-century moral imperative into a twentieth-century production imperative—transformed from an attribute of a ‘good’ individual into an individual ‘good,’ a resource or raw material vital to national security and global competition. In the process, literacy was turned into something extractable, something measurable, something rentable, and thereby something worthy of rational investment. (Brandt, 2004, p. 485).

These changes took place gradually, with the understanding of “literacy” varying according to local uses and needs until the onset of the Great Depression.

The federal government did not officially adopt the increasingly prevalent view of “literacy” as a “production imperative” for the national Census until 1930. From 1930 to 1970, the U.S. Census used grade-level criterion to determine an individual’s level of literacy, and during those 40 years, the level of education required to be considered “literate” steadily increased. During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps coined the term “functional literacy,” which was defined as having completed, at minimum, the third grade. The reasoning was that one would need at least a third grade education in order to read the essential printed material of daily life. By the onset of World War II, the military would not accept people who had not obtained at least a fourth grade education. In 1947, the Census raised “functional literacy” to the fifth grade level, and then again in 1952 to the sixth grade.
(Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). “By 1960, the U.S. Office of Education was using eighth grade as the standard. Finally, by the late 1970s, some noted authorities were describing functional literacy in terms of high school completion” (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987, p. 23).

As a consequence of using grade-level criterion to determine literacy, English was officially established as the goal language in which to be “functionally literate,” further limiting an individual’s authority to determine his or her own language needs for daily living. The steady increase from third to twelfth grade in determining whether an individual was “functionally literate” demonstrates the government’s—and society’s—changing perception of how much education was required in order to be considered an adequately functioning citizen as the literacy demands of the dominant U.S. culture apparently increased.

All of these modifications to the definition of “functional literacy” coincide with the rise of government interest and investment in adult literacy education. Although the federal government had made sporadic forays into the realm of adult literacy education prior to the 1930s, these early initiatives did not receive consistent public attention. With the onset of the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, adult literacy education finally came nearer to the forefront of the national agenda. Over the last 80 years, the federal government’s relationship with adult literacy education has been strengthened by ongoing policymaking and funding that promise the field continued national attention. With this increased attention, however, demands on individuals have also increased, as evidenced by the ever-changing definition of a “functionally literate” person, in addition to changes in the delivery of adult literacy instruction.
Theoretical Framework

The changes to adult literacy education programming and the understanding of the term “literacy” described above correspond to what Brian Street has called the autonomous and ideological models of literacy. According to Street (1993), autonomous models of literacy assume a set of neutral reading and writing “skills” that, once learned, can be applied across contexts. Literacy is conceptualized in technical terms, independent of social context, as “an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character” (Street, 1993, p. 5). These skills are presumed to be learned gradually as individuals develop, and as literacy skills are attained, the assumed consequences for individuals include intellectual, social, and economic progression (Street, 1984).

The autonomous model, however, “disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal” (Street, 2005, p. 417). As Street explained, “Faith in the power and qualities of literacy is itself socially learnt and is not an adequate tool with which to embark on a description of its practice” (Street, 1984, p. 1). Literacy itself does not possess any inherent qualities which make a person more academically or economically successful. In The Literacy Myth (1979), Harvey Graff challenged the notion that literacy results in social and economic mobility. On the contrary, he found that “The achievement of literacy only occasionally counteracted the force of other factors,” such as race, ethnicity, sex, and age (p. 85). Graff’s study illustrated that literacy is not an autonomous variable. That is, the ability to read and write, by itself, does not automatically produce social and economic success; other factors also bear influence. This presumption of the “consequences” of literacy is itself socially constructed.
As an alternative, Street has proposed the ideological model of literacy. Ideological models of literacy “view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society and … recognise the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts” (Street, 1993, p. 7). Researchers, writers, and practitioners of literacy education who employ ideological models of literacy recognize that literacy in and of itself does not have consequences for cognitive, social, or economic development. As Gee (1986) explained, “Literacy—of whatever type—only has consequences as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including a culture’s or a social group’s political and economic conditions, social structure, and local ideologies” (p. 733). While Street (1993) explained that not all researchers, writers, and practitioners of such a model employ this term, he created it as an umbrella term for “drawing attention to a cluster of concepts and assumptions that have underlying coherence where on the surface they may appear disconnected” (p. 8).

Some key indicators that distinguish ideological from autonomous models of literacy include: (1) the rejection of the ‘great divide’ between literacy and orality; (2) relating particularities of literacies to wider issues in a society; (3) using, learning, and teaching literacies in order to develop new identities; (4) using, learning, and teaching literacies in order to overcome oppression; (5) viewing literacy as a social practice embedded in sociocultural contexts; (6) recognizing and valuing multiple literacies, rather than one dominant form of literacy; and (7) the mixing of oral and written literacy practices to demonstrate that they do not occur in isolation (Street, 1993).

Autonomous models of literacy are top-down, skills-based literacy programs that are not learner-centered. Goals for learning and content are pre-determined on behalf of students, often established by public policy based on perceived—usually economic—needs
of society, rather than the perceived needs or actual interests of individuals. The social and cultural contexts for using literacy are disregarded. On the other hand, ideological models are typically student- and community-centered. Goals are set by students based on their own perceived personal or community needs. Content for learning is selected based on, and in support of, students’ learning objectives. Some examples of ideological models of literacy include critical literacy, popular education, and Critical Language Awareness (Street, 1984, 1993, 2000).

These are not contradictory models. Rather, the autonomous model is subsumed by the ideological. That is, the autonomous model is ideological; it just does not recognize itself as such. According to Street (2005), this is because “The ‘autonomous’ model is, in fact, always ‘ideological’” (p. 418). Literacy cannot be imparted neutrally; it is always situated within social practices and interactions that cannot be predetermined or imposed. According to Gee (1986), one ever-present example is essay-text literacy, which is a type of literacy valued and expected by the socially and academically elite in Western societies.

Claims for literacy, in particular for essay-text literacy values, whether in speech or writing, are thus ‘ideological.’ They are part of ‘an armoury of concepts, conventions and practices’ (Street, 1984, p. 38) that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal, or, at least, the end point of a normal developmental progression of cognitive skills (achieved only by some cultures, thanks either to their intelligence or their technology). (Gee, 1986, p. 732-733).

Therefore, an autonomous view of literacy that promotes and expects the end result of “normal” development to be essay-text literacy is based on a Western ideology. However, those that assume it is a natural outcome, rather than recognizing it as only one type of literacy, are “privileg[ing] one social group’s ways of doing things as if they were natural and universal” (Gee, 1986, p. 731). Those that assume that a particular literacy practice is natural and universal thus adhere to an autonomous view of literacy.
Applying Street’s theory of autonomous and ideological models to adult literacy education throughout U.S. history demonstrates how adherence to an autonomous perspective—that is, believing that improving reading and writing “skills” will *automatically* produce desirable social and economic effects—has in fact produced less effective adult literacy programming and instruction. An autonomous understanding of literacy has effectively robbed adult literacy students of their power over their own learning, and rather than helping them to overcome the often oppressive conditions which they are struggling against—the very reason that compelled many of them to return to school—instead, adult literacy programs have themselves become oppressive and merely reinforce the status quo (Graff, 1979).

Brandt and Clinton (2002) argued that “[L]iteracy cannot be extricated from the structures of power in which it always operates” (p. 339). When adult literacy programs do not—or cannot—help students develop an understanding of the power structures associated with different types of literacy, the students are devalued and demoralized. They learn to accept the deficit model being imposed upon them, believing that somehow they are deficient, whereas more often they just operate, or “function,” with different types of literacy than those prized by the dominant culture. This can result in students becoming disheartened about their own prospects for success in mainstream society. In addition, these learners, often members of non-elite groups in society, have been seen “to alter and resist forms of literacy associated with dominant institutions” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 341). Rather than fall prey to the autonomous perspective of literacy that perpetuates existing social conditions, many groups have shown a tendency to develop their own notions of literacy “on their own turf and on their own terms” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 341).
When public policy did not exist to support adult literacy education in the United States, the programs and classes that existed commonly evidenced traits of ideological models of literacy. However, each time that the federal government has enacted policies to regulate the field of adult literacy education, the programs and classes commonly become more autonomous in nature. This is the result of a false belief in the “consequences” of literacy acquisition. In order to provide funding for educational programs, the federal government has embraced the “literacy myth,” and “the ‘consequences’ of literacy are seen as the major justification for expenditure on education programmes in general” (Street, 1984, p. 104). Joe Taxpayer might not be comfortable recognizing the power differentials present in society, but he will be much easier to convince if policymakers explain that offering adults education in basic skills will reduce the welfare rolls and increase the GDP.

To garner support for public policies, politicians must convince “literates” that educating “illiterates” will benefit all of society. In order to do this, “illiterates” have been set apart as a group. “Illiterates, those without the benefits of primary schooling in skills, values, and attitudes, it is held, are distinct and separate culturally and socially, perhaps even composing a ‘class,’ or ‘culture’” (Graff, 1979, p. 53). More specifically, they have come to be viewed as a drain on society’s resources. Unable to meet the demands to function in modern society, they turn to crime and/or live off welfare. As Graff (1979) described:

Ill- or under-equipped to meet the demands made on them, their response is one of social disintegration, retreat, disorganization, or disruption. In this manner, their condition—and their lack of requisite abilities and attributes—severely restricts their own progress, as it hinders the larger social unit in which they reside. Trapped in a paralyzing poverty, they are, ironically, seen as unstable and rootless, either immobilized in pockets of penury or aimlessly moving about. Overwhelmingly, their condition is one of disorganization, an inability to adjust to demands or to assimilate the values and behavior required for normative success and advancement. (p. 53).
By bestowing on them the gift of literacy, then, public policies suggest that they will become productive and contributing members of society—rather than criminals and welfare recipients—thus appeasing the concerns of Joe Taxpayer.

In addition to positioning literacy as an autonomous variable, the delivery of literacy instruction has also changed when funding for adult literacy education derives from federal resources. In the United States, as this study demonstrates, government involvement in adult basic education and literacy instruction has not supported ideological models of literacy. As Street (1984) pointed out, “the teaching of literacy involved contradictions” (p. 105). Though illiteracy is dangerous to the social order because it hinders economic progress of the larger society, “the potentialities of reading and writing for an under-class could well, they [members of the ruling classes] feared, be radical and inflammatory” (p. 105). Therefore, teaching literacy had to be strictly controlled so that the only consequences achieved were those with which the ruling class was concerned. That is, adult illiterates ought to acquire employability skills, develop a work ethic, and become self-sufficient. Employing ideological models, in this case, would be out of the question. Ideological models of literacy typically explore the culture and power structures of society; they are “social” models in which students have control of their learning. However, as Street (2000) has explained, “These approaches have seen themselves as marginal and in conflict with dominant discourses on ‘illiteracy,’ ‘deficit,’ ‘top-down,’ fix-it approaches” more common in autonomous models of literacy (p. 26).

The following study traces the history of adult basic education and literacy instruction in the United States from the colonial times to the present. In so doing, it becomes evident that public policies typically force adults into autonomous models of literacy instruction whereas community-based educational organizations free from
government intervention have succeeded in developing programs based on ideological models of literacy. While both types of programming will claim to demonstrate “success,” it is important to question how “success” should be defined. Did the learner become a better worker or a better soldier? Did the learner leave the welfare rolls? Or did the learner explore power differentials and structures associated with different uses of literacy? Did the learner develop mastery of multiple literacies and learn how to use them appropriately in different sociocultural contexts in order to advocate for her/himself and overcome oppressive circumstances?
Chapter 2. Literacy of the People, by the People, and for the People: Adult Literacy Education until 1910

Until the turn of the 19th century, the majority of adult literacy and basic skills education programs reflected the principles of ideological models of literacy instruction. They were not only learner-centered, but learner-initiated and learner-directed. The objectives for adult education were determined by individuals’ expressed needs and interests. The government took little, if any, interest in the administration of adult learning experiences, and when it did take interest, as seen in the example of the Freedmen’s Schools during Reconstruction, characteristics of an autonomous view of literacy prevailed—and failed.

Adult Education in the Colonial Era

Adult literacy education has its roots in the colonial era. “Education was one of the cornerstones of Puritan society,” thus the first European settlers in the American colonies brought with them an intense value for education (Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1978, p. S41). “Among the first European immigrants to the American continent were Puritans, Quakers, and Calvinists, religious folk who held strongly the Protestant conviction that people must be able to read the Bible and interpret it for themselves” (Reid, 1999, 2). These colonists brought with them the notion of “education for all” based on their belief that people
deserved the freedom to make their own decisions about the world they lived in; thus, they needed to be able to read and write so as not to depend on an educated elite for direction.

“In the Protestant worldview, literacy signaled that personal contact had been made with the word of God. Knowing how to read was synonymous with knowing what and how to believe,” and if parents failed to achieve “their moral duty to teach young people to read… schools took up the slack” (Brandt, 2004, p. 488). The early emphasis on education and acquiring basic skills led to the establishment of community schools, first in the predominantly Puritan colony of Massachusetts, then spreading throughout the colonies, where children were instructed in basic reading, writing, and math (Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1978). However, while people at that time generally considered basic skills “mastered” by the third grade, those basic skills were intended and expected to be used in the lifelong process of gaining knowledge for personal and social advancement (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987).

The ability to read and write was closely tied to one’s social, political, and economic success. American colonists who fled Britain to be free from tyranny deeply valued political equality and the right of free people to succeed based on their own merits. With this freedom came the early notions of the American meritocracy—as opposed to the heredity-based aristocracy that existed in Britain—which remains a significant aspect of American culture to this day. And education provided the means to achieve. In America, even the poorest man could succeed socially, politically, and economically if he possessed the ambition and the competence (Long, 1983, p. 56).

The farming society during the colonial era abandoned many traditional structures as the population in the American colonies increased. Cities developed, and businesses modernized. Individuals began to accumulate personal wealth. Rather than the traditional verbal contracts and barter systems,
Written records were increasingly a part of business transactions. Credit formed a basis for expansion; contracts attested to agreements formerly sealed by a handshake. Records of inventories were required and communication increasingly depended upon the written word. In such an environment, the ability to read, to write, and to cipher provided a fundamental means of advancement. (Long, 1983, p. 56).

In order to keep up with the times, therefore, older colonists who had not had access to schooling as children found other ways to become literate.

Evening schools and private tutoring provided adults with opportunities to pursue their own literacy-related goals. From improving handwriting to learning basic math or developing bookkeeping skills, private teachers offered services tailored to meet individual learners’ needs. The first evening school for adults was established in 1660 in New York. The schoolmaster instructed children during the day and “others” at night. Adult students paid fees to take the evening classes. These evening schools were also used by apprentices whose masters wanted them to work during the day and learn reading, writing, and arithmetic in the evenings (Long, 1983, p. 57).

Adult literacy education providers in 17th and 18th century America addressed their services to the specific needs of their clients.

The newspaper advertisements of colonial America were not too different from modern efforts to recruit adult learners. The writers of the advertisements often had a flair for words and an understanding of the needs and interests of adult learners of their day. It is likely the more successful recruiting efforts in adult literacy in the twentieth-century U.S.A. are those that reflect sensitivity to the needs of the potential learner. (Long, 1983, p. 67)(emphasis added).

Thus, adult students were able to acquire skills and knowledge that they determined important for their own lives and future success. Because these were private ventures, there were no state-mandated curricula. The topics of learning were based on the expressed needs and interests of adults in the community, thus conforming to an ideological model of literacy.
Community-Based Education and the American Lyceum Movement

The private schools of the colonial era were unorganized and primarily located in larger communities that had already established schools for children. Private school teachers were often itinerant, so schooling for adults did not benefit from the structure that came to characterize children’s schools beginning in the 18th century. However, organized adult education received a boost with the American Lyceum Movement in the beginning of the 19th century.

Josiah Holbrook, a wealthy, Yale-educated, New England farmer decided that the knowledge of “ordinary” people, namely farmers, should be respected, valued, and shared. He also believed that farmers would be more productive with the scientific knowledge typically reserved for academics in higher education. In a letter to The Cleveland Herald & Gazette in 1839, Holbrook said:

The intercourse of farmers with the other classes of society, gives them an opportunity and an acquaintance with man, and the reciprocal interests of men of different pursuits, which the mere student can never form by reading, let it be ever so extensive or various these reciprocal interests are founded on the necessity of governments and laws to promote and protect those interests.

Driven by this conviction, he established the first lyceum in Millbury, Massachusetts, in 1826, which invited community members to share their knowledge with each other and invited lecturers, who specialized in sciences, arts, and even politics, to visit and instruct members of the community (Weaver, 1976, p. 12). These beliefs coincide with the characteristics of an ideological model of literacy, as he recognized that different types of learning and knowledge exist and function within different sociocultural contexts—namely, farming communities and academic circles.

Americans at this time, still building faith in the meritocracy, believed that they—individually and as a society—could achieve greatness through the diffusion of knowledge,
and the lyceums provided adults with opportunities to learn from each other for both “mutual and self-improvement” (Weaver, 1976, p. 10). Community members paid dues to participate in lessons, discussions, debates, and hear guest lecturers speak on a range of topics. Lyceums thus fed the “ordinary” citizens’—those who did not pursue higher education—hunger for knowledge in an effort to pursue and protect democratic freedoms.

“Uniquely American in its breadth of appeal and in its focus upon broad, practical, adult self-education, the lyceum fulfilled immediate, local desires for enlightenment” (Weaver, 1976, p. 11). Lyceum members encouraged the establishment of museums and libraries in order to spread knowledge to as many people as possible, and they believed that universal, free education—for both adults and children—could right the illnesses of society, preserve democracy, and dissolve the oppressive caste system (Stambler, 1981). The topics of instruction, discussion, or debate varied from community to community. Learning objectives were proposed and agreed upon by lyceum members. Funding came directly from members themselves. The American lyceums built on the desire of adults to pursue educational enrichment that had previously only been available sporadically and through private instructors.

Even more than before, Americans were taking control of their own learning in adulthood. This model of instruction was ideological in that lyceums acknowledged the necessity of altering curriculum according to different contexts, social needs, and situations. They related the use of multiple literacies to the improvement of issues in greater society. While they believed that greater education would produce positive consequences for individuals and society, they also recognized that all learning is situational, and learners maintained control over what they learned. In addition, learning that took place in the lyceums was always a social act. Members of the community came together to share
information and learn from one another. Often, this learning came about via lectures and debates, in addition to the study of written materials. Thus, lyceums embraced an ideological model of literacy that mixed oral and written literacy practices.

As New Englanders migrated farther west during the first half of the 19th century, they established lyceums in the towns they settled. By 1840, 3,400 towns had lyceums. However, these were mainly concentrated in the North and West. Southern aristocrats did not endorse the lyceum movement because they feared that educating poor whites and slaves would change the economy and damage their own status in it. Southern planters believed that “Active intervention in the social hierarchy through public education violated the natural evolution of society, threatened familial authority over children, upset the reciprocal relations and duties of owners to laborers, and usurped the functions of the church” (Anderson, 1988, p. 4). In their thinking, allowing—nevermind encouraging—poor whites and blacks to learn how to read and write could only upset the existing social order.

In fact, throughout much of the South, anti-literacy laws prohibiting slave owners from teaching slaves to read and write were common by the early 19th century. Southern states enacted these laws because, according to an 1830s Louisiana statute, Southern whites feared “a tendency to excite insubordination among the servile class” (Hurlbut, 1865). According to Rachal (1986), as abolitionism increasingly infiltrated the South before the Civil War, Southerners feared that “education would unsuit the blacks for their subservient role and fuel a desire for freedom or, after the war, equality” (p. 460). Thus, it is not surprising that powerful Southerners fought against the lyceum movement in the Southern region of the United States.

Learning that took place in lyceums was socially situated and learner-centered. Adults who belonged to lyceums were empowered students who set their own goals and worked
collaboratively to improve and attend to social issues. Lyceums’ aims were democratic, believing that no person should be denied knowledge; thus Holbrook’s vision supported an ideological model. The fear of the Southern aristocrats illustrates Street’s (1984) assertion that “the potentialities of reading and writing for an under-class could well … be radical and inflammatory” (p. 105). When adult literacy instruction for blacks in the South was finally supported by government officials, it arrived in the form of an autonomous model that attempted to maintain social control.

*Adult Literacy Education in the 19th Century South*

Adult education did not move South with any intensity until the Civil War broke out. Suddenly, the United States had millions of uneducated freed slaves to integrate into society. An urgent need became apparent in educating former slaves, so Freedmen’s Schools sprang up throughout the South. Although their relationship to modern adult basic education is often overlooked, the Freedmen’s Schools marked the federal government’s first attempt at regulating and funding adult basic education. Beginning in 1862 at Port Royal, South Carolina, the Freedmen’s Schools were funded by a combination of federal monies and private donations. Because their principal goal was to assist freed slaves in integrating into American society, much of the adult education provided in Freedmen’s Schools emphasized “daily living and coping skills… in conjunction with literacy education” (Rachal, 1986, p. 455).

Former slaves demonstrated incredible enthusiasm toward education, having “emerged from slavery with a strong belief in the desirability of learning to read and write” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). According to Anderson (1988), “The former slaves’ fundamental belief in the value of literate culture was expressed most clearly in their efforts to secure
schooling for themselves and their children” (p. 5). They accepted help in this endeavor from whomever would offer it, including Republican politicians, the Freedmen’s Bureau, as well as Northern missionary societies, all of whom were eager to participate in rebuilding the South through the education of ex-slaves.

Unfortunately, as Rachal (1986) argued, the motives of the politicians and Northern missionaries for educating freed slaves resulted in an attempt at “socialization” (p. 455). As noted above, elite Southerners had heretofore resisted efforts to expand educational efforts in the South because they feared a threat to their social order. Comparable to Graff’s (1979) observations in his study of literacy in nineteenth-century Canada, Street (1984) explained:

‘Il]literates’ were conceived as dangerous to the social order, as alien to the dominant culture, inferior and bound up in a culture of poverty. As such they represented a threat to the established order and the effort to increase literacy rates was a political move to maintain the position of the ruling group. However, the teaching of literacy involved contradictions. The potentialities of reading and writing for an under-class could well, they feared, be radical and inflammatory, so the framework for the teaching of literacy had to be severely controlled, and only those consequences of its acquisitions that the ruling class were concerned with were to be allowed. This involved specific forms of control of the pedagogic process and specific ideological associations of the literacy being purveyed. (p. 105).

The curriculum and operation of the Freedmen’s Schools was, therefore, strictly monitored and controlled.

The teachers’ monthly reports focused primarily on attendance, skills such as reading “proficiency” and the ability to do mental math, and “whether or not mulatto students excelled over other freedmen” (which was a resounding, “No”) (p. 464). Further, after the war ended, a series of textbooks was published specifically for educating freed slaves in order to “teach[] adults to read, but at the same time impart[] to their minds in an easy, comprehensible and attractive form that particular information on their duties and rights, and their relation to the white race” (Swint, 1967, p. 87-88, as cited in Rachal, 1986, p. 466). “It is notable, for instance, that moral training and affective learning took precedence over
intellectual education. Educators agreed that literacy was important, but the inculcation of attitudes and behavior patterns was the desired end” (Butchart, 1980, p. 155, as cited in Rachal, 1986, p. 466).

The first adult education programs that had been funded by the federal government were the Freedmen’s Schools, and accordingly, the government officials responsible for administering the programs determined the goals on behalf of the students, a signature characteristic of the autonomous model of literacy. Government mandates regarding curricula for freed slaves came across in their directives to teachers as well as through learning materials tailored to bring about specific social outcomes.

Not all schools for former slaves were federally funded. As Chisman (2002) touted, “The freedmen themselves took most of the initiative for creating black schools” (p. 3). Most of these schools were informally structured. Classes gathered in churches or in people’s homes. Teachers were often found within the community, as any literate person was considered qualified to teach. As the movement grew, black communities came together to build special school buildings to serve their educational purposes, and they also hired teachers from outside of their communities. When they took matters into their own hands, they were able to find their own learning materials and determine their own educational goals. As Anderson (1988) noted, “The foundation of the freedmen’s educational movement was their self-reliance and deep-seated desire to control and sustain schools for themselves and their children” (p. 5). They accepted the support of the Freedmen’s Bureau, but their primary means of education remained locally controlled and organized.

Eventually, the schools that had been established by the government lost momentum. As early as 1865, many of the Northern philanthropists began to pull their money out of the South, assuming that their work was done with the de jure abolition of
slavery. According to Rachal (1986), the “novelty” had just worn off for many of the teachers, and so they returned to the North (p. 468).

Rachal (1986) also noted that some reports of the time blamed the declining support for Freedmen's Schools on the freedmen themselves whom they claimed were just not as interested anymore. Northern missionaries felt that the former slaves were ungrateful and did not care as much about their education. On the contrary, former slaves cared so much that they resisted the continued dominance of outsiders and took control of their own education. They developed their own version of literacy education “on their own turf and on their own terms” by establishing their own schools with their own programs of instruction based on self-determined goals.

The goals of the government-run schools did not align with ex-slaves’ expectations of education and freedom. Northern whites thought that they could give blacks just enough of the right kind of literacy to make them productive members of society without allowing them to explore the power structures inherent in those literacies. When blacks resisted, whites just brushed them off as apathetic. However, blacks were really pursuing literacy education according to their own ideologies “rooted deeply within their own communal values” and refused to accept the autonomous model they were being fed in the Freedmen’s Schools established by the government and Northern missionaries (Anderson, 1988, p. 9).

Ultimately, the community-based schools were left to fend for themselves, with minimal support from national organizations, such as the NAACP. Not until 50 years later, with the onset of the Southern literacy campaigns in the early 20th century, would attention return to the rampant illiteracy in the South and the under-education of black Americans (Chisman, 2002).
Industrialization, Urbanization, Immigration, and Adult Education

Although the public and private funding for Freedmen’s Schools eventually dried up, another need for adult education quickly replaced it in the late 19th century. The United States was experiencing increasing numbers of immigrants, particularly those from non-English-speaking countries. Similar to the freed slaves only a few decades earlier, immigrants also needed to be integrated into American society and, like today, integration often began with language education and learning how to navigate American culture. In order to address the educational needs of the immigrants, a new movement evolved—the Settlement Movement—to which private donors in the North turned their funding.

In the late 19th century, industrialization fed large scale urbanization in Northern cities. Large corporations had sprung up across the North, and the promise of jobs brought low-skilled workers, particularly Eastern European and Irish immigrants, into the cities looking for factory work. Because immigrants did not speak English, had limited non-agricultural work experience, lacked social and political power, and had little understanding of American life generally, corporate employers were able to maintain low wages with no benefits and require long hours. Industrialization in America, therefore, resulted in overcrowded cities and widespread urban poverty. The extensive poverty and associated social problems inspired college-educated, socially-conscious Americans to establish “settlement houses” across the United States, most of which were concentrated in thriving industrial cities of New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Chicago (Addams, 1910; Hargrove, 1993; Husock, 1992).

The British Settlement Movement that began in 1884 arrived in the United States with New York’s University Settlement in 1886. However, the largest and most well-known settlement effort began in 1889 when Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr opened the Hull-
House in Chicago, also inspired by the settlements they had visited in England. Settlement houses were established to provide social and educational services to neighborhood residents. Middle class, college-educated volunteers would “settle” in poor, urban neighborhoods, and open these houses to the community in order “to assist the poor and to bind the social classes in a common purpose” (Husock, 1992, p. 56). As Jane Addams explained in an 1892 address:

The Settlement, then, is an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city. It insists that these problems are not confined to any one portion of a city. It is an attempt to relieve, at the same time, the over-accumulation at one end of society and the destitution at the other. (as cited in Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2002, p. 6).

Settlements’ services, therefore, relied principally on the goodwill of both resident and non-resident volunteers as well as private donations; government provided no funding.

Settlement houses provided a range of services in an effort to remedy social ills. They served as “community living rooms” where neighborhood residents could turn for recreation, health issues, shelter, food, and education (Husock, 1992, p. 55). Settlement residents offered services for all ages, from recreational activities for the very young to educational endeavors for the very mature, as well as a variety of intergenerational pursuits aimed at bridging generational divides, particularly among immigrant families (Addams, 1910).

Addams’ implementation of educational programming changed over the years she spent in Hull-House. In her memoir, Twenty Years at Hull House (1910), she admitted that initially, the settlement residents encouraged rather lofty educational ventures, believing that they should provide access to academic knowledge and invite college professors to lecture from various disciplines. They established reading groups that explored classical literature and connected with local colleges and universities to create one of the first extension
programs. This first attempt at education in the settlement was autonomous in nature in that it presumed that one type of knowledge—specifically, academic knowledge—carried the most value. Later, though, Addams developed a more Deweyan, ideological, approach to education, especially for adults.

While they never wholly abandoned the cultural literacy approach to education, “the residents of Hull-House [felt] increasingly that the educational efforts of a Settlement should not be directed primarily to reproduce the college type of culture, but to work out a method and an ideal adapted to the immediate situation” (p. 300). Being well-acquainted with Dewey and his thoughts on experiential education, therefore, Jane Addams endeavored to provide educational opportunities that both utilized the existing skills and experience of community members and imparted to them new ones that would prove “immediately available” (Addams, 1910, p. 301). These included English language education, cooking, sewing, hatmaking, woodworking, tinsmithing, photography, telegraphy, and electrical construction. Addams called this approach “socialized education” (p. 294).

Addams’ “socialized education,” an ideological model that addressed cultural and power structures in society, not only served the immediate needs of community members, but also helped to empower the poor, the oppressed, and the foreign-born. The settlement’s educational efforts consistently reflected the needs of learners, as determined and requested by the learners themselves. Addams explained that her teaching method always stemmed from the students’ own problems. The best method of teaching the poor, she explained, “is to discuss their own problems with them. In order to do this the teachers must themselves acquire an understanding of those problems… a shared interest that is genuine is the best possible thing to use as the basis for discussions in a study class” (Addams, 1930, p. 206).
By taking genuine interest in their problems, Addams and other settlement residents not only served as social workers, but as advocates for the poor.

Historians of the movement have emphasized its contribution to Progressive-era and New Deal reforms, ranging from the organizing rights of labor, child-labor legislation, improved factory conditions, welfare ‘pensions’ for single mothers, so-called model tenements and, ultimately, public housing. Settlements not only were effective advocates of such efforts but pioneered the systematic investigation of the conditions of the poor. (Husock, 1992, p. 55)

By remaining learner-centered and community-based, the settlement houses, therefore, effected far greater changes through adult education than only providing skills that would be “immediately available.” Together, settlement residents and community members brought about large-scale change that improved life and work circumstances for all United States citizens for years to come. Without government interference, they were free to endorse an ideological model that sought to both explore and alter the power relations prevalent in U.S. society.

Similar to lyceums, settlement houses provided adult learners with an array of learning experiences. As most of the neighborhood residents were non-English-speaking immigrants, English language and literacy education was at the forefront of their goals. However, in addition to “basic” language education, the settlements engaged in critical reading, writing, and speaking. Learning was socially situated, and both the settlement residents and the community members learned from one another in order to develop a critical awareness of the social structures that oppressed people. By establishing book clubs and inviting lecturers on various subjects, settlement education mixed oral and written literacy practices, constantly relating them to the wider issues in society. Perhaps most importantly, settlement residents and community members alike learned to value themselves and each other through the knowledge that they both contributed and gained through the settlement experience.
Until the turn of the 20th century, American adults were free to determine their own educational needs. Through individual and community-based initiatives, adults received education and training to suit their own goals. Even when an educated elite facilitated educational endeavors, as evidenced in the settlement movements and Freedmen’s Schools, the programs survived only if the educational goals were situated in the problems of the learners’ lives, not problems perceived and solutions imposed by outsiders. The settlements succeeded by joining the cause, recognizing that the lives of the community members and the settlement residents were bound together in the effort to improve social conditions. The Freedmen’s Schools failed because their leaders’ objectives did not align with those of the learners themselves, who instead took it upon themselves to establish their own schools for literacy instruction. Supported by learner-centered literacy programs, American adults were free to make their own decisions about the world they lived in and determine their own place in it until the 1900s.
Chapter 3. Out of Their Hands: Adult Illiteracy Is Swept up by Social Forces, 1910-1930

“Until the late nineteenth century, literacy had been important for religious understanding, economic mobility, and community membership as well as for being a social virtue in itself. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, illiteracy came to be regarded as a social problem” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 203). Literacy education for adults in the 20th century was no longer determined by individuals to serve their own purposes. The emerging industrial and technological society depended on reading and writing abilities of its workers. Due to this need, both government and business took interest in increasing adult literacy. Their involvement wrested programming from the hands of communities and individuals and resulted in a shift toward autonomous models of literacy instruction for adults guided not by individuals’ learning objectives but, instead, by the economic goals handed down to them from policymakers and business leaders.

The Progressive Era: Adult Illiteracy Arrives on the National Scene

The settlement movement was at the forefront of the Progressive Era in the United States, yet settlement houses were just one of many responses to the perceived problems resulting from industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and migration. The Progressive Era was a period of reform, led mostly by members of the middle class, who sought to achieve a wide range of political, economic, and social improvements. During this period, efforts were made by journalists to expose all forms of corruption in government, and social
movements aimed to remedy social ills by alleviating poverty and empowering citizens. However, with the imminence of war in the 1910s, very few movements resembled the settlements’ critical nature. Instead, in an effort to promote patriotism and national loyalty, many Progressives latched onto the ideology of “Americanism,” which resulted in vast Americanization efforts in order to strengthen national identity and prepare for war. “In the Americanism era,” wrote Stubblefield and Keane (1994), “adult education became an instrument of national purpose, an agency for character building, cultural conformity, and opinion formation” (p. 180).

Large influxes of non-English-speaking immigrants—Germans, Italians, Chinese, Eastern Europeans, Mexicans—continued to arrive in the United States. They came for a “better life” and to pursue the “American Dream,” but finding employment was difficult for those who did not speak English. The U.S. economy depended on low-skilled laborers during industrialization. However, even if immigrants worked in low-skilled mining or manufacturing jobs, employers still struggled with communication in the workplace. Consequently, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs sprang up all over the country to teach adult immigrants basic skills; some were community-based like the settlement houses, but others were government-supported, from the bully pulpit, if not financially.

Leaders of the settlement movement were not alone in their efforts to assist newly arrived immigrants. Major manufacturers, who relied on immigrants to work in their factories, also jumped on the adult basic skills and literacy education bandwagon. Ford Motor Company pioneered perhaps the first and certainly the most widely recognized workplace literacy and training programs, which public officials openly supported in their efforts to “civilize” both newly arrived immigrants and African Americans who had begun migrating to the Northern urban-industrial areas. The Committee for Immigrants in
America, started in 1914, and the National Americanization Committee, started in 1915, “urged that industrial welfare programs include an Americanization emphasis and require attendance at educational programs” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 183). As a result, many companies adopted workplace literacy educational programs in an effort to assimilate immigrants and secure a national identity.

Then, with the arrival of World War I, attention to adult literacy became more than a concern for the “under-classes.” Soldiers were enlisting in the armed forces, and the government was eventually forced to recognize that English reading and writing skills were low throughout the United States. As a result, several adult literacy initiatives came about in the early part of the 20th century. As Rachal (1986) noted,

Nationally, the entrance of the United States into World War I forced the Federal Government to recognize the adult illiteracy problem in the form of the illiterate soldier, while during the same period, 1915-1919, the Federal Bureau of Education provided considerable leadership for immigrant education programs. A 1921 act provided for adult education on Indian reservations, including basic education and modern living skills. The Sterling-Reed bill of 1924 directly faced the issue of adult illiteracy, but it was not passed (p. 453-454).

In addition, during this period, southern literacy campaigns became popular in several Southern states between 1910 and 1935, and the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) was formally established in Cleveland, Ohio in 1926.

**Workplace Literacy and Americanization**

In the early 20th century, adult education began to move out of the hands of the community and into the workplace. Similar to Jane Addams, Henry Ford sought to improve the basic skills and living conditions of newly arrived immigrants who worked in his factory. Ford believed that his language and citizenship education programs provided workers with greater opportunities for freedom and empowerment (Loizides, 2007). However, unlike Jane
Addams and other settlement leaders, Ford’s actions were not unselfish; he also desired a more skilled workforce. According to Loizides (2007), “[T]he efficiency of immigrant labor regarding industrial work was deemed wanting by a management that was increasingly conscious of the importance of on and off the job behavior of the employee in industrial production” (p. 115). Ford manager John R. Lee noted that

[W]e began to realize something of the relative value of men, mechanism, and manufacturing, so to speak, and we confess that up to this time we believed that somehow or other the human element of our men were taken care of automatically and needed little or no consideration. (as cited in Meyer, 1980, p. 69).

Eventually, however, they realized that well-oiled machines required well-oiled human operators to maximize productivity and efficiency in the workplace.

High rates of absenteeism and employee turn-over prompted Ford to establish the Sociological Department, which oversaw the Ford English School and other training programs. Ford wanted English-speaking employees with a strong “work ethic.” Many immigrants arrived from pre-industrial nations and needed to learn to be “good workers,” rather than good artisans and farmers. In short, the Ford workplace education programs attempted to teach workers the “American work ethic,” which was devised by the middle class for the working class. The Ford School was viewed by its managers as a factory for human products; they churned out men who spoke and behaved according to the norms imposed upon them in school (Meyer, 1980). Thus, Ford Motor Company established the first workplace literacy programs devised for producing model employees. “[T]hey trained them, not only in language, but also in obedience, and generally in both personal and work habits” (Loizides, 2007, p. 120).

Ford’s school supported an autonomous model of literacy. He believed that imparting English language skills to his workers would have emancipatory results for them. Just by reading, writing, and speaking the dominant language, they would be lifted out of
“savagery” and be empowered in greater society. However, in doing so, he also stripped them of their own cultural heritage. In order to participate in the profit-sharing plan and Ford’s “Five Dollar Day,” workers were compelled to leave their “ethnic enclaves,” where Ford said they were being taken advantage of by slumlords, and “settle in ‘good middle-class’ neighborhoods in Dearborn, under the guidance of ‘honest’ real-estate agents (Ford Motor Company affiliated of course)” (Loizides, 2007, p. 119). They also had to develop “American” attitudes and learn about American customs. Meyer (1980) called this an experiment in “welfare capitalism” in which employees had to play by the rules and “alter their attitudes and habits” in order to earn their pay (p. 69). “On the one hand, it attempted to assist the worker and to elevate him to a better standard of life. On the other hand, it sought to manipulate or to coerce the worker to match a preconceived ideal of that better life” (Meyer, 1980, p. 70). Rather than overcoming the supposed oppression of their previous landlords, Ford’s workers merely traded one oppressor for another.

Regardless of whether they spoke English and adopted “middle class values,” immigrant and African American workers continued to be looked upon as inferior. The Ford training programs attempted to “civilize” the workers only so that they would develop a strong work ethic and be more productive employees (Loizides, 2007; Meyer, 1980). Unlike the settlement houses, no effort was made by Ford Motor Company to draw attention to the unequal power structures that plagued society and the workplace.

By employing an autonomous model of literacy instruction to maintain social control over Ford employees, the Ford training programs eventually failed. Meyer (1980) explained that the Ford “human engineering project” proved unsuccessful because no matter how hard the management tried to instill one set of cultural values, the workers themselves still continued to develop their own cultural values, particularly with regard to the industrial
workplace. Conflicts between management and employees erupted, and Ford Motor Company had to accept that manipulation and Americanization could not succeed in creating a “fully malleable workforce.” Instead, employees just learned how to play the “game” in order to earn their five dollars (p. 79). According to Street (2005), this is because “The ‘autonomous’ model is, in fact, always ‘ideological’” (p. 418). Literacy cannot be imparted neutrally; it is always situated within social practices and interactions that cannot be predetermined or imposed, as evidenced by the unintended consequences at the Ford English School.

The Southern Literacy Campaigns, 1910-1935

The 1910 U.S. Census revealed a high rate of illiteracy throughout the South. “For persons ten years-of-age or older, the total southern illiteracy rate stood at 19.2% split between a 9.6% white illiteracy and a 32.1% black illiteracy rate” (Akenson, 1984, p. 2). Many people believed high rates of illiteracy were hindering the economic development of the Southern states. Predominantly a rural, agricultural society, the literacy demands of the South amounted to less than those of the more industrialized North. Thus, leaders of the Southern literacy campaigns believed that raising literacy rates would result in the modernization of the South. (Akenson, 1984; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). Seeing literacy as an autonomous variable that would automatically produce desirable results not just for individuals, but for society at large, led activists to establish programs based on an autonomous understanding of literacy that denied learners control over their own learning.

The Southern literacy campaigns were movements that spread throughout the South to eradicate Southern illiteracy. Special schools were established specifically designed to teach adults the basics of reading and writing. These schools ranged from night schools
attended during the regular school year, schools established in cotton mills for the workers, or intensive programs run during the summer months. In addition to basic reading and writing skills, many of these programs also sought to teach adults about health, agriculture, history, geography, and home economics (Akenson, 1984). The Southern literacy campaign began in one school district in Kentucky and eventually spread to Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Alabama. (Nelms, 1997; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994).

The Southern literacy campaign officially began in 1911 in Rowan County, Kentucky. Cora Wilson Stewart, a superintendent of schools and “a leading Kentucky Progressive” established “Moonlight Schools” in her local school district, specifically designed to provide literacy instruction for adults (Brandt, 2004, p. 491). She kept the local schools open in the evenings and on weekends and enlisted public school teachers to provide reading and writing instruction for local adults. In particular, she sought to separate her literacy movement from the Americanization efforts in the North, arguing that native-born citizens “were more deserving of help” (Brandt, 2004, p. 492).

Stewart embraced the notion of “functional literacy” even before the term was coined twenty years later. “Her pedagogical aim was quick success in the rudiments of reading and writing, based in the functional realities of local life,” so students learned to write their names and personal letters as well as read the newspaper; and “Her political aim was community uplift: by her reckoning, literate citizens were more inclined to support local schools, attend church, and adopt progressive outlooks” (Brandt, 2004, p. 491). With these goals in mind, Stewart’s ideas existed somewhere between the view of literacy as a moral value and literacy as a functional imperative. She believed literacy would make “good” citizens while simultaneously claiming the need for certain forms of literacy deemed necessary to “function” in society. “At times [Cora Stewart] appealed to pure pragmatics,
once calculating how many more postage stamps would be purchased from U.S. post offices if only illiterates were able to write letters” (Brandt, 2004, p. 492). Thus, she also reinforced the popular belief that eradicating adult illiteracy would improve the economy.

To achieve these ends, Cora Wilson Stewart produced her own series of learning materials designed for adult literacy students called *Country Life Readers*. Making no apologies for the messages implied throughout the stories and lessons, Stewart (1916) explained in the first pages that “Thrift is its keynote and progress is its aim” (p. 3). The second book of the *Country Life Readers* was organized by subject, most of which pertained directly to rural life and farm work, but also included sections on hygiene, home science, and the Bible. Of particular note is a section called “Reforms,” which is the most comprehensive list of lessons in the book. “Reforms” included topics such as table manners, paying taxes, parenting advice, how to behave in the presence of the American flag, and the necessity of every house to have a porch. Through reading, copying, and discussing the passages throughout the book, adults were not only expected to learn both basic reading and writing skills but, in addition, those “life skills” deemed necessary for them to become more productive citizens and improve Southern society.

Stewart thus maintained an autonomous model of literacy through the use of her *Country Life Readers*. The *Readers* presumed to know the problems and life circumstances of the adult students. They subscribed to a deficit model of instruction where the students were assumed to be deficient in basic reading, writing, and “life” skills. By incorporating “life skills” messages, such as those aimed to instruct the student on principles of patriotism, hygiene, and manners, Stewart homogenized all adult illiterates into an underclass that presumably lacked these characteristics or skills as a direct result of their illiteracy. “In her public speeches Stewart depicted illiteracy as an infliction, linking it with dwarfed
development and susceptibility to subversive forces” (Brandt, 2004, p. 492). No evidence of Stewart’s Progressive efforts to eradicate adult illiteracy in Kentucky exists to suggest that adult learners had any opportunities to set their own goals for learning.

Stewart’s movement garnered a lot of attention from state governments and the federal government. The federal government, while not opting to provide funding for adult literacy initiatives, nevertheless suggested that Stewart’s model was commendable, and other states should follow suit (Nelms, 1997). Alabama heeded this advice and began the Alabama Illiteracy Commission, a literacy campaign begun at the state-level, designed to reduce adult illiteracy in Alabama.

In 1915, “Governor Henderson… [called] upon ‘every literate man, woman, and youth’ to consecrate himself to the service of the state and, aided by ‘the favorable guidance of Almighty God,’ help[] ‘wipe away the black stain’ of illiteracy; thereby promoting Alabama’s ‘industrial… efficiency’” (Alabama Illiteracy Commission, 1915, as cited in Akenson, 1984, p. 7). Designing adult literacy instruction as a means to achieve “industrial efficiency” indicates that, from the start, an autonomous model of literacy prevailed in the Alabama literacy campaign. Reminiscent of Graff’s (1979) notion of the “literacy myth,” the governor of Alabama suggested that if illiterates were taught to read and write, the economy would improve, “catapult[ing] Alabama into the mainstream of technologically, industrially, commercially, agriculturally efficient America” (Akenson, 1984, p. 7).

In Alabama, they called programs for adult literacy learners “Opportunity Schools.” The name alone implies an autonomous connection between literacy and social progress: Learning to read and write will provide opportunities previously inaccessible to the adult illiterate. According to the Alabama State Department of Education (1919), “If in addition to learning to read and write, and perform operations in arithmetic, a person gains the power to
read a newspaper, a farm journal, and the Bible, and has developed in him health and civic consciousness, he is well on the way toward a normal life” (as cited in Akenson, 1984, p. 8). Illiterates were not considered “normal” American citizens. Illiteracy was viewed as a deficit, something to be fixed to help all adults function “normally” in society.

However, as Akenson (1984) noted, “Adult learners… already lived lives of their own independent of the perceived needs of the educational system” (p. 20). Supposedly, illiterate adults were unable to function in society. But they did, and they do. They just are not functioning in the way that the government has determined would be most beneficial to advancing the greater needs of society. Therefore, an autonomous approach to literacy instruction via a deficit model determined goals from the top-down, removing the individual learners’ goals, needs, and lived experiences from the classroom, making it irrelevant, and likely to fail. And fail it did. According to Akenson (1984), the Alabama literacy campaign’s Opportunity Schools suffered from poor attendance. Then, by the 1930s, what little funding had been available dried up during the Great Depression, virtually ending the Southern literacy campaigns by 1935.

World War I and the Soldier’s First Book

In 1917, the first draft of men aged 21 to 31 took place. Shortly after registration, the U.S. surgeon general announced that 700,000, nearly 25 percent, of the draftees were unable to read or write. This was determined based on the number of men who signed with a mark, as opposed to a signature, which at the time was a prevailing method of determining literacy in the United States (Nelms, 1997). “While many illiterate draftees were European immigrants, including nonspeakers of English, hundreds of thousands were native-born, living in states, counties, or communities where compulsory schooling was laxly regulated”
Upon learning this, Cora Wilson Stewart’s attention turned to the illiterate soldiers in Kentucky. She “forecast terrible dangers if illiterates were sent to fight overseas” (Nelms, 1997, p. 75). Soldiers would be unable to read signs or manuals, nor could they read and respond to letters from home. As a first step, she demanded that all soldiers be taught to read and write before they were sent overseas. Not discouraged when the War Department replied that it would be “impractical to attempt any compulsory instruction” in a time of emergency, Stewart persevered (as cited in Nelms, 1997, p. 76). She recruited volunteer teachers and established Moonlight Schools specifically for Kentucky draftees.

_The Country Reader_ gave way to _The Soldier's First Book_. Readings changed from ‘peaceful lessons on building roads, spraying fruit trees, rotating crops and conserving soil’ into something more ‘martial in tone,’ including information about camp life and, given the unpopularity of the draft, the honor of military service. (Brandt, 2004, p. 493).

Stewart succeeded in gaining the federal government’s attention, and it could no longer ignore the plight of the illiterate soldier.

In July 1918, the War Department established schools to teach English with a four-month compulsory course. “The army adapted the YMCA’s English-language program, adding courses in citizenship, American history, geography, and government… by February 1919, almost twenty-five thousand illiterate and non-English-speaking troops had received training” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 181-182). The YMCA had actually adopted Stewart’s Moonlight School methods, and they used Stewart’s _Country Life Readers_ and _Soldier’s First Book_ in the camp schools (Brandt, 2004; Nelms, 1997).

According to Stewart (1918) in the preface of _Soldier's First Book_,

The object of these books is to afford men in the United States army who are unable to read and write an easy and attractive vehicle for learning and one which will accustom them to the use of printed words and sentences with as little embarrassment and difficulty as possible. (p. 3).
The lessons were based on camp life, and they addressed topics such as the importance of the American flag, following orders, avoiding “dope and smokes,” the necessity of war to preserve freedom, and the embarrassment of being illiterate. Wartime efforts and the increased government involvement in the field of adult literacy, with the help of Cora Wilson Stewart, thus persisted in adherence to a top-down, deficit model of literacy instruction whereby teaching adults to read and write was expected to have lofty consequences for the productivity of both citizens and now soldiers.

Also during World War I, the Bureau of Naturalization, prompted by wartime fear of the foreign-born, announced in 1916 that citizenship training was a matter of national security. The Bureau placed citizenship training under the direction of the public schools. However, the movement never got off the ground. Fewer than two percent of the approximately fourteen million nonnaturalized adult immigrants ever attended the public school night programs (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 183).

On the other hand, “Community and educational agencies,” such as settlement houses, “became prominent and clearly demonstrated their own importance, thus strengthening the institutional base of adult education” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 185). Immigrants clearly must have seen a difference in the methods and instruction when gravitating toward community-based programs instead of government-sanctioned ones. Unfortunately, fear of disloyalty and evidence that many community-based adult literacy programs and settlement houses were socialist-affiliated during the “Red Scare” from 1919 to 1920, some state legislatures, such as in New York, seized control of all adult education programming and curricula (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 186). In such an atmosphere, community-based adult literacy programs and settlement houses struggled to maintain their ideological roots.
Adult illiteracy did not lose momentum after World War I, for fear of the foreign-born continued to intensify. “[T]he same forces which imposed immigration restriction in 1917, 1921, and 1924 encouraged the growth of literacy education and Americanization classes for adults” (Wallace, 1986, p. 27). The movement had gained so much attention that, in 1924, President Coolidge “called illiteracy a threat to the American way of life, associating it with poverty and crime” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 204). As a result of this increasing public awareness and crisis rhetoric, adult education became more widespread and more organized (Wallace, 1986). The New School for Social Research in New York implemented several teacher education courses specifically designed for adult educators (Gist, 1926). National literacy campaigns began, and the first National Illiteracy Conference was held in Washington, DC, in 1924. Then in 1926, the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) was formed in Cleveland, Ohio.

Leaders of the adult education movement recognized that all over the country, adult basic skills and literacy education was already taking place in “small spontaneously formed study groups, in workers’ classes, in institutes and forums, or in university-extension classes throughout the country, [in which] men and women were occupied in studying in their leisure hour” (Gist, 1926, p. 244). Therefore, they gathered together in order to form a national organization for organizing adult education efforts. In forming the AAAE, leaders of the adult education movement expressed the belief that an organization which sought not to centralize, standardize, or impose uniformity but to serve as a clearing-house of information and ideas, a center of discussion, and a repository of the records and practices of the profession would further the idea of adult education and give assistance to adult educators and students. (Gist, 1926, p. 245).
The AAAE, therefore, was not attempting to regulate education. Its leaders did not want to detract from the existing methods and administration that had already proven successful in various programs throughout the country. Rather, they wanted to provide mutual support for each other in both existing and future endeavors. Thus, the AAAE did not endorse the autonomous model of literacy guided by top-down policies that was becoming increasingly popular as a result of Cora Wilson Stewart’s adult illiteracy crusades.

Though invited to the conferences which led to the establishment of the AAAE, Cora Wilson Stewart refused to attend. Her mission did not align with that of the AAAE’s founding members, who believed that adult education should be “pointed less toward righting an educational wrong, less toward securing for the underprivileged that which has been withheld, and more toward providing an ideal of continuing education throughout life for all types of adult individuals” (Nelms, 1997, p. 144). Stewart, however, believed these (ideological) goals would diminish attention to the illiteracy crisis, a crisis which she believed more rightly placed in the hands of a State Literacy Commission, not the adult educators themselves (Nelms, 1997). Stewart thus persevered in her autonomous understanding of the benefits of literacy whereas other prominent adult educators attempted to proffer a more ideological model for adult basic skills and literacy education. In the long run, unfortunately, Stewart’s perseverance helped her model to prevail.

Regardless of this increased attention and the first National Illiteracy Crusade that began in the 1920s, the federal government still did not support the movement financially. Therefore, without any resources and the apparently clashing goals of the movement’s leaders, these efforts “served only to create public awareness,” not public nor governmental support, until the onset of the Great Depression (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 204).

The increasing awareness of adult illiteracy finally drove federal agencies to take action. In order to make adult illiteracy a national priority, and to be able to “sell” it to constituents, policymakers adopted a rationale that raising literacy rates would benefit all of society—echoing the claims of prominent adult literacy educator and activist Cora Wilson Stewart. As a result, “functional literacy” was born in the 1930s and refined throughout the subsequent four decades. By the onset of World War II, the military would only enlist citizens who had obtained at least a fourth grade education. In 1947, the Census raised “functional literacy” to the fifth grade level, and then again in 1952 to the sixth grade (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). “By 1960, the U.S. Office of Education was using eighth grade as the standard. Finally, by the late 1970s, some noted authorities were describing functional literacy in terms of high school completion” (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987, p. 23).

While the federal government did take interest and initiative in establishing adult literacy education programs, “it was not until 1964 that legislation was enacted which directly and substantially funded literacy education” (Rachal, 1986, p. 454). The period of 1930 to 1970 marks a time in which “functional literacy” gained momentum: It began with the unemployed masses during the Great Depression and evolved to include soldiers during World War II until all citizens finally became its prey during Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty in the 1960s. As “functional literacy” evolved and eventually prevailed as the literacy bar for all Americans, adult literacy became increasingly associated with work and the
The Great Depression: A New Deal for Adult Illiterates

By the onset of the Great Depression, the need for adult basic skills and literacy education had moved into the public consciousness. However, not until the federal government stepped in to create jobs to ameliorate the skyrocketing unemployment rates did federal agencies finally attempt to regulate and administer adult literacy initiatives. The New Deal established two primary vehicles for educating adults: the Emergency Education Program and the Civilian Conservation Corps. And they had two primary motives for doing so: “to while away the boredom, and to acquire and improve skills for a constantly more critical labor market” (Hopkins, 1936, p. 113). When people are bored, they are more likely to engage in illicit activities, and because the labor market was changing to require higher levels of education, the government believed it could kill two birds with one stone.

The New Deal Emergency Education Program for adults provided a variety of learning opportunities for Americans who “did not generally participate in systematic learning experiences” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 231). Similar to the activities of the lyceums in the early 19th century, the Emergency Education Program offered a variety of educational opportunities. Programs were grouped into ten major categories: (1) general adult education, (2) literacy and naturalization classes, (3) avocational and leisure-time activities, (4) vocational education, (5) nursery schools, (6) homemaking education, (7) parent education, (8) public affairs education, (9) workers’ education, and (10) correspondence
instruction. Literacy and naturalization classes consistently ranked second in terms of demand, with anywhere from 18 to 25 percent of enrollees requesting such services from 1933 to 1943 (Campbell, Bair, & Harvey, 1939; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). “Under the FERA [Federal Emergency Relief Administration] and more fully developed under WPA [Works Progress Administration] they [adult literacy programs] have been given government sponsorship for the first time in American history” (Hopkins, 1936, p. 172).

Harry Hopkins (1936), administrator and creator of the Emergency Education Division, explained the rationale for adult literacy programs during the Great Depression:

In a world conducted by the written sign, whether the sign is on a mile post, a bill of lading, or in a newspaper, it is hard to imagine the handicap under which a man must labor if he cannot read or write. He feels his exclusion even more if he has children in school, because his pride is involved. Over 250,000 grown men and women are taking this hurdle in literacy classes under teachers hired by WPA. In only one sense are literacy classes at the bottom of the educational program; they are the first means to an end. (Hopkins, 1936, p. 171).

Like Cora Wilson Stewart and others, Hopkins viewed illiteracy as a deficit and social evil. Stubblefield and Keane (1994) described Hopkins’ goals as a project in “social engineering,” much like that of Henry Ford two decades earlier (p. 230).

Hopkins (1936) “wanted to reduce the threats to democracy posed by the poor and foreign-born and native-born illiterates whom he believed were open to radical influences from abroad and were easy prey to propaganda” (p. 230). With so much extra time on their hands as a result of unemployment and shortened work weeks, Hopkins worried that poor illiterates would not make constructive use of their time. Thus, “To preserve democracy, citizens needed… ‘language literacy’ and ‘social literacy’” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 230). Through the Emergency Education Programs, particularly literacy, naturalization, and workers’ education, adults would gain the skills and training needed “to fit them to take their part as self-supporting citizens” (Campbell, Bair, & Harvey, 1939, p. 7).
In 1935, the U.S. Office of Education estimated that approximately 3,700,000 adults in the United States were “unable to read or write in any language,” and approximately 15,000,000 were “functionally illiterate in the sense that ‘they cannot use written or printed speech as an instrument for business or learning’” (Campbell, Bair, & Harvey, 1939, p. 66). At this time, literacy levels were determined by asking individuals whether they were able “to read and to write a simple message either in English or any other language” (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987, p. 11). Thus, whether or not an individual was “literate” remained self-determined until the 1930s.

However, the notion of “functional literacy” arose to complicate this understanding. “Functional literacy” was determined based on grade-level completion—third grade—thus, “functional literacy” relied on one’s ability to perform tasks—specific tasks—in English. According to a U.S. Office of Education Bulletin in 1935, the objectives of literacy education in the Emergency Education Program were to provide “classes for adults unable to read and write English with sufficient facility to be able to read a newspaper with understanding and to write an intelligible letter” (as cited in Campbell, Bair, & Harvey, 1939, p. 65). Thus, to demonstrate “functional literacy” without a third grade education, people had to demonstrate an ability to perform specific literacy practices deemed essential to “function” in U.S. society.

Campbell, Bair, and Harvey (1939) noted that the national entrance onto the scene of adult literacy education enabled the movement to spread throughout more states. Also, not only did programs reach more people, but because of the initiatives begun in earlier decades, leading adult literacy educators were influential in recommending “progressive methods,” such as relating the subject matter of classes to the daily lives of students (p. 66). However, Campbell, Bair, and Harvey (1939) also noted that materials for instruction had been
“successfully” developed by leading educators—such as those by Cora Wilson Stewart described above—in order to instruct adults at the elementary level in topics of interest to them. These materials were presumably sensitive to the adult illiterate’s pride because they were less demeaning (p. 68). As noted earlier, however, while these materials may have entertained adult topics, they were not always related to the subject matter of students’ lives. Truly using topics of interest and relevance to the students’ daily lives would have established ideological models of adult literacy instruction. Because adult literacy students were spoon-fed literacy practices chosen for them by a distant authority—via pre-fabricated instructional materials—autonomous models of literacy instruction for adults prevailed in the Emergency Education Program.

Although Calvin Coolidge had been the first president to publicly comment on the “problem” of adult illiteracy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first to make it a national priority. Roosevelt sold the American public on the idea of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) when he said that the CCC would not only “conserve our natural resources and create national wealth,” but would also “prove of moral and spiritual value, not only to those who are taking part, but to the rest of the country as well” (as cited in Hill, 1935, p. 8).

From 1933 to 1942, about 3,000,000 unmarried men between the ages 17 and 28 participated in work experience and training in the CCC. The nature of the work varied: “trail construction; work on reservoirs, dams, springs, roads, wells, telephone lines, and fences; fire protection; rodent, insect, and poisonous plant control” (Barry, 1999, p. 650). The CCC was established to keep single, young, unemployed men busy with “constructive projects” so that they would not “destroy our civilization” (Thrasher, 1936, as cited in Barry, 1999, p. 649). But the CCC found the need to supply more than gainful employment.
According to Barry (1999), “Educational programs were originally implemented because of the unstructured evening time that had begun to be a problem for many officers… Also, many enrollees were interested in acquiring additional knowledge and vocational training to make themselves more employable” (p. 650). Hill (1935) called this a “human problem… with great potentialities for creative action” (p. 8).

The educational needs of enrollees were determined using a combination of standardized tests and interviews. And while educational programming ranged from basic skills through graduate school, a central problem identified by CCC administrators was illiteracy. Illiteracy in the 1930s was defined as an “inability to read a newspaper or write a simple letter” or having fewer than three years of schooling (U.S. Civilian Conservation Corps, 1936, p. 3). Based on these criteria, approximately 22 percent of enrollees read below a fourth-grade level (Barry, 1999, p. 650).

Initial attempts to instruct CCC members were based on an ideological model of literacy. The Handbook for the Educational Advisers in the Civilian Conservation Corps Camps (1934) stated: “There is no program planned outside the camp and imposed from above,” and advised that “The educational activities to be organized in a given camp should be based upon the interests and the problems of the men” (U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Education, 1934, p. 4-5). This educational model is similar to the efforts of Jane Addams and the settlement movement. In addition, the Handbook recommended that instruction should be tailored to meet each individual’s needs and goals and be as practical in nature as possible because “An attempt to regiment the men into classes in which they are not interested or to urge a man to study subjects in which he sees no value would be doomed to failure” (U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Education, 1934, p. 10).
One notable characteristic of this ideological model is the professed aims of the educational activities. According to the *Handbook*, the goals of the CCC literacy program included:

1. To develop in each man his powers of self-expression, self-entertainment, and self-culture;
2. To develop pride and satisfaction in cooperative endeavor;
3. To develop as far as practicable an understanding of the prevailing social and economic conditions, to the end that each man may cooperate intelligently in improving these conditions;
4. To preserve and strengthen good habits of health and of mental development.


Ideological models of literacy typically recognize that the power structures that exist in society often prevent marginalized groups from developing the skills and abilities valued by mainstream culture. They acknowledge that marginalized groups often develop their own literacy practices valued in their own social contexts. In this way, they are not deficit models; the phrase “preserve and strengthen” intimates that these qualities already exist and will be built upon, rather than they must be imparted where deficits exist.

In addition, the *Handbook* advised that camp education leaders should not depend on standardized testing to determine the educational needs of enrollees. “In all cases tests should be used only to supplement information obtained through personal interviews” (p. 9). Through interviews, educational advisers could determine level of educational attainment as well as the interests and problems of the men. Testing, such as elementary and high school batteries, was suggested only as a supplement if needed to determine specific strengths and weaknesses in a given subject area that an enrollee may require to move in a particular vocational direction. The preparers of the *Handbook* thus recognized that a standardized test was only a narrow measurement of a person’s actual literacy abilities—another characteristic of ideological models of literacy.
For instruction, the Handbook recommended “group conferences or group supervised study”:

The conference method is especially well adapted for use in educational situations where constructive thinking, development of judgment, and the formation of independent conclusions are desired. It is of little use in those cases where the only purpose is to teach a definite procedure or where specific and fixed information is to be conveyed… It differs from the ordinary organized class procedure in a number of ways, the chief one being that the members of the group learn largely from each other rather than from teachers or from text material (p. 14).

The Handbook explained that a textbook would not be provided for instruction because instruction would vary from camp to camp depending on the unique needs, wishes, and problems of the men in each location. Suggested teaching materials included magazines, books from the local libraries, camp leaflets and manuals, films, and radio broadcasts. Including such a large repertoire of “texts” in camp instruction, rather than limiting instruction to a set curriculum or workbook, indicates that the preparers of the Handbook recognized and valued multiple literacies used for a variety of purposes in a variety of social contexts—an important characteristic of ideological models of literacy.

In 1936, however, another document about education in the CCC camps was prepared by the Director of CCC Camp Education, Howard Oxley. In his report, Oxley explained that “The objectives of the program have become clearer and more practical” (p. 1). These goals were presented differently than in the first Handbook and included:

(1) to eliminate illiteracy; (2) to raise the level of enrollees deficient in school subjects; (3) to provide instruction on camp work jobs and projects; (4) to provide vocational training; (5) to provide training in constructive and worthwhile use of leisure time; (6) to provide cultural and general education; (7) to provide training in health, first aid, and safety; (8) to provide character and citizenship training; and (9) to assist enrollees in finding employment. (Oxley, 1936, p. 3).

Oxley (1936) still professed that the camps’ educational activities supported individual learners’ needs and interests.
However, the language choices and tone of the later document clearly demonstrated a shift toward an autonomous model. According to Oxley (1936),

The first rung of the ladder is the elimination of illiteracy. Out of 350,000 men enrolled in the Corps, over 10,000 cannot read a newspaper or write a simple letter. By the same tests, thousands of other enrollees who state they have had one or more years of schooling are functionally illiterate… The second rung of the ladder is the removal of deficiencies in common school subjects. Enrollees, because of pride, frequently overstate the amount of schooling which they have had. Of the 393,000 men in camp during February, 1936, there were many who were seriously handicapped in ability to read, write, calculate or to express themselves clearly. (p. 5).

The words “deficiencies” and “handicapped” indicate that the CCC literacy program, under Oxley’s direction, had shifted toward a deficit model, which is a defining characteristic of an autonomous model of literacy. Deficit models assume that learners are lacking skills, as opposed to ideological models that assume learners already possess certain skills that can be built upon, expanded, or added to. In addition, the term “functionally illiterate” and the fact that they had begun to give the enrollees literacy “tests” regularly demonstrates that the program now broke literacy down into measurable “skills” that were arranged according to a hierarchy of levels, which is another characteristic of autonomous models.

Following Oxley’s publication, the U.S Department of the Interior Office of Education, who had authored the initial Handbook, likewise moved towards an autonomous model of literacy with the creation of a workbook series for teaching reading and writing to the CCC enrollees. They published four workbooks at varying levels of difficulty. In addition, advisers used standardized test scores to group students into appropriate levels. Barry (1999) noted that the use of the workbooks for instruction was a “top-down” approach to instruction, another characteristic of autonomous models. They used skill-and-drill instruction of vocabulary and grammar and also included a “hidden curriculum” that sought to instill particular social and cultural values in the learners.
For example, in *Camp Life Reader and Workbook 1*, in addition to learning about the use of capital letters and end punctuation, the reading passages addressed topics such as courtesy, appearance, obedience, and effective use of one’s time (U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Education, 1939). As a result of these shifting objectives and delivery of instruction, Barry (1999) observed that

functional literacy (e.g. filling out job forms or insurance claims) and cultural literacy (the ‘canonical knowledge’ that literate people share) were sanctioned; critical literacy (literacy skills that allow one to consider unfair treatment on the job or limited access to social services) was not (p. 653).

So while the literacy programs ultimately designed by the CCC remained practical and related to the enrollees’ real life goals and interests, they also became a form of social control.

Men were encouraged to advance in their knowledge of trades so that they could gain employment. However, they were not invited, as put forth in the first *Handbook*, “To develop as far as practicable an understanding of the prevailing social and economic conditions, to the end that each man may cooperate intelligently in improving these conditions” (U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Education, 1934, p. 3). Instead, they were given only the tools necessary to function within the prevailing social and economic conditions, with no aim to necessarily improve them.

*World War II and the GED: Developing Manpower with Literacy Training*

By 1940, “the nation had seen more and better-enforced compulsory education laws, dwindling agriculture, and rapidly increasing educational levels” (Brandt, 2004, p. 495). Illiteracy, therefore, was not really considered as problematic because total illiteracy was not as common. The 1940 Census revealed, however, that 13.5 percent of the population ages 25 and older had completed fewer than five years of schooling, and “functional illiterates” outnumbered college graduates four-to-one (Goldberg, 1951).
Historians often mention World War II as a time when expectations for schooling and literacy really took off—when what was considered an adequate level of education moved from fourth grade to twelfth grade in a matter of a few years. The conduct of modern war certainly would explain the rise. Fighting became less about muscle power and more about advantages of superior knowledge and speedy communication. (Brandt, 2004, p. 485).

Whereas “functional literacy” had previously been defined as having at least three years of education, advances in technology and communication used by the military raised the bar during the 1940s; a third-grade education no longer sufficed. And the evolving standards of the U.S. military eventually became the standards for U.S. civilians as well.

According to a General Accounting Office report on military recruits, “poor readers, when compared to the normal recruit population, tended to (1) have higher discharge rates, (2) experience more difficulty in training, (3) perform less satisfactorily on the job, and (4) lack the potential for career advancement” (Kime & Anderson, 2000, p. 468). Because of these patterns, at the start of World War II, the military viewed functional illiterates as a liability and deferred them from military service. “During the first World War, development battalions were eventually organized to provide adequate training and suitable assignments for physically unfit, non-English-speaking, illiterate, and otherwise handicapped personnel” (Goldberg, 1951, p. 8). However, during World War II, the number of “suitable assignments” was severely limited due to the increasing technological advancements and the level of skill required to fulfill related duties.

Functionally illiterate men [those lacking a fourth-grade education] could not be expected to serve adequately in a modern army in which sixty-three of every hundred men inducted were assigned to duties requiring specialized training and in which the basic ability to read and write was a prerequisite to any except the lowest type of labor. (Goldberg, 1951, p. 11).

For the first draft from 1940 to 1942, therefore, the Army deferred all illiterate draftees.

By August 1942, the military could no longer deny the need for manpower, and the 433,000 illiterate registrants could no longer be left behind. With the aid of existing
organizations, such as the WPA and Moonlight Schools, and private funding for scholarships, states began to mobilize and recruit illiterate registrants into literacy programs. Because the WPA was scheduled to be liquidated in January 1943, the U.S. Office of Education solicited a grant from the Bureau of the Budget for “Literacy Education for Manpower Mobilization” (Goldberg, 1951). Their justification for the federal funds for adult literacy instruction had nothing to do with the illiterate men themselves. Instead, the rationale proffered was that “illiteracy was cutting down our military manpower, sabotaging our war industries, retarding our ‘food for victory’ program, and having a deleterious effect generally upon wartime morale” (Goldberg, 1951, p. 18). Literacy instruction for adults, therefore, would benefit greater society, with no mention of (or apparent concern for) its benefits for individuals.

Materials developed by the WPA and the CCC were used initially in the Army literacy training program, until the War Department eventually developed its own text, *Army Life*. “Situations of Army life were taken as a background for the presentation of subject matter. Words and phrases in everyday Army use were presented in the text” (Goldberg, 1951, p. 86). Each unit, with titles such as “My Home,” “My Family,” “An Army Camp,” and “Mess Tables,” “was illustrated by a picture, and contained drill exercises in which the man was required to write the new words and sentences learned” (p. 86). During the subsequent two years, the War Department also developed *Soldier’s Reader* and *Army Reader*. The *Army Reader*, which became the official text for literacy instruction in June 1943, was divided into four sections, each of which aligned approximately with the first four grades of elementary school. This leveling came as the result of a recommendation from the *Testing Manual for Measuring Ability in Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic*, which encouraged the use of placement, progress, and achievement tests (Goldberg, 1951).
The learning materials and tests were designed based on an autonomous model of literacy. Developers viewed reading and writing as a hierarchy of discrete skills that could be mastered, allowing a learner to progress through “levels” of literacy. The professed goals included:

1. To increase the vocabulary gradually.
2. To increase the length and complexity of sentences.
3. To increase the length and complexity of paragraphs.
4. To provide variety in methods of presenting phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. (Goldberg, 1951, p. 106).

In addition, they measured progress solely based on test scores. Throughout the life of the Army literacy training program, the Army developed an array of placement, progress, and achievement tests including the Army Illustrated Literacy Test, the Word Meaning Test, the New Stanford Achievement Test, spelling and handwriting scales, and the Progressive Achievement Test. The progress tests were aligned with the content of the different readers, thus demonstrating that only one type of literacy was of value to the military—the literacy they fed to soldiers.

The Army had an autonomous understanding of literacy in that they expected basic reading and writing instruction to produce more capable soldiers. However, Goldberg (1951) noted that “the task of training illiterates was undertaken by the Army not as an educational venture but as an expedient to secure and salvage needed manpower” (p. 3). They imparted only the literacy skills that they believed would produce better soldiers. Unfortunately, because the military established itself as a leader in adult literacy education at this time, many of their methods, including standardized testing, were adopted by civilian society. The General Educational Development (GED) test, created in 1942, evolved “out of the military’s extensive experience in testing.” The United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI) designed the GED “to measure major outcomes and concepts generally associated with four years of high school education” (Kime & Anderson, 2000, p. 468). In its early
stages, the GED was administered only to active-duty servicemen and veterans in order to assist their transition back into civilian life. After obtaining a GED, veterans were better equipped to secure jobs or enter postsecondary institutions. In 1947, the GED was made available to non-military civilians, and by 1959, civilians taking the GED outnumbered veterans (Kime & Anderson, 2000).

World War II and the military’s apparent successes in adult literacy “training” changed the face of adult literacy and basic skills education. The autonomous model of literacy instruction adopted by the military provided both a prototype and a justification for increasing public funds to support this area of education. As Brandt (2004) explained,

> World War II changed the rationale for mass literacy. Literacy was irrevocably transformed from a nineteenth-century moral imperative into a twentieth-century production imperative—transformed from an attribute of a ‘good’ individual into an individual ‘good,’ a resource or raw material vital to national security and global competition. In the process, literacy was turned into something extractable, something measurable, something rentable, and thereby something worthy of rational investment. (p. 485).

Both the federal government and businesses took notice of how effectively adult literacy instruction improved manpower in the military. “Literacy development in the military stood at the forefront of employer recognition that human beings can and must be developed academically to work and live in an increasingly technical world” (Kime & Anderson, 2000, p. 475). This increased recognition produced both positive and negative effects for adult literacy learners in the following decades.

**The 1960s and the War on Poverty: Business Comes to School**

By the 1960s, as the result of a technologically advancing U.S. economy, the federal government had altered the definition of literacy to require ever more schooling. As mentioned earlier, Stedman and Kaestle (1987) explained that, in 1960, “functional literacy”
was defined as sixth grade completion, and not until the late 1970s did authorities establish high school completion as the desired end. Therefore, in 1963, graduating from high school had not yet become the social norm. Many adults continued to succeed financially without a high school diploma.


A million boys and girls, young men and women, each year, make the wrong decision and drop out of school. By doing so, they doom themselves. For these persons will have trouble finding work since they are able to compete only for the dwindling opportunities in unskilled labor. They are the last to be hired, receive the lowest pay, and are the first to be laid off. Frequently, their jobs can be taken over by machines.

Before the end of the decade, 7 ½ million more will be added to the already staggering number of American citizens who are academically and vocationally unprepared for this changing and challenging age. (U.S. Office of Education, 1963, p. 1).

The pamphlet also noted that “The majority of high school dropouts come from families where school attendance and achievement are not considered as having much value” (U.S. Office of Education, 1963, p. 2). However, as educational standards had rapidly increased in just a few decades, previous generations of American families had not required similarly high levels of education in order to succeed.

The publishing of such pamphlets marked one of the first occasions when the goals of public schooling became directly associated with work readiness and financial success. It stated: “Without adequate education, a young man or woman has no access to modern jobs the economy is constantly creating” (p. 3). Businesses also had a stake in this because they wanted better educated employees. As a result, in order to combat the high school dropout problem and help students recognize the economic value of education, the pamphlet described several programs established in cities around the country that invited local
businesses into the realm of education. Schools and businesses developed partnerships so that schools prepared students for work, and students were able to work part-time and earn money as long as they stayed in school. Before this time, businesses did not have a direct hand in the education of America’s children. However, since the Great Depression and compounded by World War II, education became more and more associated with one’s ability to become productive citizens whereas education until that time was much more democratic and morally driven in nature (Brandt, 2004).

According the pamphlet, students left school for a variety of reasons including financial needs or a general lack of interest in the topics of study. Therefore, in order to attract students and compel them to remain in high school, the last page of the pamphlet was an advertisement aimed directly at potential high school dropouts. It read:

High school students, there is real value in staying in school through graduation!
- You will be in a better position to compete for worthwhile, good-paying jobs.
- You will be better suited for promotion, more likely to find another job if you should be laid off for any reason.
- You will be better able to train yourself for that really good job you may decide upon 5 or 25 years from now.

Did you know that—
- The fastest growth of our labor force is that of technical and professional jobs requiring 16 or more years of education.
- Technician and semiprofessional jobs requiring 1, 2, or 3 years of postsecondary school education are the second fastest growing category in our labor force.
- Jobs filled by high school graduates rose 30 percent while jobs for those with no secondary school education decreased 25 percent in the last decade.

And look at your changed earning prospects! On the average, a high school graduate during his working lifetime, beginning at age 18, earns—
- $46,000 more than a high school dropout.
- $76,000 more than a grade school graduate. (U.S. Office of Education, 1963, p. 5).

By associating schooling directly with job prospects, the U.S. Office of Education only recognized one type of literacy, thus this pamphlet’s authors adhered to an autonomous
model of literacy. The mixing of business and schooling supported only a technical version of literacy—one that can be measured and broken down into measurable skills using standardized tests. It was from this environment that the War on Poverty, including the Economic Opportunity Act and Adult Basic Education Program (later renamed the Adult Education Act) was conceived.

As the government became more involved in adult basic and literacy education programming, the nature of the instruction changed. In its beginnings, adult learners determined their own educational needs. However, with increasing attention and more public funding, the “functional literacy” model prevailed (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). If the government—thus, the taxpayers—were going to pay for it, then the students, teachers, and administrators had to produce the desired results of reducing welfare and crime, as well as improving the U.S. economy by producing more employable citizens. Therefore, students, teachers, and administrators in adult literacy programs were now held accountable to the public and the government.

The popular sentiment in the 1960s was: “Unless poverty is reduced, the fiscal resources of the nation will continue to be drained ‘severely and increasingly, by the necessity for growing appropriations for special services for education, welfare, and crime control’” (Parker, 1964, p. 3260). In May 1964, President Johnson attempted to alleviate these fears when he declared that his administration would wage a War on Poverty.

The first major anti-poverty legislation was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. According to President Lyndon Johnson, the goal of the Economic Opportunity Act was “to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this nation by opening to everyone opportunities for education, training, work, and a life of decency and dignity” (as cited in Drennan, Kittel, & Winnick, 1964, p. 3272). The “unifying theme” of the War on
Poverty legislation, according to Drennan (1964), was “the deep belief that education must and will effectively serve to provide equal opportunity. This is a belief deeply ingrained in American ideals” (Drennan, 1964, p. 3241). Education was viewed as the key to ultimately ending poverty. By providing educational opportunities to the impoverished, they could obtain and retain employment. Consequently, Title IIB of the Economic Opportunity Act, which established the Adult Basic Education Program, created Job Corps, the Work-Training Program, and the Work-Study Program—each of which directly connected improving adult literacy and basic skills to work readiness (Drennan, Kittel, & Winnick, 1964).

Since the 1910s, many leading adult educators had been advocating for government funded adult literacy and basic skills education. However, as Halperin (2007) pointed out, “In a Congress long dominated by southern conservatives, ‘adult basic education’ became conflated with efforts by liberals and the growing civil rights movement to teach ‘Negroes’ how to pass the literacy tests created by southern states as effective barriers to the exercise of voting rights” (p. 6). Bills that addressed adult literacy and basic education, therefore, consistently failed in Congress until the issue finally gained attention and backing as part of the War on Poverty (Halperin, 2007). Those who had historically opposed adult literacy and basic skills education due to the fear that social hierarchies would be upset were able to climb on board with the War on Poverty because it was sold to their constituents as a means to improve society and the economy in entirety. In addition, with the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1964,

The power of state literacy tests to thwart voting by blacks would sharply decline, if not entirely disappear. The mood and tactics among southern lawmakers shifted accordingly. As one leading southern senator said in closed caucus, ‘If we are going to have to let ‘them’ vote, we had better be sure they can at least read.’ (Halperin, 2007, p. 7).
The Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program was established as Title IIB under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The rationale for ABE was that “illiteracy was a blight on the land that adversely affected the quality and extent of skilled manpower, increased public welfare costs, and reduced the level of national defense preparedness” (DeSanctis, 1980, p. 246). ABE’s ties to the Economic Opportunity Act—anti-poverty legislation—signal a continuance of the notion of “functional literacy.” That is to say, if one cannot read the newspaper and write a letter to the satisfaction of a standardized test measurement, that individual is unable to “function” in society, so they must be impoverished and unemployable.

The War on Poverty sought to remedy social ills by correcting perceived deficiencies in individuals, rather than problems in the social structures that had created and maintained them. Leaders of the War on Poverty aimed to help “the culturally deprived—those functionally illiterate adults and their children, the high school dropouts, and juvenile delinquents from slum areas—who live in squalor on the fringes of our increasingly affluent society” (Parker, 1964, p. 3260). Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote of the efforts in 1964:

The short-term economic programs in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 are essential of course. Variants of some of the community assistance programs or the Job Corps may have to be with us for some time. But when one looks down the years of a long-range program to eliminate poverty, one finds that education is at the heart of the problem. The hard core of the poverty problem is the self-perpetuating aspect of it. The people who have fallen through the cracks of our affluent society are those, for the most part, who have not had the educational equipment to keep up with job evolution. As they have fallen into being unemployed and unemployable, they have fallen into poverty. In this environment, their children tend to fall behind in educational opportunity and encouragement. The evils of the fathers are visited on the sons, and a vicious cycle is perpetuated… Every assessment of the educational problem in the children of the poor tends to highlight two main difficulties: cultural deprivation, and the inability to use and communicate in standard American English. The cultural deprivation derives from generations of such. The family situations are lacking in conversation, in books, in enriching experiences. The children of the poor enter school behind other children, and the gap widens quickly.
This is a handicap just as severe in its way as that suffered by the blind, the deaf, the crippled… Unless these children learn to read, write, and speak in normal usage, they will remain forever on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. Sargent Shriver, director of the task force on the Poverty Program, has identified many thousands of young people who simply cannot read well enough to fill out a job application. They are not stupid or mentally retarded. They just cannot articulate well enough in the ordinary forms of communication to put themselves forward” (Humphrey, 1964, p. 3243).

Humphrey and his contemporaries viewed the poor as deficient, deprived, and handicapped. They did not recognize that the people these programs were intended for had their own cultural values that differed from the mainstream. Consequently, the ABE legislation was written from a deficit perspective and supported an autonomous model of literacy for adult learners.

The first ABE Program provided funding for adult literacy and basic skills education through the sixth grade level. Title IIB provided grants to states. States then distributed funds to adult literacy service providers, such as evening schools, settlement houses, and other neighborhood organizations. In addition, Title IIB also established Job Corps, the Work-Training Program, and the Work-Study Program.

Job Corps, one of the largest programs to evolve from the ABE legislation, did not upset social hierarchies. Job Corps was a training program that provided basic skills education and job readiness skills to undereducated adolescents and adults. However, it did not prepare them for college. Job Corps participants were typically trained for blue collar work in the labor and service industries. They were made employable, but not too employable. Thus, existing social hierarchies and power structures could remain in place.

Then, in 1965, ABE became the Adult Education Act (AEA), Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), because Congress recognized that illiteracy should not be directly associated with poverty. As Congressman Bell asked, “So, actually, adult education, would you say, does not belong in the Poverty Act because there
are many people throughout the country that are not necessarily in poverty that deserve to have an opportunity for an adult education?” (as cited in DeSanctis, 1980, p. 247). Under the ESEA, therefore, the AEA was rewritten to read: “Overcome English language limitation to improve their ability to benefit from occupational training and otherwise increase their opportunities for more profitable and productive employment, and to make them better able to meet their adult responsibilities” (as cited in DeSanctis, 1980, p. 247). The changed language, along with its move from anti-poverty to education legislation, opened up adult literacy education to more people, particularly English language learners. However, the legislation continued to strengthen the rationale that illiterate or functionally illiterate individuals were unable “to meet their adult responsibilities.”

From 1964 to 1970, the AEA provided grants to states in support of adult literacy education. The funding formula was based on the number of adults in the state with less than a sixth-grade education. In 1970, as a result of the evolving definition of “functional literacy,” the AEA was amended to include all adults without a high school diploma (DeSanctis, 1980, p. 248). Because the goal changed and states had an interest in boosting their numbers of high school graduates, adult literacy and basic education programming increasingly resulted in the creation of GED programs.

At the same time, however, according to DeSanctis (1980), other leaders in the adult education movement had established the foundation for a redefinition of illiteracy that was in direct contrast to the GED focus of the states. A number of adult educators, many of whom had either worked in the Peace Corps or with Third World literacy programs, or who were stimulated by those who had, were leaders in supporting or developing definitions of literacy that challenged the traditional grade-level definitions historically used by USOE [U.S. Office of Education] and the state departments of education (Freire, 1970; Harmon, 1970; and Ziegler, Note 2). (p. 248).
The adult educators that DeSanctis (1980) referred to supported ideological models of literacy instruction that eliminated leveled, skills-based instruction, and the dependence on standardized tests; instead, they promoted emancipatory literacy instruction that explored multiple literacies and their ties to power relations in society.

However, the goals of the unleveled adult education movement were misconstrued. As DeSanctis (1980) noted, as a result of subsequent amendments to the AEA during the 1970s, “The definition of literacy… has moved substantially away from grade levels to one based on functional or coping skills and knowledge” (DeSanctis, 1980, p. 251). The definition of literacy for adults thus no longer depended wholly on grade-level completion. It merely traded one autonomous model for another in adopting a “functional” understanding of literacy which still only allowed one type of literacy to carry value. Whether grade-leveled or based on “functional” assessments, learners still were not granted opportunities to learn and use literacy to overcome oppression. Rather, as Street (1984) and Graff (1979) have both explained, adult literacy instruction for American adults further oppressed them.

“Planners of the War on Poverty chose to target individuals and the conditions that held them in poverty rather than deficiencies in the social and economic structure, and education played a major role. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964—the centerpiece of the War on Poverty—addressed poverty through community action, manpower development, and literacy programs” (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994, p. 301). “Manpower development” was the key motive and rationale for increasing spending on “anti-poverty” programs. Believing that individuals could be molded through appropriately designed education and training programs, Americans established the foundations for neoliberalism, a political philosophy that would come to pervade U.S. culture during subsequent decades. They attempted to “fix” the problem by targeting individuals’ deficiencies, which allowed for
the maintenance of unequal social structures. In this way, the U.S. economy was anticipated to improve while also preventing the existing power hierarchy from tumbling.
Chapter 5. The Marketization of Adult Literacy Education: 1970s to the Present

Beginning with the economic crisis in the 1970s, a neoliberal ideology took hold of American culture, which was cemented by Reagan-era policies of the 1980s (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism began as an economic philosophy. Yet as it became more and more engrained in mainstream culture, particularly as it came to be considered “common sense,” it became a sociopolitical philosophy as well. Its economic groundings fostered the establishment of a mainstream U.S. culture that is dominated by business interests, disregarding the social and democratic interests that the U.S. had been founded on. “Freedom” became a buzz word that defended and allowed corporations to assume control of public affairs by asserting that the U.S. was founded on a neoliberal economic philosophy. Though neoliberalism existed prior to the 1980s, Reagan-era policies made it mainstream.

“The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as ‘the central values of civilization’” (Harvey, 2005, p. 5). The ideology of the free market has thus manifested itself in every aspect of American culture, and the notion of “individual freedom” has evolved into a hard and fast belief in individual initiative and personal responsibility. A neoliberal society promotes an “every man for himself” mentality—the competition that drives the free market now drives individuals in every area of their lives. If a person fails to succeed, it is his or her own fault. Victims of oppression are blamed for their own plights. They are no longer viewed as victims because
their failures—such as poverty and low literacy skills—are not seen as failures of institutional structures. Rather, their failures are instead attributed to personal defects.

The results of neoliberalism are far-reaching. Neoliberalism, now accepted as “common sense” by most Americans, has allowed business interests to dominate public spheres. Private interests and undertakings are colonizing areas that were once the public domain, especially schools (Giroux, 2004). The roots could be seen in the War on Poverty programs for adults in the 1960s in which education became a means to a job. Neoliberalism effectively “sever[s] the link between education and social change” (Giroux, 2004, p. 66). It “defines the citizen as consumer and disbands the social contract in the interests of privatized considerations” (Giroux, 2004, p. 70). Schooling, thus, has been reduced to economic, rather than democratic, purposes.

Neoliberalism supports an autonomous model of literacy whereby one literacy is valued above others and is seen as the “natural” literacy. It does not recognize itself as ideological because it has become accepted as natural, universal, common sense. In doing so, neoliberalism prevents other literacies from holding any value. The literacy of the dominant social group in society trumps all others. Nobody complains about this because even non-dominant groups have come to accept it as natural, universal, common sense. According to Harvey (2005),

Common sense is constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the ‘good sense’ that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices. (Harvey, 2005, p. 39).

From 1980 to the present, ideological models have struggled for existence—swimming against the tide of neoliberalism that has swept the United States. Reagan-era education
policies started the movement, and then welfare reform in the 1990s established an adult literacy education system that all but drowned out ideological models.

The Reagan Era: Neoliberalism Goes Mainstream

According to neoliberal theory, human well-being and advancement are directly related to the free market, free trade, and private property rights. Government intrusion in such areas is believed antithetical to human progress. The role of government is to establish and secure an institutional framework that supports military, police, and laws that protect markets and property rights. “Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). “When the Reagan Administration came into office, it was pledged to reduce the level of overall domestic spending, reduce the size and scope of the federal government, and encourage the states and private sector to assume many of the roles performed by the public sector,” which included the proposed elimination of the U.S. Department of Education (Kolenbrander, 1987, p. 13). As a result of Reagan’s success in deregulation and privatization of formerly public spheres, education has been drawn into “the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

As Demetrion (2005) explained, federal policies in the 1980s on adult literacy became inextricably linked to workforce needs and readiness. By allowing business to assume control of educational needs, goals, and delivery of instruction, the needs and goals of individual learners ceased to be of importance. The goal for educating adults became creating a workforce ready and capable of filling empty positions, typically low-paying positions, as quickly as possible in order to improve economic productivity. By tying economic needs directly to adult literacy education, adult learners have thus remained in an oppressive state
in which they are not given the tools with which to advance individually. They are treated as machines, as human capital, reminiscent of Henry Ford’s attempts in the 1910s to create a “fully malleable workforce.”

The difference today is that, as a result of neoliberalism’s stronghold on U.S. culture, those being oppressed are not rebelling. Instead, they accept their fate. Because of neoliberalism’s permeation throughout society, individuals tolerate inequalities because those at the top of the social hierarchy (with more money, power, etc.) have “won,” and those at the bottom still feel they have a chance to “win” if they work hard enough. Reagan-era policies have established a competitive state in which everyone believes they have a chance of getting ahead. People are playing the lottery every day, without realizing that wealthier people are going to always have a better chance of winning because they can afford to buy more tickets.

In 1981, Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell convinced President Reagan to appoint the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Its 1983 report, titled *A Nation at Risk*, fueled the drive for education reform in the 1980s, including the Adult Literacy Initiative. According to the report, America’s schools—the students and the teachers—were failing to adequately educate American children for participation in the Information Age. “The perceived failure of the nation’s educational system would have been viewed as a significant problem on any account. What made it a crisis was the demands that an emergent global and increasingly competitive economy was placing on the nation’s workforce, and, therefore, on its school system” (Demetrion, 2005, p. 60).

The report declared:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American
prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7).

The Committee on Excellence and Education framed the educational “crisis” in the United States as an act of war, a need to improve America’s competitive stance on the world stage. They blamed society for failing to understand “the basic purposes of schooling.” However, as this study has demonstrated, the purpose of schooling changed dramatically in the second half of the 20th century.

In addition, their word choices and rhetoric portray the required response to the “crisis” as one of “common sense.” Marshall (2008) explained:

First, by appropriating the term ‘at risk’ and applying it to ‘Our nation’ instead of ‘students’ or ‘children,’ the authors of the report effectively raise the stakes of ongoing debates about the effects of schooling while at the same time trumping any more targeted concern for populations of students who might be more ‘at risk’ than others. As in war, when ‘our nation’ is at risk, we cannot afford politically fractious discussions about the equitable distribution of educational resources. And it is war, and the cost of losing a war, that provides the deep metaphorical power of these paragraphs… The clearly implied argument is that American schooling is somehow to blame for America’s economic slippage in comparison to other nations, that this slippage is the equivalent of war, and that the only solution is a serious recommitment to educational excellence… It was politically complicated, of course, for the educational community, then as now, to argue against… the central importance of education to the nation’s well-being. (Marshall, 2008, p. 114-115).
Who will argue with “common sense”? People get trapped because even while they might disagree, arguing against something that, on the surface, is seemingly so true and obvious, makes the critic sound stubborn and unpatriotic. To argue against policies that emanated from this report “would be to stand somehow against educational excellence, against even our national stature in the world” (Marshall, 2008, p. 115).

Further, according to the report, “Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9). Although this is the only statement with specific regard to adult literacy in the entire report, it stimulated a new way of thinking about and addressing adult literacy in the United States. Following the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Secretary Bell issued a statement that said:

Adult functional illiteracy is a major ‘hidden problem’ in the United States that affects Americans without regard to race, gender, or economic status. An estimated 23 million Americans are functionally illiterate; they are unable to read, comprehend, write or compute at a level which enables them to function in a complex world. The startling truth is that one in five adult Americans are unable to read a ballot, fill out a job application, read the directions on a bottle of aspirin, or calculate the change required for bus fare (Bell, 1984, p. 2).

Because international competition was not enough to rally the support needed to advance awareness of the adult literacy “problem,” Secretary Bell employed a rhetoric of fear. He tied adult illiteracy to diminished productivity, unemployment, underemployment, and crime. In addition, he claimed that “As many as 15 million employed adults may be functionally illiterate; untold billions of dollars are wasted due to clerical errors, mistakes on the production lines, or industrial accidents cause by functional illiterates on the job” (Bell, 1984, p. 3). By drawing a “direct correlation” between illiteracy, money, accidents, and the prison system, he effectively scared the public into supporting the Adult Literacy Initiative that came about in 1983. He led people to believe that illiteracy was somehow causing many
other problems without acknowledging the distinct difference between a correlation and a causation.

In saying that functional illiteracy “affects Americans without regard to race, gender, or economic status,” he was untruthful. He illuminated his error when he also declared that “Approximately 40 percent of all minority youth may be functionally illiterate” (Bell, 1984, p. 8). Forty percent was certainly a disproportionate number of minorities to fall into this category. Though aware of this statistic, neither he nor President Reagan were willing to address the fact that other social factors contribute to the “problem.” The accepted belief after A Nation at Risk was published was, if you give students—children and adults alike—an opportunity to learn, then they will become fine, upstanding, productive, participatory citizens. This is an autonomous understanding of literacy. Reagan-era education policies pronounced literacy as the key to solving unemployment, crime, and the economic recession. Literacy alone, however, has no agency because agency resides with people who use multiple literacies to perform and accomplish various tasks.

In order to solve the adult literacy crisis, President Reagan announced the Adult Literacy Initiative in 1983. The legislation anticipated partnerships between the government, the public, and the private sector. According to President Reagan, the goal of the Adult Literacy Initiative, which provided no federal funding and relied almost entirely on volunteers, was “to help 23 million Americans who cannot read and write” because “our national security, the health of our economy, and our position in the international marketplace depend upon literate people” (as cited in Freeland, 1983, p. 60). At the launch of the Initiative in September 1983, he announced:

Let us today resolve to roll up our sleeves and get to work, because there’s very much to be done. Across this great land, let those of us who can read teach those who cannot. Let the lights burn late in our classrooms, our church basements, our
libraries and around our kitchen tables, wherever we can gather to help others help themselves to the American dream. (Reagan, 1983).

He dumped the entire project on the people because, according to neoliberal theory, government only gets in the way of free enterprise. His administration expected and assumed that the private sector and individual citizens would recognize the problem and effectively develop their own solutions free from government interference—and funding.

While some literacy groups and political leaders were supportive of the Adult Literacy Initiative, many Congressional Democrats scoffed at the plan calling it a “transparently fraudulent education blitz” (as cited in Freeland, 1983, p. 60). Even though Reagan’s Adult Literacy Initiative reinforced the crisis rhetoric and drew public attention to the field, the federal government provided no funding. In Reagan’s first two years in office, the government cut programs for schools, low-income children and families, women, bilingual education, and student financial aid. As Freeland (1983) declared, “Reagan has abolished the traditional role of aiding those not well off” (p. 61). And the Adult Literacy Initiative was just another political move that did nothing to actually help address adult literacy education other than strengthen the “crisis” rhetoric.

In addition to motivating a volunteer army to combat adult illiteracy, Reagan also wanted the private sector to become involved. As Kolenbrander (1987) explained, “The Administration believes that if business is shown a problem they will find a way to solve the problem within the private sector” (p. 14). According to Secretary Bell (1984), “The private sector has a keen interest in the promotion of literacy. This year, U.S. businesses and corporations will spend approximately $40 billion on programs to teach their employees skills which they failed to learn in school” (p. 4). What he failed to explain was whether or not these “skills” should have been learned in school. Many businesses offer training programs that provide employees with industry-specific “skills” that many would consider
inappropriate to learn “in school” because every student will not end up working in the same industry.

Kolenbrander (1987) explained what actually transpired as a result of the Adult Literacy Initiative: “Business’s response to adult illiteracy is one of responding to a specific need for properly functioning employees. As a result, business will provide basic training when required; but they are primarily interested in job-related training” (p. 14). As with Henry Ford in the 1910s and the U.S. military in World War II, the private sector had a manpower shortage. Their endeavors into the field of adult education were only insofar as they could produce higher-functioning employees. In that sense, these were not actually educational endeavors. Businesses, driven by profit, have little to no interest in helping their employees overcome oppression, advance their personal goals, or become better-informed citizens. It would not be cost-effective to educate an employee beyond the duties of the particular position. “[A]part from a corporation’s interest in making a contribution to its community or seeing a specific need for basic training within its own workforce, the only incentive it has is the good public relations it receives for its efforts. Whether this is enough of an incentive for corporations when they consider their profit and loss statement seems doubtful” (Kolenbrander, 1987, p. 14).

By 1988, the Adult Literacy Initiative had not produced the desired or intended results. Some private sector companies, such as McGraw-Hill, became invested, but only insofar as it promoted their own ends. McGraw-Hill, for example, is a prominent publisher of educational materials. This company stood to gain a great deal from investing in adult literacy education programming because it would eventually produce much of the learning materials used by such programs for instruction. However, the movement still lacked
strength; consequently, the federal government turned to another area where they could connect adult literacy education to the labor force: welfare.

**JOBS: Literacy Meets Welfare**

In 1988, Congress enacted the Family Support Act, the central piece of which created the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. JOBS provided welfare recipients with education, training, and job-finding services. The federal legislation mandated that participants achieve an eighth-grade skills-level education before participating in job training, but many states raised the bar to high school completion. Multiple agencies were expected to collaborate in order to provide literacy and basic skills education, health care, child care, and transportation for participants. However, the government underestimated the costs because it underestimated how many welfare recipients would require education—60 percent instead of the predicted 20 percent in California, as an example—and how long it would take participants to complete the education portion of the program, which preceded job training and placement. As a result, many applicants were turned down by the program because the government lacked sufficient funds to serve everyone.

In terms of “success,” JOBS had mixed results. Whereas some participants developed valuable skills and training that led them to find jobs that paid a living wage and provided health care benefits, most of the job training resulted in “cheap labor.” Participants trained for low-skilled positions that still did not pay enough to lift them out of poverty and get off the welfare rolls, such as a Summit County, Ohio program that emphasized landscaping, custodial work, and microfilming. Critics called the Summit County program a sham and accused the county of molding its own cheap labor force. Rather than tailoring education and training programs to meet the needs of clients, the programs were tailored to
produce high “success” rates—with short programs that produced high numbers of “graduates”—and to meet the labor needs of the county government. Landscaping and janitorial work are two areas that one does not necessarily need specialized training in to get a job. Therefore, programs were merely designed to teach students how to be “good workers,” to develop a “work ethic,” and be overall dependable employees (Jones, 1991; Umrigar, 1991).

As Brandt (2004) explained, beginning with World War II, a “production imperative” became the rationale for providing adult literacy education.

Efficiency and rationality took over. Under the production imperative, those of low literacy were no longer morally less deserving of opportunity but rather, objectively, less cost-effective, their skills too time-consuming to develop, their worth too small to the overall effort. In the cost-benefit analysis, investment in their education would become a last resort. (p. 497).

Short-term training, instead, reigned supreme. Politicians, for the last few decades, have proclaimed that workforce-based educational initiatives would eliminate poverty; however, they have failed to actually achieve this goal.

The NALS and the National Literacy Act of 1991: Standardizing Adult Literacy

Finally, in 1988, Congress asked the U.S. Department of Education to determine the actual extent of adult illiteracy in the United States. As a result, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Division of Adult Education and Literacy awarded a contract to the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to conduct a national household survey of the literacy skills of American adults, the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), which took place in 1990. The NALS was designed to assess an individual’s ability to comprehend and accomplish literacy tasks in prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy
“that reflect the types of materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives” (Kirsch, Jungleblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993, p. xiii).

Designers of the NALS created “representative” tasks that one might encounter in “real life.” According to Street’s ideological model of literacy, this would be impossible. Standardized tests of literacy are both inappropriate and unethical because “they privilege particular contexts, identities, and knowledge while marginalizing all others” (Carter, 2006). Because literacy is a social practice, and people use multiple literacies depending on the context of the task to be accomplished, test makers cannot actually anticipate the “materials and demands” that adults actually “encounter in their daily lives.” The results of the NALS demonstrate the inconsistency between the types of literacy tasks standardized assessments allege that adults can and should be able to do and the literacy practices that adults actually do in real life.

According to the results of the NALS presented in Kirsch et al. (1993), the NALS ranked the literacy abilities of adults in five levels. Twenty-one to twenty-three percent (40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in the U.S.) tested into the lowest level. However, 25 percent of them were immigrants who may have been just learning to speak English; 33 percent were aged 65 or older; 26 percent had physical, mental, or health conditions that prevented them from fully participating in school, work, or other activities; and 19 percent reported having visual impairments that made reading print difficult. Around 25 to 28 percent (approximately 50 million adults) tested into the second level. Level 2 of the NALS indicates that these adults can locate information in a text or on a map, fill out forms, and make low-level inferences. Adults who tested into Level 1 were considered functionally illiterate; thus, they were deemed incapable of performing literacy tasks necessary to function in society. Those who tested into Level 2, although “their skills were more varied than those
of individuals performing in Level 1, their repertoire was still quite limited” (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. xvi).

Notably, however, only a fraction of adults in Levels 1 and 2 reported that they required assistance from others in order to accomplish every day prose, document, and quantitative literacy tasks. In a 2001 study, Sticht argued that drawing direct correlations between literacy skills measurements and how an individual functions in daily life is problematic. Assessments measure performance on “representative” tasks that are devoid of the context in which the tasks actually occur. Sticht (2001) supported his claim by demonstrating that, in fact, the majority of adults labeled “functionally illiterate” based on standardized assessments self-reported that they had no problem functioning in daily life. His study complicates the understanding of “functional literacy.” If adults cannot perform the tasks on the assessment, they do not live up to society’s standards for functioning in society. However, the same adults do not find their literacy skills problematic in their daily functioning. So whose standards carry more value? According to neoliberal theory, society’s standards for functioning take precedence over an individual’s standards for functioning, even if that adult is unaware of the perceived “problem.”

Even so, as a result of the increased public awareness of adult functional illiteracy, in 1991, President George H. W. Bush signed the National Literacy Act into law, which replaced the Adult Education Act of 1966 and established the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). In doing so, adult literacy education became officially tied to the economic well-being of the United States. Additionally, the federal government increased accountability requirements for state programs and envisioned the development of measurable performance standards for adult literacy education. Assessment techniques included standardized tests, retention rates, learner-self-reports, teacher reports, improved job or life
skills, and portfolio assessments. These performance standards were ultimately adopted by states to determine funding levels for “successful” programs and to eliminate funding for “unsuccessful” programs.

The National Literacy Act had a broad focus. Moving beyond the nearly 60-year-old definition of literacy that had been in use since the CCC coined the term “functional literacy” during the Great Depression, the National Literacy Act redefined literacy to incorporate a number of goals and purposes:

For purposes of this Act the term ‘literacy’ means an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential. (National Literacy Act, 1991).

The federal government thus recognized other purposes for literacy, particularly including family literacy in the Act. However, as Demetrion (2005) pointed out, “a postindustrial workforce orientation remained the critical underpinning of national policy” (p. 77). Even though not entirely explicit in the language of the Act itself, “a workplace focus remained central as business metaphors like ‘customer’ abounded in the discussion of adult education, as did phrases such as ‘return on investment,’ ‘the bottom line,’ ‘efficiency,’ and ‘outcome based performance’” (Demetrion, 2005, p. 84). While the government indeed broadened the understanding of literacy for the purposes of adult literacy instruction, the prevalence of standardized tests and job skills measurements in determining program funding strengthened the autonomous model of literacy instruction for adults in the early 1990s.

Work First: A New Definition of Literacy

Soon after the National Literacy Act passed and the results of the NALS were published, President Clinton promised to “end welfare as we know it.” By this, he meant that people would not receive handouts; people would be required to work for the
government support they received; and people would not be allowed to subsist on welfare permanently. Embracing the neoliberal ideology of individual initiative and personal responsibility, to “end welfare as we know it” would compel welfare recipients to correct their personal deficiencies and go to work because the government refused to support them indefinitely. Following the same line as Presidents Reagan and Bush had, “By 1994, there was talk of moving adult literacy and basic skills programming under workforce development and away from education. Congress was stressing performance outcomes for the receipt of federal funds, performance outcomes based on standardized testing measurements, rather than the alternative methodologies and constructivist standards” that had been made allowable under the National Literacy Act of 1991 (Demetrion, 2005). These “performance outcomes” were directly tied to work readiness.

Historically, government responses to poverty have been based on a belief that defects in the poor themselves prevent them from succeeding in the economic system… Even when society views the personal defects of the poor as caused by factors beyond the individual’s control, such as racial discrimination, society still expects the poor to take responsibility for their own improvement. (Gideonse & Meyers, 1988, p. 46).

As evidenced by the Depression era efforts to improve adult literacy skills, government has tended to provide incentives to work and remedy personal defects by upgrading work skills. In doing so, “These responses have benefited employers by maintaining the supply of low-wage labor and have tried to minimize the burden on taxpayers by keeping down welfare costs” (Gideonse & Meyers, 1988, p. 46).

As with the JOBS program in the late 1980s, welfare reform that came about during the mid-1990s stressed work over education. The goal of welfare reformers was to move people off welfare as quickly as possible. This increased the supply of cheap labor, but also prevented welfare recipients from overcoming poverty. Work first. Any work.
The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 reformed the United States welfare system and instituted the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) system for providing block grants to states. TANF replaced the previous system, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This legislation included provisions that increased the pressure on state and local governments to move people off the welfare rolls and into work. The new laws included a two-year time limit for welfare recipients to either find work or begin participating in a “work activity.” PRWORA also mandated a new lifetime eligibility limit, of five years, for all welfare recipients. In addition to employment, “work activities” could include certain education and training activities, such as job searching (limited to six weeks); on-the-job training; community service; vocational education (for a maximum of twelve months); and secondary school or the equivalent, or education directly related to employment, but only for participants without a high school diploma or GED. PRWORA also allowed activities that could be funded through the TANF block grant program but did not meet PRWORA’s work participation requirements. These included adult literacy and basic education classes, English as a second language (ESL) classes, and postsecondary education (Hayes, 1999).

With the passage of PRWORA, adult literacy education “found itself irrevocably bound up with a major social policy” (Dirkx, 1999, p. 83). In order to receive government funding, adult literacy programs became more accountable and more dependent on performance outcomes, such as student retention and test scores. Whereas they had been moving in this direction for nearly two decades, programs found it increasingly difficult to maneuver around the “work first” rhetoric now attached directly to education. In addition, because of the time limits imposed on welfare recipients, instruction had to change. It had to become more intensive in shorter time periods, and because test scores determined funding
for both programs and individuals now, instruction was forced to become much more assessment-centered, rather than learner-centered (Dirkx, 1999). In addition, with the emphasis for individuals on “work first,” retention rates suffered because students could not remain enrolled in classes while they were being forced to participate in other “work activities” in order to receive welfare benefits (Hayes, 1999).

Adult literacy programs were expected to establish partnerships with local businesses, which led to the creation of many “workplace literacy” programs in which employees received training in basic skills needed to meet the demands of specific positions or workplaces. These partnerships effectively replaced the needs of individual learners with the needs of the businesses that employed them. Dirkx (1999) explained that, as a result of welfare reform, there were now many more stakeholders in adult literacy education, including “education professionals, social services agencies, employment and training agencies, and employers” (p. 88). This is a far cry from the roots of adult education when the learners were the only ones with an actual stake in the purpose and outcome of their educations. From Henry Ford to welfare reform, now everyone in American society has something to demand from an individual’s achievement.

To further complicate the understanding of adult literacy education in the United States, in 1998, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) replaced the National Literacy Act of 1991. Consequently, adult literacy education no longer exists as an educational priority. It is now only perceived as a labor priority. Under WIA, adult literacy education ranks second to workforce needs as Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). WIA, with AEFLA, became the new basis for federal funding and oversight of adult literacy programs (Hayes, 1999). As Hayes (1999) indicated, “Although this legislation is not explicitly linked to welfare reform, it has strong philosophical ties to welfare legislation.
Perhaps most notable is that ALE [adult literacy education] is included as a part of employment and training legislation, not educational legislation, thereby reinforcing its connection to work” (p. 6).

Moreover, alternative, constructivist methods used for program evaluation, such as portfolio assessment and learner-self-reports, were no longer significant or allowable for determining funding. According to Title II of WIA, the three core indicators for program “success” would be:

1. Demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels in reading, writing, and speaking the English language, numeracy, problem solving, English language acquisition, and other literacy skills.
2. Placement in, retention in, or completion of, postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement.

By eliminating the alternative performance outcomes from adult literacy education, Title II of WIA subscribed to a wholly autonomous model of literacy instruction whereby only “acceptable” forms of literacy—those related to employment outcomes, such as skills-levels and credentials—counted.

Furthermore, Title II of WIA redefined literacy, narrowing the understanding of literacy from the more broad interpretation used in the National Literacy Act of 1991.

The term ‘literacy’ means an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English, compute, and solve problems, at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society. (WIA, 1998).

This new definition eliminated “to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” In such an environment, and under such a definition, learner-centered education is nearly impossible. According to the new legislation, the federal government has no interest in the education of individuals beyond their immediate contributions to the economy.

Together with welfare reform, these two legislative acts removed the ability of individuals to mandate their own educational needs and priorities.
By the end of the 20th century, adult literacy education had been completely transformed. What had once been an area guided by learners' thirst for knowledge with possibilities for social change has become an oppressive environment driven by a neoliberal society's thirst for human capital. Adult literacy educators are now in a state of confusion, not entirely sure whose needs they serve anymore: learners or businesses. Hayes (1999) appropriately summed up the desperate and unclear consequences for adult literacy educators nationwide:

If literacy education is considered to be 'education related to work,' how can and should this be interpreted? Does this mean literacy educators should teach job-specific literacy skills, such as reading blueprints or writing a work order? Many employers are citing the development of 'soft skills,' such as punctuality, politeness, or even a work ethic, as the major educational need. Should literacy educators make these skills the focus of their programming, or does this approach simply meet the needs of employers for compliant workers, without helping learners develop abilities that will truly enable them to gain more power and autonomy in their lives? Would it be of greater benefit to help welfare recipients earn high school credentials, since credentials are a critical factor in increasing earnings and upward career mobility? Should literacy educators help welfare recipients learn family literacy skills, to help their children be more successful educationally and vocationally? Or should educators help students learn to confront issues like wage inequities, racism in hiring and promotion, or unsafe working conditions? (Hayes, 1999, p. 11).

In 2006, WIA was reauthorized as the Job Training Improvement Act, which allowed faith-based and for-profit organizations eligibility for funding. Clearly, the ideological goals of overcoming oppression through adult literacy education, as seen in the settlement movement 100 years earlier, cannot compete with neoliberal goals of the dominant U.S. culture and the need for a cheap, malleable workforce. With the limited time constraints for students and the marriage of educational funding to achievement on standardized tests, little time—not to mention incentive—exists for adult literacy educators to help students achieve their own goals, engage in critical issues, or develop their knowledge and potential—if they want to stay in business, that is.
Chapter 6. Entrenched in Neoliberalism: Can Ideological Models Survive?

In the era of accountability, where funding is directly tied to student performance outcomes on standardized assessments, embracing an ideological model of literacy is difficult. Program administrators and instructors feel they must teach to the tests; this is the “best way” to limit the risk of losing funding and going out of business altogether. Adult educators are trapped. In order to assist adult students at all, they must remain in business, even if that means dispensing false hopes to students. The students, who have themselves latched onto neoliberal ideals because of their prevalence and “common sense” status in dominant U.S. culture, believe that passing the “test” will provide them with a “golden ticket” to success. Unfortunately, as Graff (1979) has shown, many other factors affect an individual’s social progression, regardless of their literacy “skills.”

Belief in the “literacy myth” dispenses false hopes to both educators and students who think that increased “levels” of literacy will automatically equate to better job prospects and postsecondary opportunities. This has not been the typical case for GED recipients: GED holders have higher college dropout rates, are still placed in low-wage jobs that keep them on welfare or in poverty, and are not permitted to continue pursuing educational opportunities because they have to “work first.” This de-emphasis on education prevents adults from overcoming poverty. They do not have adequate time to accomplish either educational or career goals because they are held down by oppressive welfare and adult literacy education policies that do not allow the time, funding, or space to develop critical
uses of reading and writing needed for success on the job, in college, or to promote and participate in social action.

Although it is true that nearly half of all GED recipients enroll in two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions, statistics also show that less than 10 percent ever earn a degree (Steinberg, Johnson, & Pennington, 2006). The reasons are no doubt many and varied for individual students. GED recipients often have other life obstacles such as low-wage jobs, health concerns, and child-care issues that make it difficult to persevere in a postsecondary program. In addition, GED recipients are more likely than traditional diploma recipients to be placed in remedial or developmental courses in college (Hamilton, 1998; Tokpah & Padak, 2003). Remedial or developmental courses do not count towards degree requirements, but they still deplete a student’s financial aid. A student who scores low on a placement test and must take several remedial courses could spend multiple semesters taking courses that do not count towards earning a degree; both their momentum and their financial aid packages could dry up in the process.

In terms of employment, GED recipients do earn more than those without any credential (Hamilton, 2002). Nevertheless, GED holders do not earn as much as traditional high school diploma holders (unless they continue their education in postsecondary education and training). Low-skilled dropouts tend to benefit from the GED credential; but, the GED provides no additional economic benefit to higher-skilled dropouts (Tyler, 2001). Also, according to a study by Tyler, Murnane, and Willett (2000), though the GED increases the earnings of white high school dropouts by 10 to 19 percent, they found no statistically significant effects of the GED on the earnings of minority dropouts. The implications of this finding are staggering.
In the current system of adult literacy education that emphasizes integrating marginalized people into mainstream society by bestowing upon them the gift of literacy (See Freire, 1970), white adults are better able to benefit from the process. It is easier for white students to learn and adapt to the dominant cultural practices whereas minority adults, regardless of having obtained the GED, still find themselves in the same positions they were in before passing the test. The GED is, therefore, not a “golden ticket.” This finding calls for increased attention to the oppressive social structures that continue to prevent minorities from experiencing the same benefits for the same credentials; it calls for ideological models of literacy.

Can the United States adult literacy education system support ideological models of literacy today? Can adults who lack basic skills also learn other forms and uses of literacy that would allow them to accomplish their own educational goals, solve their own problems, and develop the skills perceived as necessary to serve society’s economic needs? Can they develop “basic skills” while also learning how to navigate and overcome oppressive social forces? If the true goals of social welfare and labor polices are to end welfare-dependence, improve labor outcomes, and help people escape poverty, then the answer must be yes.

The adult literacy education system in the United States has become so entangled in the autonomous model of literacy that it has become oppressive in its own right. In order to overcome this oppression, adult literacy programs must move toward ideological models of literacy. Multiple literacies must be valued and viewed as social practices, and adult learners must be provided opportunities to understand how literacies affect social structures and power relations in U.S. mainstream culture.

Transforming adult literacy education into workplace literacy education in the 1990s led some leaders and scholars in the field to hypothesize a corresponding transformation
from an autonomous to ideological model of instruction (Dirkx, 1999; Hull, 2000). The prospect of situating literacies in actual workplaces, in real-life contexts, seemed a promising shift from the skills-based, deficit model that had been evolving throughout the 20th century. It would not have been perfect; it would not necessarily have led to programs in which students investigated the power structures associated with different forms of literacy in order to overcome oppression and poverty; but it would at least have positioned literacy as a social practice.

As Hull (2000) explained, literacy at work is not the same as literacy at school. Reading is not reading is not reading. She explored the difference between terms such as “reading to do,” “reading to learn,” “useful literacy,” “practical literacy,” and “informational literacy.” In real-life situations, people need to be able to use reading and writing to accomplish a variety of tasks such as explain, take part in discourse around and about texts, participate in a flow of information, solve problems, exercise critical judgment, and exercise or resist authority. Unfortunately, because of adult literacy’s marriage to welfare reform and workforce investment, because of the demand for efficiency and expediency in getting people to “work first,” and because of the ever-increasing dependence on standardized performance outcomes for program funding, the field has become entrenched in an autonomous model with seemingly no way out.

Some education researchers and practitioners, however, say that, even in this era of accountability that seems to force the education system into autonomous models of literacy instruction, ideological models of literacy can and do persist (Beck, 2005; Kane, 2003; Rivera, 2008). It is possible to improve “basic skills” while also educating students about multiples literacies and power structures in society. Street explained that the ideological model is an umbrella term for a variety of pedagogies such as critical literacy or critical
pedagogy, popular education, and Critical Language Awareness (Street, 1984, 1993, 2000). Adult educators all over the world have been successfully implementing these pedagogies in a variety of settings for decades. These programs have proven successful. They have helped students improve “basic skills,” while simultaneously allowing students to explore and solve problems locally, akin to the American lyceums and settlement houses over a century before.

*Paulo Freire: An Ideological Model*

Literacy programs alternatively called critical literacy, critical pedagogy, popular education, social change education, and participatory education are based on the work of Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire examined how schooling often reproduced social inequalities and injustice and offered an alternative framework for literacy education that would allow students to gain critical consciousness and participate in social transformation. Rather than allowing literacy programs to participate in the maintenance of unequal social relationships through curricular decisions that reflected the dominant political, economic, and cultural interests of society, he advocated literacy programs that questioned texts and the political, economic, and cultural conditions under which those texts were constructed. Critical literacy programs explore controversial, provocative issues in learner-centered discussions in order to help learners confront social inequities and take action against injustices. Additionally, critical literacy encourages learners to acknowledge and value their own knowledge and relationships with the world, rather than holding them in positions of inferiority by assuming they are deficient in knowledge and skills.

Freire (1970) explained that “the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering
aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them” (p. 62). This self-depreciating attitude “derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them… Almost never do they realize that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men” (p. 63). Critical pedagogy, therefore, begins with and embodies the lived experiences of men and women. Students must learn that the teacher does not know everything. The teacher merely becomes a guide and facilitator in helping them learn to trust themselves and see the value in the knowledge they do possess.

In this way, critical literacy rejects the “banking concept” of education “in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 72). In traditional schooling, the teacher possesses the knowledge, and the students must memorize and recite that knowledge in order to demonstrate learning. Knowledge is thus positioned as a “gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p, 72). By positioning the students as wholly ignorant, the banking concept of education reinforces oppressive social relationships. It does not permit students to raise questions because the teacher dominates classroom discourse and is accepted as all-knowing. However, Freire (1970) explained that “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). Inquiry and dialogue, therefore, lie at the heart of critical pedagogy.

Freire (1970) argued that the oppressors—members of society who dominate social hierarchies—never truly desire to help the oppressed overcome their oppressive circumstances. Instead, they “use the banking concept of education in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus, within which the oppressed receive the euphemistic title
of ‘welfare recipients’ in order to change the consciousness of the oppressed, rather than the circumstances that oppress them (p. 74). The oppressed—members of non-dominant underclasses—are treated as marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a ‘good, organized, and just’ society. The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these ‘incompetent and lazy’ folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginalized need to be ‘integrated,’ ‘incorporated’ into the healthy society that they have forsaken. (p. 74).

This understanding is mirrored in educational endeavors in the U.S. to eradicate illiteracy such as the Southern literacy campaigns, the CCC camps, and the War on Poverty.

However, Freire (1970) explained:

The truth is … that the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’—inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves.’ Such transformation, of course, would undermine the oppressors’ purposes; hence their utilization of the banking concept of education to avoid the threat of student conscientização. (Freire, 1970, p. 74).

Conscientização, or conscientization, is the state of critical consciousness that people arrive at when they have achieved an understanding of the world that accounts for its sociopolitical contradictions and injustices. Critical consciousness allows people to take action against oppressive social forces. Autonomous models of literacy instruction do not provide opportunities for students to achieve critical consciousness because achievement would pose a threat to the existing social order.

Adult literacy programs that follow and promote a critical literacy, critical pedagogy, popular education, or social change education model for instruction are thus ideological. They place issues of power in the forefront of educational endeavors and explicitly attend to controversial topics and differences across race, class, gender, and sexuality. The critical literacy classroom emphasizes student voices and dialogue as tools for students to reflect on
and construct meaning from texts because literacy is seen as a social practice tied to real-life contexts and experiences. Most importantly, critical pedagogy rejects the deficit model of literacy instruction because it acknowledges and values the knowledge and experiences that students bring to the classroom.

Responsible citizenship is another important aspect of critical literacy education. However, being a responsible citizen extends beyond the “measurable outcomes” of registering to vote or voting that are commonly promoted and encouraged by current adult literacy education policies in the United States. Being a responsible citizen means confronting and taking action against social inequalities and injustices. Students are encouraged to see themselves within the larger social, cultural, political, and economic structures that exist in society. In an ideological model of literacy, students are provided opportunities to reflect on and understand how their own problems and concerns fit into and are reinforced by larger social forces. Once critical consciousness is achieved, students are then encouraged to take action and solve problems, as seen in the important workplace reforms that came about as a result of the settlement movement. Therefore, they are encouraged to extend their learning in order to both understand and improve oppressive circumstances.

The popular education movements inspired by Freire’s notion of critical literacy or critical pedagogy, for the most part, have operated outside of, and often in conflict with, state systems of education. Therefore, putting these ideological models of literacy into practice often seems difficult, if not impossible, within a state-run education system. However, many devoted educators have persisted in the pursuit of ideological models of literacy instruction, even within the constraints of a neoliberal, “work first” system in the United States. An examination of three examples of such models follow.
Project Hope is a convent operated by the Little Sisters of the Assumption just south of downtown Boston. Since 1947, the Little Sisters who lived at Project Hope have assisted area residents with health care and social work services. Then in 1983, they opened the convent to the neighborhood as a family shelter, “HOPE: House Open, People Enter,” one of the first family shelters in Massachusetts. From the beginning, the Little Sisters at Project Hope believed that community organizing would be the “key to addressing the neighborhood’s problems” (Rivera, 2008, p. 35). They collaborated with other community organizations and invited shelter residents to participate in creating programs that would improve their own life circumstances while also promoting community development. In 1990, therefore, when the Little Sisters asked a group of former shelter residents “what they needed, now that they had housing,” the women decided that they wanted GED classes, and so the Little Sisters established the Adult Learners Program (ALP).

Having no experience in adult education, the ALP’s director studied other programs, collected information, shared her findings with the students, and asked them, “What do you think about this?” She constantly asked for their input and let them know that the program was something they would have to “create together” (Rivera, 2008, p. 40). In this way, the Little Sisters continued their mission of community organizing by building an adult education program based solely on the needs and wants of the community members. From day one, the students possessed control of their own learning, and the director and instructors merely functioned as facilitators.

The ALP follows a popular education model, which in addition to providing literacy instruction also “aim[s] at fostering political empowerment and social change” (Rivera, 2008, p. 5). By relying primarily on private donations and grants, the ALP can reject the neoliberal
ideology that imposes certain structures or principles on other—mostly federal and state-funded—adult literacy education programs. In fact,

[The literacy philosophy of the ALP is diametrically opposed to the economically based tenets of Human Capital Theory and functional literacy. Building on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and other theorists and practitioners of democratic adult literacy education, the teachers and learners at the ALP developed a literacy practice based on self-awareness and cultural critique as the foundation of literacy skills. In their vision, literacy is a means of enabling democratic participation in social change, as well as individual advancement; indeed, the structure of the program stresses the value of collective learning, as learners work together to achieve the group and individual goals. (Rivera, 2008, p. 27).

Through the study of issues pertinent to their own lives, the students at Project Hope, all women, learn more than just basic reading and writing skills. According to Rivera’s (2008) study of the students and their lives beyond test scores, the ALP’s efforts evidenced the following achievements:

- Women’s efforts and growing desires to help other women in the community;
- Women’s increased self-confidence and sense of community;
- Women’s participation in community change projects, both within and outside of the popular education classes;
- Women’s increased participation in their children’s education;
- Women’s gains in reading, writing, and numeracy skills, and for some women, the successful attainment of a GED; and
- Women’s increased ability to advocate for their basic legal rights with regard to welfare, housing, health, and education. (Rivera, 2008, p. 96)

The popular education classes at Project Hope increased the women’s senses of community, personal power, and social activism, and enabled them to break through the prejudices they held against themselves. The women came to understand how social forces impact their everyday lives and how their problems are linked to socioeconomic inequalities. They learned that the discourses regarding individual choice are woven into a hegemony that oppresses them. (Rivera, 2008, p. 8).

The women’s increased community involvement as well as their ability to research and write about social and legal issues made them less likely to depend on social services in the future. They became advocates and volunteered their time to help other women overcome obstacles similar to their own, thus lessening the burden on the social welfare state.
Unfortunately, with the “work first” welfare reform that came about in the 1990s, Rivera (2008) observed that, even at the ALP, “the goals of popular education become subsumed in order to help women obtain the GED credential as soon as possible” (p. 126). Many students were forced to stop attending classes at the ALP in order to expedite their job search. Some of them were forced into welfare-to-work programs in order to develop work readiness skills. Students continued to suffer from poverty-related issues such as homelessness, poor health, and domestic violence. The ALP persisted in its popular education model, but because of “work first” policies, individuals had less time to pursue education, thus ultimately prolonging their dependence on the social welfare system.

Punitive welfare reform interrupted the gains that students had been making at the ALP. As a result of welfare reform, the majority of the participants in Rivera’s (2008) study remain in poverty, now as the “working poor.”

Remedial Writing in College: English Class Is Not the Only Literate Community on the Planet

Carter (2006), director of the remedial writing program at Texas A&M University-Commerce, declared: “I have learned to live with the test” (p. 97). By state mandate, all first year college students take a placement test which “measures the literacy ‘skills’ deemed necessary to ‘function’ in college according to the test-taker’s responses to multiple-choice, ‘objective’ questions about grammar and usage and a single persuasive ‘writing sample’ written within a specific time limit” (p. 95). Carter (2006) resisted the test and the basic writing programs that continue to be dominated by skills-based instruction. However, she has been unwilling to push back too hard. She feared that retaliating against the standardized placement test might raise the bar for admission standards, thus preventing “remedial”
students from attending college altogether. Plus, she wanted to guarantee that any “new measures” that replaced the “test” were theoretically sound (p. 97).

She solved this dilemma by basing the curriculum for the remedial writing program on the principles of Street’s ideological model. “Rather than perpetuating the autonomous model, this new framework treats literacy as a social practice” (Carter, 2006, p. 97). She explained that recognizing the value and use of multiple literacies in different contexts led me to develop what I call a ‘pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity’—that is, the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice (the academy) based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one. Helping our students develop rhetorical dexterity is the primary objective of our basic writing program. (Carter, 2006, p. 99).

She argued that students and teachers alike “must routinely and explicitly validate the complex systems in which these students are already considered literate by taking them seriously and asking our students to do the same” (Carter, 2006, p. 99).

Using students’ writing responses and exercises as a vehicle for helping students “trust in and make use of their own expertise—their own literacies,” the writing teachers asked students to consider:

(1) How do I put literacy to use in my own life among people that matter to me in places I know and understand, especially in those places and among those people where I am taken most seriously, as a meaningful member with ideas that matter? (2) How can I reuse (and reclaim) these strategies in new places and for new people who may have different needs and expectations? (Carter, 2006, p. 100).

By doing this, students were not led to believe that they would develop a set of skills that could automatically transfer from situation to situation. Instead, they would develop “rhetorical dexterity” in order to read, understand, and use a variety of cueing systems in constantly changing social, political, and cultural contexts.

Writing assignments encouraged students to explore literacy in a variety of contexts. For example, the first essay the students wrote asked them to explain the ways that they have
experienced literacy, paying particular attention to how they interpreted the “rules” for
school-based literacy practices. For the most part, students “begin the term by describing
themselves as ‘bad writers’ who ‘hate’ writing, a self-assessment they attribute to either a lack
of familiarity with ‘the rules’ for writing or an ‘obsession’ with the rules” (Carter, 2006, p.
108). Furthermore, the “rules” for writing in school seemed arbitrary and constantly
changing so that mastery eluded them. Different teachers, subjects, and projects required
different “rules,” and they expressed difficulty keeping up with the changing expectations.
For “struggling” writers, writing becomes synonymous with grammar and punctuation, and
they obsess over their lack of mastery of such concepts.

Following the initial essay, the students write investigatory essays on vernacular or
familiar literacies. They must explore the “rules” that “literate users must come to know,
understand, and be able to negotiate in order to be heard, understood, and taken seriously in
that particular community of practice (as a plumber, a deer hunter, or a fan fiction writer for
example)” (Carter, 2006, p. 104). Interestingly, at this point, students discover that people
who are “literate” in one community of practice can be entirely “illiterate” in another, such
as religion or football. They learn not to take their own knowledge and abilities for granted
because they find value in helping others learn about the “rules” governing different literacy
practices. According to Carter (2006), “The objective at this point is to learn how expertise
(i.e., ‘literacy’) functions when trying to communicate among people whose experiences,
interests, and expertise may differ in some rather substantial ways” (p. 104).

Students then wrote one essay on workplace literacies and another on leisure-time
literacies. They had to “consider the special tools, terminology, values, and body movements
that might be required to be accepted as members of these communities of practice,” and by
this point, “they begin to really articulate the specific events that taught them what they
needed to know to become insiders in the target community” (Carter, 2006, p. 105). For studies about workplace literacies, students referred to their own work experiences. Essays about leisure-time activities ranged from cheerleading to hunting and playing video games. By articulating the specific events and experiences that led to their learning the “rules” for these different literacy practices, students came to understand that no one literacy trumps all others because they are socially situated and dependent on context.

By the time students arrived at the final essay that asked them to compare and contrast their in and out-of-school literacy practices, most students were able to recognize and apply strategies for learning the “rules” across contexts, but also understood that the “rules” for different contexts necessarily differ. They were better able “to represent their experiences with school literacies in less ‘autonomous’ and more situated terms” (Carter, 2006, p. 105). By encouraging students to explore literacy as a social practice, particularly how they use literacy in different contexts, students came to value their own knowledge and see themselves as writers. One student reflected on the process at the end of the course in saying, “After writing [the essay about his workplace literacies], I had pretty well figured out that English writing class was not the only literate community on the planet” (Carter, 2006, p. 112).

Carter’s (2006) basic writing program was based on an understanding that “without working consciously against those things that we instinctively assume to be plain commonsense, the real rules will remain largely unavailable to outsiders and unteachable by insiders” (p. 106). At the beginning of the course, many of the students expressed frustration about the “rules” of writing. All their lives, they could not view themselves as writers because they had been led to believe that writing meant understanding particular “rules.” Carter’s course provided a forum for them to discuss what it means to be literate, what it
means to be a writer. By unpacking ideologies surrounding different social practices, students came to value their own knowledge and see themselves as literate beings within multiple and varying contexts. They learned that academic literacy is neither natural nor universal.

All the while they learned about multiple literacies, however, the “rules” that had plagued them for so long became easier because, in finding purpose and passion for writing, students spent more time editing and revising papers. They valued the contributions that their understandings made to the knowledge shared with others, and they wanted their papers to communicate their ideas, so they polished them. Carter’s ideological model of literacy instruction in this basic writing course thus enabled students to master “basic skills” as required by the standardized test, but also explored power structures and oppressive restraints associated with dominant forms of literacy.

The Workers Education Program: Popular Education for English Language Learners

The Workers Education Program (WEP), established in 1991, is a nonprofit educational program that serves Service Employees International Union (SEIU) members in Massachusetts. Through the use of both public and private funding, the WEP develops labor and training programs for workers, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and adult literacy and basic skills education classes. Classes are based on Freirian principles of critical pedagogy. In addition to learning basic skills, students (union members) are provided a “forum for them to critically examine problems and their root causes, develop strategies, and take action as union members to address the problems” (Utech, 2002, p. 188).
In 1998, the SEIU Local 285 in Massachusetts began offering ESOL classes at its union hall. Before then, classes had been held on location at different work sites. However, as Utech (2002) acknowledged,

In WEP’s worksite-based ESOL and ABE classes … holding classes on-site has meant that supervisors were often close by, sometimes making students and teachers reluctant to talk above controversial or delicate work-related topics. The tensions and complexities of the labor-management context sometimes put a damper on critical analysis of workplace issues. Teachers have often had to sneak participatory class work in the back door and either present this work with a spin that management will accept or not even report participatory class work to management. (p. 189).

Moving classes off-site to the union hall allowed students to speak freely, build critical consciousness, and develop language skills without fear of repercussions at the workplace. Literacy is indeed a social practice because the type of literacy students engaged in differed based on both the space and place for its use.

The SEIU sponsored the classes and matched a grant provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE). Together with the Workers Education Program (WEP), the SEIU “hoped to increase members’ understanding of and participation in the union, and to build leadership among immigrant workers” (Utech, 2002, p. 187). The stark difference between this worker education program and others, such as Henry Ford’s, is that these workers learn via union-sponsored programs rather than via employer-sponsored programs. Unions have an inherent interest in helping workers learn how to address inequalities and injustices. Therefore, rather than employers trying to create better employees, the union is trying to create better union members, and popular education suits the ideology of the union itself.

When the first class met, students and teachers worked together to establish goals. The only professed student goals related to language development; they wanted to improve reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and speaking skills. The teacher, therefore, had to add
workplace concerns and the union to the goals list because she wanted to create “union-centered, participatory lessons that would uncover students’ issues and concerns and help us examine them together” (p. 190). The teacher in a critical literacy classroom must act as a guide to bring about and facilitate discussions of issues relevant to students’ lives. The students, unaware of the possibility of addressing workplace concerns and problems, would not necessarily have the confidence or awareness to add these to the list of goals themselves. Freire (1970) explained that the oppressed often gravitate and aspire toward the dominant culture's way of doing things because they believe that they are in fact inferior and unknowledgeable. Therefore, the teacher as facilitator in the WEP ESOL class had to help students recognize power structures and their positions within them.

In order to generate discussion, the teacher provided a short story about a nurse’s aide. They talked about working conditions and students devised a questionnaire to interview students from other worksites about their experiences. From the interviews, they compiled the information into charts and used them as a further catalyst for comparing and contrasting workplace conditions. This lesson is an excellent example of how a critical literacy classroom promotes dialogue in addition to providing real-life practice with language skills. She used other reading selections as catalysts for discussions about power structures and differentials in their workplaces. From there, she provided readings about worker rights and union membership to encourage students to examine what it meant to be a union member and how members could take action to stand up for their rights. They learned how to read their union contracts as well as ways to conduct research in order to find additional information or clarification. Throughout each of these activities that were designed to promote awareness of power hierarchies and worker rights, students also developed reading and writing strategies and built their vocabulary.
For one lesson, the group invited a union representative to class to help them brainstorm strategies for a problem at a particular work site. Their work in class led them to take action to resolve a contract dispute. Through the WEP ESOL classes at the union hall, adult learners, therefore, improved their basic skills in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. The improvements came as the result of engaged discussions, research, and writing activities that centered on the real-life issues and concerns of the students themselves. Rather than acquiring basic skills through grammar drills and worksheets, by situating reading and writing in social practices, students developed greater confidence in their reading, writing, and speaking abilities. They demonstrated this confidence by becoming increasingly involved in union activities.

*Adult Literacy Education in the United States: A Social Problem, Not a Technological Problem*

Each of the three programs described above embraces an ideological model of literacy. They recognize multiple forms of literacy, and they understand literacy as a social practice. They reject the autonomous model, which positions literacy as a natural and universal skill set transferable among and between contexts. Importantly, these committed educators demonstrate that it is possible to “live with the test” while pursuing alternatives based on ideological principles of literacy instruction. These programs demonstrate that adult literacy programs can assist learners in acquiring “basic skills” in order to demonstrate measurable performance outcomes while simultaneously engaging in critical inquiry. In ideological models of adult literacy instruction, students are provided opportunities to exercise their literacy “skills” in meaningful ways. It is not just that they can read and write; they also know how to wield reading and writing as weapons against the status quo. Therefore, students can and do overcome their own autonomous understandings of literacy,
and they exhibit successes beyond the “test” as a result of their participation in these classrooms.

As a result of the mainstreaming of the neoliberal ideology, rather than recognizing real problems like structural racism or class and gender inequalities, Americans now turn the problem back on the victims. By invoking values of “personal responsibility,” citizens do not have to take responsibility for the problems that continue to plague society; instead they blame individuals. Quit being lazy. Get a job. Take some initiative. Neoliberalism “guarantees” “individual freedom,” so all one must do is choose to exercise it in order to succeed. Those who “choose” not to exercise their “freedoms” will fail. Who will argue with freedom? Who will argue that laziness is a positive trait? Everyone agrees that “individual freedom” is a good thing, thus by embracing neoliberalism as “common sense,” those who “choose” not to exercise their freedoms deserve what they get; nothing is holding them back; they are “free.”

However, accusations of laziness, irresponsibility, and poor life choices are just a veil for the structural and institutional problems present in American society. Harvey (2005) explained that “Values of individual freedom and social justice are not … necessarily compatible. Pursuit of social justice presupposes social solidarities and a willingness to submerge individual wants, needs, and desires in the cause of some more general struggle for, say, social equality or environmental justice” (p. 41). The neoliberal emphasis on individual freedom prevents people from coming together because it places so much value on individualism. If Americans continue to place so much value on individual freedom, and buy into “every man for himself;” then how can citizens come together and take collective action for social justice? Thus, adult literacy programs influenced by neoliberal policies will always struggle take up some of the principles of ideological models because the central
purposes of social transformation, critical consciousness, and collaborative learning run
counter to the goals articulated by neoliberal policies.

Brandt and Clinton (2002) said: “Where anyone is observed reading and writing
something, it is well worth asking who else is getting something out of it; often that
somebody will not be at the scene” (p. 347). In autonomous models of literacy instruction,
access is granted, sanctioned, or coerced “by more powerful others” (p. 349). Further, they
explained that we should “always ask questions about the literacy materials in a setting. How
did they get there? Who paid for them or provided them, delivered them, or imposed them?
Who is responsible for them? How are they controlled or shared? What is the cost or
obligation to the user for using them?” (p. 350).

Power relations and ideologies are present in every autonomous model. Instructors
and students must learn to ask whose ideology is represented in this classroom? Who is in
control of the literacy instruction? Are topics and materials self-selected by students? Or are
topics and materials imposed by a greater authority? What/Whose values are “hidden” in
those materials? What assumptions do the materials make about their users? By examining
learning materials, power relations (or differentials) become evident in the literacy practices
taking place in a given setting.

As Willinksy (1991) argued, educational endeavors must “make literacy a subject of
inquiry, rather than treating it simply as a skill to acquire” (p. 180). Adult literacy programs
can and should study literacy as a subject of inquiry. At present, many students submit
themselves to instruction because they perceive test scores and credentials as tickets to a
better life. However, that is an autonomous understanding of literacy. Thousands of adults
get pieces of paper indicating they have passed a test, but still have little to show for it
because they have not learned to value the significance of reading and writing in their own
lives. They have not learned that literacy as defined by tests is too narrow, and measurable skills alone will not automatically grant them “success.” If policymakers truly want to lift people out of poverty, increase the number of high school and college graduates, and so on, then they need to promote literacy instruction that fosters expanded uses and understandings of reading and writing as they exist in “real life” contexts.

“[U]nlike putting a man on the moon, adult illiteracy is a people problem not a problem of technology” (Kolenbrander, 1987, p. 22). Therefore, policymakers must refrain from seeking technological solutions to the perceived deficiencies of adult learners. Welfare reform and the Workforce Investment Act have removed the people from the solution. “Solving” adult illiteracy has become a quest to “solve” welfare spending and reduce the welfare rolls. It has all become a numbers game that robs adult learners of opportunities to achieve critical consciousness, to develop reading and writing “skills” in real-life contexts, and most importantly, to find value in themselves. Neoliberal adult literacy policies oppress individuals by fostering a self-depreciating attitude. Neoliberals blame the victims, and the victims blame themselves. In this environment, policymakers cannot expect people to experience the successes supposedly intended or expected for American citizens. As Hayes (1999) put it, “Current policies are aimed at ending welfare, not ending poverty” (p. 12).

So much focus on the “individual” has left so many people isolated and powerless. By putting all their chips on the “individual,” citizens of the United States have ignored the masses. What should adult literacy educators do? Should they learn to “live with the test”? Or should they challenge it? Concerns for losing public funding for adult literacy education programs has led far too many educators to become complicit in the oppressive adult literacy education system in the United States. Adult literacy instructors should live with the test if they must, but they should not let the test dictate their instruction. As evidenced above, it is
possible to maintain public funding and stay true to the ideological model of literacy. Instructors and students alike should become advocates for more informed policies by engaging in critical inquiry in their classrooms and overcoming the false consciousness associated with the autonomous model of literacy. Adult literacy education could thus return to its roots and become a practice of freedom, rather than a practice of oppression.

Over the past three centuries both the ideological and autonomous models of literacy have flourished in the U.S. at different times. Currently, the autonomous model prevails. The autonomous model of literacy does not allow for critical engagement with social issues because it does not recognize them. Literacy in the autonomous model is tied to the dominant social structures in society, so members of non-dominant groups continue to experience oppression. However, if other forms of literacy are excluded from schooling, the dominant social structures cannot be upset; social hierarchies remain in place, and non-dominant groups continue to experience oppression, even if they do not recognize it as such. Ideological models of literacy support multiple literacies. In particular, ideological models typically engage in a critique of dominant literacies and allow students to study power differentials in society that are tied to different forms of literacy.

Within the confines of the neoliberal ideology, the autonomous model of literacy has become entrenched in the American adult literacy education system. However, examples of successful ideological models have been examined, and educators should make every attempt to continue to promote ideological principles in their classrooms. Although this is clearly a different era from the colonial period, the lyceums, and industrialization, educators in the Information Age must encourage their students to explore power structures in society that are tied to different forms of literacy as well as their own status in them, thus empowering students to determine their own goals and the means to achieve them.


