

**Forum: Immigration and ESL***(Part 3 of 3)*

# Showing Up for Immigrant Learners (and Each Other)

Andy Nash, World Education, Inc.

We are witnessing a mounting campaign in this country to blame immigrants and refugees for our economic insecurity, rampant violent crime, and a diminished social safety net. Under this banner, our government is using immigration policy to turn away asylum seekers and refugees, separate children from parents, and threaten the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of communities that have lived in the United States for a generation and consider this their home.

Turning us against our immigrant neighbors is not a new trend. It is an example of a time-tested divide-and-conquer strategy that is quite effective at redirecting legitimate grievances (low wages, unaffordable health care, etc.) away from the powerful who benefit and toward an easily identifiable (by accent or skin color) “other.” And the result of this targeting, as Larotta notes in her piece, “Immigrants Learning English in a Time of Anti-Immigrant Sentiment,” is that many immigrant groups are reporting increased incidents of intimidation and harassment, and many English language learners who come to our programs describe living in fear.

Educators everywhere are trying to figure out how to address this new reality – how to make sure that all students feel safe and able to learn, how to encourage critical thinking about daily events, and how to break

down the manufactured fear of black and brown immigrants that keeps us from coming together to build alliances. None of us wants to be the frog in the proverbial pot that waits as the temperature slowly rises until it’s too late to do anything.

There are things we can do. Some involve challenging the conditions that fuel immigration - the poverty, repression, and danger that drives people from their homes - and others focus on creating the conditions *here* that nurture connection to one another and discovery of the commonalities and differences in our experiences.

In adult education classes, we can demonstrate our commitment to creating safe learning spaces for all, and to thinking critically with our students about the causes and effects of this ongoing campaign. Below, I share and build upon some of the promising practices I’ve seen implemented in adult ABE and ESOL programs.

## **For Classroom Teachers**

In the classroom, we need to think first about immediate harm reduction, and then we can plan for a curriculum that includes serious practice of the critical analysis skills highlighted in our rigorous learning standards.

*Build safety through community.* Immigrants

attend all kinds of adult education classes, not just English language classes. Many teachers include activities that engage students in sharing their experiences and finding their commonalities – not just personal characteristics such as how many sisters they have but talking about how an issue touches their lives on a daily basis – getting their kids to eat, finding a living-wage job, dealing with weather (climate change) disasters. Sharing experiences puts the voices of students at the center, developing their agency in naming, discussing, and analyzing issues and ideas. And building relationships with real people is a powerful inoculation against hate.

There are practical ways to do this kind of community-building that also attend to language learning, with all the related grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary building. You can find wonderful examples in the archived webinars of the Immigrant Learning Center<sup>1</sup> and the New England Literacy Resource Center<sup>2</sup>. See also *The Change Agent*<sup>3</sup> and Welcoming America's toolkit for adult educators<sup>4</sup>.

*Teach analysis of the big picture.* While it's important to note current events as they are happening, educators don't have the capacity to respond to daily upheavals – nor is it helpful to focus on what drains and disheartens. We can instead help students step back and study an issue more deeply by organizing instruction into thematic units that encourage students to name their concerns, ask and investigate their own questions, and develop the language skills to express informed opinions. This would include opportunities to consider “why” questions – why this? why now? – that honor the ability of students at any level to draw on their learning and their life experiences to analyze what they see.

Here's a quick mention of some topics, skill areas, and questions you might include in a unit:

- Media literacy: What is reliable news? What is fake news? Why is there fake news? How do we distinguish objectively descriptive from subjectively persuasive language and evaluate the bias of a text/source? (Resources: Mind Over Media<sup>5</sup>, The News Literacy Project<sup>6</sup>, “Don't Get Duped”<sup>7</sup>)
- History: People created our institutions and systems (our schools, our economic system, etc.) and people can change them. History offers up many examples of how communities and social movements have been able to advance justice in the past and can do so again. History also helps us understand the origins of current policies, attitudes, and behaviors. But since that history is usually written by the “victor,” we need to check multiple sources and remind students to consider: Whose perspective is reflected here? Whose is missing? (Resources: Teaching for Change<sup>8</sup>, Zinn Education Project<sup>9</sup>)
- Critical analysis: How is a problem defined by different stakeholders? What questions do we need to ask in order to fully understand an issue (e.g., Who benefits? Who is hurt? Who is making money?)? (Resources: Right Question Institute<sup>10</sup>)

In developing a unit on Immigration (for ESOL or ABE), in addition to all the level-specific lessons we might do about the fact that people throughout history have been on the move (using maps, graphs, images, and other visuals to support learning), we might consider the categories above to help frame class discussions and activities:

Building community: What do you know about your own family origins (Native American, immigrant, refugee, or enslaved)? What is a question you have about your family origin?

History: Why do people come here? What is

happening in their countries? (Extra credit: What role has the U.S. played in their countries? In your own?)

*Critical analysis:* How do asylum-seekers describe their reasons for coming to the border? What does the administration suggest are the reasons? What does the evidence suggest?

*Media literacy:* How is terminology used (asylum-seekers vs. invaders) to influence a reader about immigration? What other language devices are used to persuade readers?

*Find each other.* It can feel disorienting to work in a field that has become almost solely focused on workforce preparation in a time when basic human dignity and connection are on the line. To keep moving forward, concerned educators need to support one another as we continue our own self-education, speak up where we can, share resources, and reflect on the assumptions underlying our work. What are the implications, for example, of defining the purpose of adult education to be almost exclusively well-being through individual employment? What will we do when we're expected to turn away students based on a newly criminalized immigration status?

We can help each other grapple with these perplexing questions and find the courage to follow the internal moral compass that points us toward protecting the rights of our immigrant (and otherwise targeted) friends. (Resources: LINCS discussion boards, Facebook groups, local immigrant and racial justice groups).

## For Program Leaders

Program leaders have a crucial role to play in communicating support for all students.

*Explicitly demonstrate solidarity with vulnerable students.* Adults who are at risk of being targeted

(immigrant, LGBTQ) anywhere in the community need to know that the program is a safe space. Leaders in many programs are making it clear (through banners or public statements) that hate is not welcome in their programs and that all residents are invited there to study and learn. Such declarations set the tone of the program and model how to speak up in solidarity with our neighbors.

*Organize program-wide projects.* Celebrations of any sort that bring students together informally to learn, mingle or break bread do a lot to build community and dispel fears. And as Larotta suggests, creating space for program-wide learning (bringing in speakers to talk about community resources, events, or issues; organizing student-researched voter education campaigns; hosting “Know your Rights” workshops and legal clinics; or hosting an awareness event about the upcoming Census 2020 – the importance and the risks) opens up opportunities for students to interact about a topic of common interest. Very important is introducing students to community organizations, both service organizations that can help them build their support networks and activist/advocacy organizations they can join to organize collectively for themselves.

## For Adult Education Advocates

*Advocate for inclusive services.* Funding sources each come with their own rules and regulations. At a time when federal and some state funders are looking for ways to limit the access of our immigrant students to all kinds of services, it is incumbent upon us to push back on those restrictions and to seek out other funding that allows us to continue full services to all residents of our communities. The recent proposal to broaden the way the government determines who may be a “public charge” (and therefore ineligible for public services) is just one example of efforts

to vilify and exclude current and future language learners from our programs.

*Build alliances.* Adult education advocates have historically been guided by the maxim that we need to focus our advocacy message exclusively on adult education funding. And while that targeted message has yielded certain results, the practice of staying in our advocacy silos competing for funds has not advanced a united cross-issue movement that reflects the intersectionality of our students' (and our) struggles. Adults are not just immigrants or students or parents or patients or workers, and now more than ever we need to build alliances with all the movements working to help people get free. The Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, for example, has allied with labor organizations on the *Fight for \$15* and with

immigrant rights organizations on many issues; and conversely, those organizations have added adult education funding to their own priority lists.

## Conclusion

I would like to be part of an educational community that helps one another find the courage to creatively resist unjust immigration and economic policies where we can. I don't want to have to look back one day and wonder what I was doing as xenophobia was being used to destroy lives and entrench the powerful. I am so grateful to the adult education coalitions, justice organizations, and individual educators who are refusing to be too busy to respond to these dangers. I hope we can all find ways to show up for our immigrant learners and each other.

## For More Information

- <sup>1</sup> Immigrant Learning Center ([www.ilctr.org/promoting-immigrants/ilc-workshops/](http://www.ilctr.org/promoting-immigrants/ilc-workshops/))
- <sup>2</sup> How to be an Effective Ally to Adult Students, The New England Literacy Resource Center (<https://bit.ly/2AyzjzU>)
- <sup>3</sup> The Change Agent magazine for teaching resources and compelling student writings ([changeagent.nelrc.org](http://changeagent.nelrc.org)).
- <sup>4</sup> Welcoming America's *Instructors' Toolkit for Building Bridges Across Communities* (<https://www.welcomingamerica.org/content/instructors%E2%80%99-toolkit-building-bridges-across-communities>)
- <sup>5</sup> Media Education Lab's Mind Over Media webpage (<https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/>) offers teaching resources to support students to think critically about propaganda and the messages all around them.

- <sup>6</sup> The News Literacy Project, (<http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org>) is a national education nonprofit offering nonpartisan, independent programs that teach students how to be critical media consumers in the digital age.
- <sup>7</sup> Alicia Shepard, Don't Get Duped, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/2016/12/12/savvy-news-consumers-guide-not-get-duped>)
- <sup>8</sup> Teaching for Change ([teachingforchange.org](http://teachingforchange.org))
- <sup>9</sup> Zinn Education Project ([Zinnproject.org](http://Zinnproject.org))
- <sup>10</sup> Right Question Institute ([rightquestion.org](http://rightquestion.org))