

## A Tale of Two Adult Learners: From Adult Basic Education to Degree Completion

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*This action research study sought to understand what contributed to the success of two adult learners who had previously been left behind by the educational system. The findings revealed the importance of supportive educators, as well as a personal support system. In addition, their participation in this study was an empowering experience for the students.*

Several years ago, two women, embarked on a similar course. Marie, a single mother of three, living in the United Kingdom, ended her formal education at the age of fifteen. Cynthia, a married mother of two, living in the United States, formally dropped out of high school at the age of 16. Both struggled with basic academic skills. In spite of these barriers, both women enrolled in educational programs to enhance their skills. This led to a transformation of both of their lives.

After losing her job and having her relationship break down several months later, Marie found herself receiving public benefits, depressed, and struggling to make ends meet. Her motivation to enroll in an adult computer literacy course was the Additional Loan Parent Benefit, an initiative from the British government to encourage participants to engage in education to enhance their employment marketability. Similarly, Cynthia decided to complete her General Education Development (GED) exam to be able to take a sign language course at her local community college which she could not attend without a high school diploma. Although most students do not complete formal university studies after literacy and GED programs, Marie and Cynthia did continue their education. Marie completed an adult nursing diploma program in March 2009. She works as a hospital nurse. Cynthia recently completed her bachelor's degree in Applied Behavioral Sciences from an adult accelerated program. She is a certified addictions counselor, and is taking coursework towards her master's degree in counseling. In

spite of all the odds being stacked against them, Marie and Cynthia are now educated and confident women.

Marie and Cynthia's success begs the question of how educators can support their marginalized students, who come into programs lacking not only basic academic skills, but also a belief in their abilities and low self-esteem. Upon meeting at the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning in Stirling, Scotland in the summer of 2007, two collegiate educators, Vickie and Carrie, found themselves discussing this question at length. In order to begin to understand the questions they were asking themselves, Vicky and Carrie introduced two of their students, Marie and Cynthia, connecting them online to share their learning journeys with each other. It is this communication that provides the data for the study.

### Methodology

Action research is a method in which the participants examine their educational practice strategically by using research techniques (Ferrance, 2000). Participatory action research (PAR) has emerged in recent years as an approach which strives for both social transformation and "consciousness raising" (Freire, 2000) among the underprivileged and minorities, where an ever growing underclass is accepted as the norm. The "underclass" is cut off from the mainstream working class and left behind (Clarke, 2002). As is the case with many persons in these groups, being labeled poor and struggling in school had impacted Marie and Cynthia's self esteem.

At the core of this study, is the fact that the students were not simply participants. They were co-researchers with the adult educators, guiding the study through their email communication and discussions at a conference they attended with their faculty mentors, Vicky and Carrie. The online conversation was open-ended and developed completely by the students. Vicky met in person with Marie and Carrie and Cynthia also met throughout the study.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action learning project was for the educators to gain in-depth knowledge from two students who

beat the odds by being highly successful in their academic pursuits as non-traditional adult learners. This information can assist adult educators in transitioning marginalized adult students from basic skills courses into post-secondary education.

### Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What led the learners to continue their studies beyond the original program they enrolled in?
2. What advice do the learners have for educators who serve adult students with previous educational experiences similar to their own?

### Background Literature

This section provides a brief overview of policies that have influenced the changing face of Skills for Life (SfL) in Britain. It also presents information on the GED exam in the U.S., and its impact on participants' transition into university education.

#### *Literacy Education in Britain*

Adult literacy, language, and numeracy learning has moved from being considered a fringe activity within the field of adult education to holding a central and pivotal role in England. The British government has given priority in successive policy initiatives to tackling the extent of low literacy, numeracy and language skills in the adult population. SfL is considered essential to improving the skills level and therefore the performance of the UK economy (HM Treasury, 2006).

A review of the literacy and numeracy capabilities of the adult workforce in England, reported that as many as seven million adults in England had literacy and numeracy needs. In response to these findings the SfL strategy (DfEE, 2001) was launched in March 2001. Priority groups were unemployed adults and others receiving benefits. The goal was to increase the skills and employability of these target groups. The purpose of this initiative was not, however, to prepare the participants for university education.

#### *GED Completion*

Introduced in the 1940s, the General Education Development (GED) exams were a means for World War II veterans to complete their

high school education. The GED consists of five exams including reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. In order to earn a GED, students are required to pass all five sections (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998; Tokpah & Padak, 2003). Currently, five percent of all first-year college students in the United States are GED recipients (Tokpah & Padak, 2003).

When comparisons were made between GED degree recipients and high school students, similar scores on the five tests were earned by GED recipients and high school seniors (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998). In spite of these test scores, research suggests the skills of the GED holders' are not comparable to those of high school graduates. One possible reason is that GED holders might lack the in-depth knowledge and skills needed in post-secondary education due to a shorter period of instruction than those earning a high school diploma. Support for this idea can be found in a study of students entering two-year colleges which discovered that more GED recipients than high school graduates were placed in developmental reading, English, and math courses (Brown, 2000).

In 2000, 66 percent of those taking the GED exam indicated that they were planning to continue their education. However, only 30 to 35 percent of those who passed the exam actually obtained any post-secondary education, and only five to ten percent completed at least a year of post-secondary education (Tyler, 2001). The discrepancy between those wishing to complete a college education and those actually doing so is cause for concern.

Since learners frequently have difficulty transitioning from literacy education and GED programs into higher education, the cases of Marie and Cynthia, described above, are somewhat unique. They are positive examples of the kind of success such programs can lead to. Their experiences might be duplicated more frequently if we know what contributed to their academic success.

## Findings

The email communication provided the two collegiate educators with critical information to support and enhance their practice. This section summarizes the dialogue between Marie and Cynthia as it relates to the original research questions.

### What led Marie and Cynthia to continue their studies beyond the original program?

Marie and Cynthia both discussed the importance of their teachers. When talking about her first computer teacher, Bill, Marie explained how important it was that he never talked down to her. She explained how she frequently struggled with the computer classes, but rather than dismissing her as a failure, Bill persevered and encouraged her to continue the course remarking, "I've got to hand it to you Marie, you keep coming back to class no matter how much you struggle; you're very determined."

Marie later met Vicky, her literacy tutor. Vicky's support went beyond the classroom. At the time that Marie was studying with Vicky, Vicky began her doctoral research and asked for volunteers willing to take part in her study. Marie became part of Vicky's participatory action research group. Vicky worked with Marie and other members of the group to facilitate the participants working together in an egalitarian way, engaging in negotiations and developing solutions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000) to create a curriculum that met their needs and would be a model for future learners. When asked why she chose to take part in study, Marie said, "I could not say no to Vicky. She always took a personal interest in me. It made me feel good." As a participant in the study, Marie started meeting with Vicky at the college where the basic skills courses were offered. They later met off-campus to put them on equal ground. Vicky did not wish to be in a position of power. Marie credits this relationship with Vicky as the motivating factor of her continuing her education.

Vicky inspired me with my education as she always told me that I could do it; she made me believe that I could do something with my life. Before I used to think that what you were dealt in your life was your lot; she made me see that this is not true. Life is what you make it. Vicky believed in me and helped me to believe in myself.

Over the course of the four-year study, Marie and Vicky developed a personal relationship based on mutual respect. Vicky recalls that when Marie began class, she sat in the back and would not look anyone in the eye. Learners who attend adult literacy classes often have to overcome significant barriers to gain the confidence and courage to return to learning, in some cases bringing with them "fear of violence, threat and intimidation" (Barton & Hamilton, 2007, p.165). Even when learners have been in vulnerable situations, facing domestic violence or other social or emotional difficulties, adult literacy education can often be a critical space to support and empower them to take agency, no matter what their educational trajectory. Learners' stories, poetry and images were used as foils to represent the generative themes in the lives of the learners that attended the literacy classes. On progressing from the

literacy education course and beginning university study, Marie wrote an easy read autobiography. It looked at the motivation for returning to education (McNamara, 2007).

Marie's story is used with current students to open up a dialogue with learners to explore experiences of violence, poverty and illiteracy, which many learners face, and how these problems can be addressed. To support the use of the easy read autobiography assignment with other learners, holistic resources (Duckworth, 2008) were developed. The resources encourage learners to consider their own life situation, their hopes for the future and aims to help them identify a series of actions they can take towards achieving their goals. Together with using these holistic resources, previous students who had overcome similar barriers visit the class to serve as role models to encourage the learners to reach their potential.

Marie points out that after changing her self-perception and realizing that she could turn her life around, it was important for her to have "some good people in it." Before meeting Vicky, Marie had no support system. Vicky's role went beyond classroom teacher. Marie explained how Vicky always made her focus on the things she did well, rather than her weak academic skills. Vicky would complement her on her parenting skills, home decorating and gardening. This helped Marie realize that she had skills to offer others.

Like Marie, Cynthia had instructors who inspired her, but she also had the support of her husband and friends. Explaining her initial experience in higher education, Cynthia states:

At first, when I began my class, I felt embarrassed, inadequate, stupid, no confidence, ashamed, and thought there was something wrong with me because I could not write a school paper for a class requirement. A lawyer friend of mine helped me to write a couple of paragraphs to begin my first research paper that was extremely difficult for me. I had written so few papers in junior high and high school.

Thinking about her instructors, Cindy states, "I recall my teachers, and there were many that were patient and understanding that I was an older student (46 years old) returning to school after 30 years." She had one teacher at the community college who told her she would be a good counselor. When Cynthia inquired how she knew this, she called her "a diamond in the rough." This was a powerful comment to Cynthia, giving her confidence in her potential. After transferring from the community college to a university, Cynthia met Carrie. Carrie had recently completed

her doctoral degree when she taught one of Cynthia's classes. Cynthia was inspired by Carrie's story, and started thinking about continuing her education, and possibly earning a doctorate as well. She recalls, "I remember Carrie saying 'set the bar a little higher.' At that time I did not even know I would be capable of striving to reach for more, but now I do."

While Marie and Cynthia entered adult education with disadvantages, they both learned to take advantage of the opportunities that were presented to them. Marie found that in Vicky, who went from being her teacher to being a role model, confidante, and friend. Cynthia encountered many people who encouraged her. Unlike Marie, Cynthia had support from her husband and a few close friends. She also discovered classmates and teachers who supported her in her educational journey.

Both women were fragile when they started their coursework. They lacked self-confidence and questioned their ability to succeed in learning new skills and information. Marie and Cynthia attribute initial success in their new learning environments and support from teachers as the reason they continued their education. In addition, they both found their learning experiences personally meaningful. They were able to use and apply the information they gained from the coursework. This immediate application, combined with a supportive learning environment, gave them the motivation and confidence to continue their studies.

### **What advice do Marie and Cynthia have for educators who work with students with previous educational experiences similar to their own?**

"If it had been a teacher I was used to as a child I would have walked out. He never made me feel fake. He was always happy to repeat things without rolling his eyes or giving the look," says Marie speaking about Bill, the first teacher she had when she entered the literacy program. Marie's words are powerful. As an adult learner, she feared the classroom. Her childhood memories caused a great deal of anxiety for her and Bill's patience and support kept her coming back. Marie lacked a social network that supported her in her education. As a single mother of three, she rarely had someone encouraging and cheering her on. Vicky provided her with that.

One of the things that Cynthia appreciated about her educational experience was realizing she was capable of learning more than she expected. Cynthia did not meet Carrie until her senior year of college. Even at that point, she still struggled as a learner, especially with writing. She states, "You [Carrie] told me I could gradually set the bar higher and I am grateful for you planting the seed that I can reach beyond and improve."

Learners such as Marie and Cynthia often have to unlearn messages from their past. What they are telling us is that educators can and should help learners let go of their educational pasts. This effort might need to take place outside of the classroom in a neutral setting. Sometimes teaching might also include un-teaching and helping the learner break free of their past perceptions regarding their inability to learn.

As educators, our words and actions are more powerful than we sometimes realize. For example, Cynthia repeatedly mentioned Carrie teaching her she could “raise the bar.” This was a statement Carrie made in the classroom, never realizing the impact it might have on a student. It is also significant to realize that previous experiences lead some learners to construct different meanings from the same words. We need to be sensitive and in tune to what we say and how we say it.

Although the information gained from Marie and Cynthia’s online dialogue is useful to the practice of adult education for marginalized adult learners, the conversation did not end with the online communication. The most significant event that transpired as a result of this study was the award of an international scholarship from the Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA), providing the opportunity for Marie and Vicky to attend their 2008 annual conference in Mobile, AL. This provided Marie and Cynthia the opportunity to meet. In addition, they co-presented a session with Vicky and Carrie to the other adult educators attending the conference. This created a critical space for consciousness raising or conscientization (Freire, 2000). Additionally, it provided each of the conference delegates who attended their session an opportunity to question their assumptions about adult learners, providing a critical inquiry of their pre-conceived ideas. This was an empowering and transformative (Mezirow, 1991) experience for the students and their faculty mentors. The following section provides information about the conference experience and its impact on Marie and Cynthia, as well as Vicky, Carrie, and some of the conference participants.

### Engaging in the Critical Dialogue

After being at the conference for a day and a half, the four presenters sat together to discuss how they would approach the presentation that was scheduled for the following day. Marie quickly volunteered, “I am willing to answer any question.” From that comment, it was decided that Carrie and Vicky would begin the session by explaining how the four of them had come together.

Marie began by telling the participants that she returned to school for personal reasons and one of the participants asked if she could inquire what those reasons were. This simple question led her to relax and share

her story. The room was set up in a circle, with the four presenters seated at the front. Marie and Cynthia both stated that this circle made them feel as if they were engaging in an informal conversation. Marie elaborated, “I felt more confident [sitting]. I did not have to stand up and answer questions about me. You are high ranking doctors, teachers, and I did not feel a hierarchy. We were all on one level.” She also stated that knowing Cynthia also helped her. They knew they were in this together.

Cynthia had similar feelings about the experience. She explained, I was happy to sit down for a presentation with Marie. It was less intimidating, and I was calmer, more able to be myself, and comfortable. I was delighted to have the experience to get to know Marie and felt I could identify with our common backgrounds, limitations, struggles, and determination to succeed with all the obstacles in our way.

It was interesting for the faculty mentors to observe Marie and Cynthia during the presentation. They thwarted the agenda and began asking the delegates questions. We could visibly see the change and confidence that was developed during the presentation. By asserting themselves and asking the participants questions, the students took the power in this situation. They became self-confident and articulated their experiences clearly and openly. They provided the session attendees with practical information to assist them as educators when working with similar students. This is something that neither Vicky nor Carrie could have imagined when first meeting Marie and Cynthia. Comments from Marie and Cynthia, along with observing them together at the conference, demonstrated how significant they had become to each other. Their online communication had provided them with mutual support during their studies and led to mutual respect. The two learners openly shared their challenges with each other throughout the presentation and provided each other with unconditional support. Even prior to meeting, Marie and Cynthia had broadened their support network to include each other. In fact, well over a year after meeting, they continue to email each other.

### Conclusion

This action research project had a life-changing impact on each of participants. Cynthia and Marie helped Vicky and Carrie become aware of how their actions and attitudes might be perceived by their students. Since Marie and Cynthia had returned to education feeling vulnerable and fragile, they needed to overcome their fears about returning to the classroom. Each identified with instructors who made them feel good

about themselves and stated that they were pleased to find their teachers emphasized the positive rather than the negative.

By sharing their experiences, Marie and Cynthia reminded Carrie and Vicky of some very important aspects of their roles as educators. Although the power relationship between teacher and student naturally exists in a formal classroom setting, such power should never equate to oppression. Cynthia emphasized,

I will say to become better teachers be an inspiration, a good educational role model, have empathy, patience, humility, and a genuine concern for students, and please never give up on them; their greatest work is yet to come. Sometimes a teacher may not just develop reading or writing skills; you are developing a person who might not have been in an educational or classroom environment for a very long time and it could be new for them.

We have a great deal of power as educators. We have the power to support and nurture; we have the power to suppress and control. Although Vickie and Carrie were aware of this prior to this study, this experience illuminated this for them. Our words and actions can provide encouragement to our students. They can also add to any insecurity that already exists within the learner.

As we work with our students, we must always show them respect. This respect includes taking an interest in their lives and listening to them. Although students often come to us with academic challenges, they each have life skills that should be acknowledged. For example, when Vicky complimented Marie on her decorating and gardening skills, this increased Marie's self-esteem. This transferred to Marie as a learner. By realizing that she had talents her teacher admired, Marie began to see herself as someone with potential to be successful in other areas. Similarly, Cynthia was encouraged by an instructor who called her "a diamond in the rough." Having someone see her promise helped Cynthia believe in herself.

Many adult learners have not had previous success in formal educational settings. They often fear that they will fail once again. Educators who are encouraging, and acknowledge the learner's talents can help their students overcome their fear of failure and move them forward educationally.

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