

# BEYOND MULTIPLE LEARNING STYLES, CULTURES AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LEVELS: HONORING MULTIPLE *WAYS OF KNOWING* IN THE ADULT ESOL CLASSROOM

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## INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to imagine a K-12 educator who would contend that children's developmental stages – along with their corresponding strengths and challenges - should not be explicitly foundational in the process of designing their school curricula, activities and assessments. The concept that children go through stages of development that encompass cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and ultimately, educational implications is hardly controversial. Likewise, major theorists of child development are relatively well-known, such as Jean Piaget, the Swiss developmental theorist who described the stages of child psychological development. Entire curricula and schools have even been based on specific theories of child development, such as Rudolph Steiner's Waldorf schools.

It has been argued that, as a society in general and as adult educators in particular, our understanding of and response to adult developmental needs has a long way to go (Kegan, 1994; Weathersby, 1976). As adult educators, we have developed a rich dialog on individual adult learning needs based on learning styles and cultural educational norms. We may also catch wind of phase theories of adult development, which focus on how we may be affected by major life events. However, actual *stage* theories of adult psychological development have only sporadically intersected with the field of adult education and ESOL. Carol Hoare (2006), editor of the *Handbook of Adult Development and Learning*, points out that adult development itself is a young field, emerging as a subject heading in the *Psychological Abstracts* in 1978, and that for the most part, adult development and learning have existed as separate fields. Adult development has typically been found under the umbrella of psychology, and learning has been studied under the umbrella of education. Hoare points out that there are no professional societies, associations or journals serving as a vehicle for discourse between the areas of adult development and learning.

The understandable lack of familiarity that most of us, as adult educators, have with adult psychological development can lead to the assumption that we somehow 'plateau' in our psychological development as young adults. This assumption has also been fostered by psychology's own history. Hoare (2006) points out that until the twenty-first century, psychologists also thought of development as something relevant only to children. Rita Weathersby (1976) remarks that most educators have no "systematic and available evidence" to counter the common assumption that adults no longer develop psychologically. This assumption, combined with a lack of systematic dialog between the fields of adult development and learning, has created an ABE/ESOL field that is generally uninformed by the principles of adult psychological development. As an ESOL teacher, I have not encountered colleagues or professors who are familiar with the concept of adult development, and I have found very few graduate level course offerings addressing adult development within a department of education. One of the few departments of education that I have discovered that includes coursework on adult development is in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where Psychologist Robert Kegan, also a prominent adult developmental theorist, resides as faculty.

In his book *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*, Kegan (1994) also addresses our lack of familiarity with adult developmental stages, not only as educators, but as a society in general:

...in the last few hundred years we have succeeded in recognizing a qualitative distinction between the mind of the child and the mind of the adult, [but] it may still remain for us to discover that adulthood itself is not an end state but a vast evolutionary expanse encompassing a variety of capacities of mind. And if we have been able to extend a disciplined sympathy to children, evoked by our analytic exploration of their capacity to meet the challenges of the various curricula we create for them, it remains for us to extend the same disciplined sympathy to adult experience. (p. 5)

Kegan (1994) maps out the stages of this “evolutionary expanse” in his theory of constructive-developmentalism, which emerges from a line of adult developmental theories by his predecessors, including Jane Loevinger (1976) and her construct of ego development, later expanded on by Susan Cook-Greuter (1999) in her theory of post-autonomous ego-development.

The NCSALL study (Kegan et al., 2001), *Toward a “new pluralism” in the ABE/ESOL classroom: Teaching to multiple “cultures of mind,”* and the resultant book, *Becoming Adult Learners* by Eleanor Drago-Severson (2004), both describe the only large-scale study to date applying Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory in an ABE/ESOL setting. Their study introduces “a new definition of the resource-rich classroom, one that includes good pedagogical matches to a broad variety of adults’ learning needs and ways of knowing” and suggests that learners with different ways of knowing “need qualitatively different forms of support and challenge in order to benefit more fully from ABE/ESOL programs” (p.15).

Drawing from this study, as well as from a 2006 Minnesota Literacy Council (MLC) consultation with curriculum specialist Brandy George<sup>1</sup>, this report describes Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory; outlines the three most common stages of psychological development in adults; discusses how adult stages of psychological development affect motivation, learning, strengths and challenges in the classroom; and looks at learner perspectives on what makes a good teacher. It also discusses implications for meeting distinct learner needs in areas such as pedagogy, activities and assessment.

## **CONSTRUCTIVE-DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY**

Drago-Severson (2004) explains that constructive-developmental theory attends to how people make sense of their experiences from emotional, cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives and is based on two fundamental principles. The first, *constructivism*, maintains that people *construct* meaning from their experiences. The second, *developmentalism*, refers to the critical tenet that the way in which people construct meaning *develops* over time. The way in which a person constructs

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meaning is referred to as a *way of knowing*. A way of knowing is like the lens that organizes how we understand and experience ourselves, others, and life situations.

As Weathersby (1976) emphasizes, growth and development do not end in late adolescence, but continue throughout our adult lives. Kegan (1982) explains that as we grow developmentally into a more complex way of knowing, we are able to recognize our previous way of knowing, and the limitations therein, as the way we used to see things, rather than the way things necessarily were. The nature of developmental growth is that we transition out of one way of knowing and incorporate it into a progressively more complex way of knowing. As we develop into a new way of knowing, we do not discard our previous way of knowing, but 'transcend and include' it. A previous way of knowing becomes reincorporated into the new way of knowing: "Development is not a matter of differentiation alone, but of differentiation and reintegration" (Kegan, 1982, p. 67).

Kegan (1982) explains that adult developmental growth is based on *subject-object relations*, the same theory that Piaget used to describe children's psychological development. Subject-object relations theory contends that what we are *subject* to, we are embedded in or *identified* with – and thus unable to objectively see or take perspective on. As we are subject to our current way of knowing, we are not aware that we are looking through a lens that has any particular assumptions or perspective. We simply assume that we are seeing the world as it is. When developmental growth occurs, what we have been *subject* to begins to become *object*. That is, we can begin to see the lens that we were looking at the world through from the perspective of a new and more complex frame. We start to become aware of the assumptions and perspective of our previous worldview as we grow into a more complex worldview.

Drago-Severson (2004) describes how transitioning from one developmental stage to another is a gradual and progressive process that occurs step-by-step. Development also occurs in a consistent, predictable order, in stages of increasing complexity. It is important to note that developmental growth is independent of intelligence or IQ. A person with a relatively high IQ can function from a less complex way of knowing, while a person with a relatively low IQ can function from a more complex way of knowing. Developmental growth depends on and is a result of the challenges and supports (and the balance thereof) in a person's environment over the course of his or her life. Finally, while the *content* of anyone's way of knowing depends on factors such as culture, the *stages* themselves – that is, the principles underlying the frame through which we are looking at the world – are universal.

Constructive-developmentalism's distinction between *content* and *structure or way of knowing* is directly akin to the distinction between *informational* and *transformational learning*. In the discussion of implications at the end of this report, I argue that supporting learner success in our increasingly complex society requires both informational and transformational approaches to teaching and learning. While informational learning focuses on the content that learners acquire, transformational learning involves growth in the structures through which we see and interpret content - in our *ways of knowing* themselves. (Mezirow, 2000).

Kegan (1994) explains that any given way of knowing reflects an inner logic and coherence, and due to the gradual and progressive nature of development, is durable for a considerable period of time. Rarely does a person fully transition from one way of knowing to another in the time span of less than a year, and usually this type of

transition takes place over several years. At any given time, our current way of knowing comes with predictable strengths and challenges.

These strengths and challenges, of course, also show up in the classroom. A learner's way of knowing determines how learning will be experienced, managed, handled, used, and understood. It also shapes predictable strengths and challenges in the classroom and explains how the same curriculum and classroom activities can be experienced significantly and qualitatively differently by different learners; how, as Drago-Severson highlights "...the very same curriculum, classroom activities, or teaching behaviors can leave some learners feeling satisfied and well attended while others feel frustrated or lost" (2004, p. 15).

In *Becoming Adult Learners*, Drago-Severson (2004) describes the three most common ways of knowing among adults as *instrumental*, *socializing*, and *self-authoring*. In *In Over Our Heads: The mental demands of modern life*, Kegan (1994) refers to these stages respectively as second, third, and fourth orders of knowing. The instrumental way of knowing is preceded by the incorporative way of knowing of infants, and the impulsive stage of childhood. Ways of knowing also exist beyond self-authoring, but are rare, and have never been detected before mid-life (Drago-Severson, 2004). She goes on to explain that the gradual nature of developmental growth also means that many individuals do not fit squarely within one particular way of knowing. Where 2 represents the instrumental way of knowing, 3 the socializing way of knowing, and 4 the self-authoring way of knowing, a person may be squarely within a 2 or 3 or 4, or may be, for example, at 2(3), where instrumentalism is the dominant worldview but aspects of the socializing way of knowing are beginning to emerge; 2/3 in which both ways of knowing are equally dominant; or 3(2) in which socializing has become the dominant way of knowing but aspects of the instrumental way of knowing are still present. American philosopher Ken Wilber (2003), whose Integral Theory has been informed by Kegan's work on constructive-developmentalism, explains that a person's way of knowing isn't static but alive and evolving. A person who is assessed at a socializing way of knowing may express a socializing way of knowing 50% of the time, an instrumental way of knowing 25% of the time, and a self-authoring way of knowing 25% of the time. However, no one will express a socializing way of knowing before expressing an instrumental way of knowing, and no one will express a self-authoring way of knowing before a socializing way of knowing. He also describes how different aspects of a person, or lines of development, will grow at different rates. The cognitive line of development is typically the first to advance to a more complex way of knowing, while the emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal lines of development take longer, and often years, to 'catch up.'

As we discuss the ways of knowing most common in adults, the limitations thereof, and appropriate teaching strategies, it is important to bear in mind that measuring a person's meaning-making system requires rigorous assessment such as the Subject-Object Interviews (SOI) and/or Loevinger's Ego Development Sentence Completion Test, as used in Drago-Severson's (2004) study. Any theory of a person's way of knowing based on anecdotal evidence can only be speculative and quite likely inaccurate. Limitations in a learner's English proficiency level, of course, should not be confused with a developmental limitation, and language limitations could further obscure any guesswork on a learner's way of knowing.

While we are not in a position to ascertain our learners' meaning-making systems, we can, and should, assume that they have one. We can be cognizant that, like all

adults, our learners (and, of course, we ourselves) are somewhere along a trajectory of cognitive development, and function from a meaning-making system replete with its own strengths and challenges that affect their classroom experience. As we pay attention to the tasks that challenge our learners, we can begin to critically examine the nature of these tasks and challenges through a constructive-developmental lens. We can examine what implicit developmental demands our curricula and activities place on our learners, in addition to language demands, and more critically consider where learners may be facing language challenges, where they may be facing developmental challenges, and how best to refine the support that we offer them as they strive to meet these challenges.

The following sections discuss the strengths and challenges of the three most common ways of knowing, and present corresponding teaching strategies. They also present learner perspectives, within each way of knowing, on what makes a good teacher. As we consider George's (2006) teaching recommendations for the three most common ways of knowing in adults, it is also important to keep in mind that the 'transcend and include' nature of developmental growth also extends to our learning strategies. Strategies that were helpful to us in learning content such as language in a previous way of knowing will likely still be helpful for us at a more complex way of knowing. Strategies geared toward a way of knowing that we haven't reached yet, however, will not be helpful to us. That is, strategies that are helpful for instrumental learners, such as anchoring material in concrete, observable, familiar experience, will also be helpful for socializing and self-authoring learners. However, strategies geared toward self-authoring learners, such as encouraging learners to self-define, set and track their own learning goals, will be 'too much' for instrumental learners without plenty of concretization, scaffolding and support. Perhaps it is because so many of the strategies suggested for instrumental learners are helpful for all learners that we recognize in them elements of what we know about best practices. Perhaps it is because strategies suggested for self-authoring learners are not helpful for all learners that we intuitively suspect that they might not apply to all of our learners.

### **Instrumental way of knowing**

Kegan (1994) explains that an instrumental knower is subject to, or identified with, her concrete needs, preferences, wishes, and interests. She is also identified with her own concrete characteristics, such as "I am tall" or "I have a good car." What has become object at this way of knowing, which was subject at the previous Impulsive way of knowing, is that observable events have their own reality independent of the person's subjective perspective. An instrumental knower realizes that when she is in an airplane, objects only appear to shrink because she herself is moving away. She understands that objects have their own enduring properties separate from her own perception of that object.

Kegan (1994) refers to the underlying structure of the instrumental way of knowing as *categorical*, which points to both the abilities and challenges of this worldview. An instrumental knower is able to recognize distinct categories at this stage, and the enduring properties of those categories, such as that the Earth (category) is large (attribute), or that her aunt is kind. She recognizes that others have their own preferences, needs, and beliefs, and has acquired control over her impulses.

At the same time, an instrumental knower perceives the qualities of any given category, such as her own or another's preferences, as certain, absolute and

unchanging. An instrumental knower is also oriented exclusively to the concrete world and is not able to make 'as-if' abstractions that require holding another viewpoint along with his or her own viewpoint at the same time, or to engage in a hypothetical 'as-if' situation. Concern about consequences is motivated by reward and punishment rather than by how actions might affect another. As long-term future constitutes an abstraction, the instrumental knower is oriented to the present and to short term consequences, and regards the future as "the-present-that-hasn't-happened-yet" rather than "something one lives with as real in the present" (Kegan, 1994, p. 27).

In *In Over Our Heads*, Kegan (1994) illustrates the instrumental way of knowing through a fictitious yet typical American teenager, Matty, whose parents are waiting for him to come home two hours after his midnight curfew. Kegan suggests that when Matty realizes his parents know he is late, he will respond in as a 'typical teenager' with excuses and a made-up story. He discusses how Matty's parents, like many parents, want something 'more' from him: consideration for their feelings, common sense, thinking about long-term consequences, and the ability to prioritize his agreement with them over his conflicting desires in the moment. They want a sense of loyalty. Kegan explains that:

in order to subordinate his own point of view to some bigger way of knowing to which he would be loyal, in order to subordinate it to some integration or co-relation between his own and his parents' point of view, in order for his sense of himself to be based more on the preservation and operation of this co-relation than on the preservation and operation of his own independent point of view – for all of this to happen, Matty would have to construct his experience out of a principle that was more complex than the principle of durable categories. (p. 24)

Drago-Severson (2004) explains how the principle of durable categories, or categorical thinking, applies to and determines learning motivation. Instrumental knowers find meaning through concrete rules. Instrumental learners in the classroom are motivated to *acquire* something, and goals are based on concrete needs and desires, such as being able to get a better job or car. Knowledge is seen as a possession that one can accumulate, and is obtained from an external authority. Instrumental learners focus on naming concrete goals and setting the right concrete steps to get there. One's learning strategy is to try to follow correct steps and rules and make sure to do each one in the right way (there being only one right way). Deviation from the prescribed way is experienced as doing it wrong.

During her consultation with the Minnesota Literacy Council, curriculum specialist and educational consultant Brandy George (2006) advised that educators should not expect instrumental learners to:

- understand abstract concepts or have a sense of nuance
- grasp hypothetical situations
- make generalizations
- exhibit self-reflectivity, e.g., why they have made particular life choices
- anticipate effects of actions (their own or others) beyond immediate context
- discern options or alternatives (there is only one right way)
- recognize problems for which there are not absolute answers
- reconcile competing categories (e.g., recognizing how something might be 'fun' and 'scary' at the same time)
- fully assume or appreciate another's perspective

- deal with any more than three of four concrete variables at a time

Teaching strategies that George (2006) recommends for instrumental learners include:

- anchor material in *concrete, observable, familiar* experience
- physically act out or demonstrate the meaning of material
- whenever possible, use props, visual aids, and timelines
- literally illustrate as much as possible using diagrams, photos, etc
- concretely model how to approach activities, handouts and assignments
- explicitly show progression from step-to-step; do not expect learners to infer steps
- not introduce the 'next step' until learners fully understand the preceding step
- introduce reading material with a limited number of characters and simple concepts
- not put two unrelated assignments on a single page

Drago-Severson (2004) and colleagues interviewed learners who, based on Subject-Object Interviews (SOI) and on Loevinger's Ego Development Sentence Completion Test, entered the study with an instrumental way of knowing. She found that for these participants, good teachers:

- explain things to help them understand.
- help them learn by showing them how to do things.
- give them rules to follow so they can do things the right way.
- give them their knowledge and tell them what they should know.

They know they have learned something when they can 'do it' (demonstrate a behavior) and when they get a good grade (a consequence.) (p. 108)

### **Socializing way of knowing**

According to Kegan (1994), the socializing way of knowing is based on an underlying *cross-categorical* cognitive structure. At this way of knowing a person has become able to coordinate more than one category at a time, and thus for the first time is able to take another's perspective. This very ability shapes what a socializing knower is subject to: the social context, ideals and relationships that he most values. He is identified with the expectations of those valued others. A socializing knower has become able to take his own inner states and motivations as object; for example he is able to reflect on reasons for life choices. A socializing knower is also able to make abstractions and orients toward abstract and psychological consequences such as a concern for a sense of belonging. Kegan explains that these abilities become possible because of the underlying capacity to subordinate *durable categories* and relate them to each other in a *cross-categorical* framework.

Drago-Severson (2004) explains that challenges for a socializing knower include evaluating another person's point of view and considering his own expectations of self. He needs a clear sense of what others expect and feels a strong obligation to meet expectations. For socializing learners, the meaning of education is to "be someone" (Drago-Severson, 2004, p. 29). Knowledge is still viewed as absolute in nature, but it is recognized that not everything is known, even by experts. Knowledge is still viewed as something that comes from external authorities, but is now desired in order to meet goals and expectations. A primary learning strategy is to follow the advice of an authority to work toward a goal. A socializing knower wants to set up a plan based on what the experts or authorities recommend. A

socializing learner looks externally for support, encouragement and validation of progress. Success is based on positive external evaluation.

A primary challenge for socializing learners is to independently create and use their own goals, procedures, and standards for evaluation separate from and possibly in contradiction to external experts/authorities. George (2006) suggested that educators do not expect socializing learners to:

- track or monitor their own learning
- see self as the author (rather than the theater) of their inner psychological life
- risk "looking bad" in front of their peers by standing out or making a mistake
- tolerate ambiguity
- tolerate and reconcile inner conflict
- understand how context influences content

She suggested the following teaching strategies for socializing learners:

- identify both content and language objectives for all lessons (provide the expectation so the learner can meet the expectation and feel successful)
- use students' work as a model so that it can become objective
- mirror back language so that it can become objective
- use analogies (make more complex abstractions concrete)
- an environment that is rich in print: word walls, labels for everyday items, and vocabulary lists that are tied to the content studied in class
- assign individual work with clear guidelines and expectations
- use outlines, hierarchies and analogies to show the relationship of unknown new material to already acquired knowledge

Drago-Severson (2004) and colleagues discovered that for [socializing] learners, good teachers:

- care about them
- things to help them understand
- really listen and support them
- know what is good for them to know, and tell them what they should know
- have certain human qualities; they are described as kind, patient, and encouraging

These adults can feel, inside, when they have learned something and the teacher acknowledges them in that. (p. 108)

### **Self-Authoring way of knowing**

Kegan (1994) explains that the underlying construct of the self-authoring way of knowing is *trans-categorical*. That is, a person is now able not only to relate different categories to each other, e.g., her own perspective and another's perspective, but to step outside of those categories and take a perspective on a relationship *itself*. A self-authoring knower can now have a *relationship to* her own relationships, interpersonal contexts, emotions, and internal states. She is able to set her own internal benchmarks for success and consider the expectations of society and valued others in relationship to her self-defined priorities. She can now manage and prioritize internal and external demands, hold conflicting feelings simultaneously, and

can meaningfully understand how past, present and future relate. She also recognizes that knowledge is relative.

George (2006) further explains that for a self-authoring knower, the challenges include discerning meta-systemic patterns, or developing a theory about how all of the different perspectives that she can now recognize relate to each other. She may not be able to perceive complex, long-term trends or to grasp paradox. However, she is able to successfully perform the tasks that she would be expected to perform in an ABE setting. George suggests the following strategies for self-authoring knowers:

- use scenario work in class
- use learners' own experience as text – journals, autobiographic assignments, reflective writing about learning
- generate questions that support critical thinking
- allow learners free time in which they can use the language of instruction to talk about their own interests
- encourage learners to self-define, set and track their own learning goals

Drago-Severson (2004) found that for socializing learners, good teachers:

- are one source of knowledge, and they see themselves and their classmates as other sources
- are open to students' feedback to help improve teaching practices and they expect good teachers to listen to that feedback
- a variety of teaching strategies
- help learners meet their own internally generated goals

These participants know internally when they have learned something, and when they have, they can then think of multiple ways to teach what they know to others. (p. 109)

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT ESOL**

In his book *In Over Our Heads: The mental demands of modern life*, Kegan (1994) addresses mismatches between our culture's "hidden curriculum," or society's implicit expectations of adults, particularly in the realms of our professional and interpersonal lives, and the meaning-making systems of some adults. Similarly, Drago-Severson (2004) addresses the potential for mismatches between the implicit developmental expectations in ABE/ESOL curricula and classroom activities and the meaning-making systems of some learners: "In [some] cases, teachers may unknowingly be using materials, classroom designs, or teaching strategies that are more appropriate for learners who have one way of knowing while inadvertently neglecting others" (pp. 160-161). She goes on to explain that aspects of old rote learning methodologies, long discarded by most educators and boring and frustrating to most adult learners, including those making meaning from a socializing or self-authoring worldview, would actually be experienced as "satisfying and supportive" to instrumentalist learners. She concludes that a general mindfulness of developmental stages in the classroom would help teachers reach and actively support more of their students, and that without that awareness, unintentional bias is more likely.

Until theories of adult stage development are more well-known, it is reasonable to surmise that our classroom activities, curricula, and policies will not match all adult learners' developmental capacities. Perhaps one day the need to strive to accommodate all ways of knowing – to meet all adults 'where they are at' and

provide the support, challenges, and continuity that foster growth and development while making necessary tasks manageable – will be as familiar and attended to in the field of ABE/ESOL as the need to honor different cultures and learning styles has become. In the meantime, it behooves us to examine policies, procedures, curricula and classroom expectations for unintentional developmental bias.

One striking, yet in all probability common example of such unintentional bias was illuminated during George's observation of the beginning level class at the MLC Arlington Hills learning center. Perhaps the most striking among her observations was in our beginning level class, in which learners were practicing *before* and *after* in the context of time. To illustrate the concept, the instructor had handed out a worksheet with a graphic of a calendar week. The graphic started with a Sunday and ended with a Saturday. All learners were able to respond to questions such as, "What day comes after Tuesday?" or "What day comes before Friday?" by looking at the graphic. George reported that some learners, who could answer what day came after Tuesday, could not answer "What day comes after Saturday?" and looked confused upon being asked the question. She explained that to an instrumental knower, there is literally nothing after Saturday, according to the graphic. While some learners were able to infer that the week cycled around and began again on Sunday, a smaller percentage of learners were not. One could argue that this challenge could have been caused by different cultural conceptions of time, or different proficiency levels, but most of the learners were from the same culture, and at a similar language proficiency level. Since all learners were able to answer the question, "What day comes after Tuesday?" it seems that they understood the language itself. George suggested that to make this task more accessible to learners who may be operating from an instrumental way of knowing, the instructor make a graphic of several weeks, and physically point to the Saturday wrapping back to the Sunday over a few weeks, to help make the cyclical nature of the weeks more concrete. Understandably, the instructor for the class hadn't considered that this activity, in requiring learners to infer that the linear graphic of the week symbolized something continuous, might have posed a challenge to learners. When George implemented her suggested strategy with the learners, she said that many of them nodded and smiled, indicating that they understood.

In my own Low Beginning level class at the MLC, I have come up against these unintentional biases in my own lessons. I sometimes notice learner stumbling blocks that appear to be based not on language, but on an abstraction implicit in a task. Recently my beginning level learners were practicing telling time. When we were reading digital time, I included *a.m.* or *p.m.* on the printed examples. In one speaking chain activity, I gave each learner a slip of paper with a digital time such as 3:45 p.m. One learner would ask, "What time is it?" and the other learner would respond, "It's 3:45 p.m." When I wanted to elicit and model how to read time from an analog clock (with hands), I drew a picture of a physical clock displaying the time 3:30. One learner looked confused, pointed to the clock and asked with furrowed brows, "Teacher, a.m. or p.m.?" Other learners smiled and elbowed each other, and this learner adamantly repeated, "a.m. or p.m.?" I was reminded here of George's recommendation not to expect all learners to understand how context influences content. It seemed that this learner may have been struggling to understand that whether it was a.m. or p.m. depended on the context, or what part of the day one was reading the clock. I expect that this learner would have been able to determine a.m. or p.m. in an authentic situation, in which the pragmatic context would have been implicit, but concrete and obvious. However, outside of that pragmatic context, she did not seem to be able to step back and explicitly realize that a hypothetical

pragmatic *context* (time of day) was missing, which would be needed to determine the *content* (a.m. or p.m.) that she was seeking. These classroom examples of unintentional mismatches between classroom expectations and the meaning making systems of some learners begs the question of how often such mismatches might occur on assessment, program and policy levels.

If this learner was in fact struggling to cross-reference context and content while studying time, perhaps she also struggles to cross-reference context and content on the CASAS tests, in which it is necessary to be able to infer a context for the authentic images upon which the questions are based, such as department directories and doctor's office sign-in sheets. The CASAS test not only assesses language content, but critical thinking and abstraction skills that an instrumental learner, for example, would not be able to complete, despite the language content that she was able to acquire. For example, the following are CASAS competencies: Interpret information about purchasing a home, including loans and insurance (1.4.6); Identify procedures for career planning, including self-assessment (4.1.9); and Identify appropriate behavior, attire, attitudes, and social interaction, and other factors that affect job retention and advancement (4.4.1)"

(<https://www.casas.org/home/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.showContent&MapID=1602>).

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) also includes self-authoring in many of the tasks that they encourage learners to cultivate. The list of goals on their website includes:

- assess one's own knowledge and skills accurately
- set specific, realistic, personal goals
- use imagination freely, combining ideas or information in new ways
- make connections between ideas that seem unrelated
- understand how beliefs affect how a person feels and acts
- identify irrational or harmful beliefs you may have and understand how to change them when they occur
- identify common goals among different parties
- clearly present one's position
- understand party's position
- examine possible options
- make reasonable compromises

(<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teaching/scans.htm>)

In my work with refugees, I have seen that learners receiving Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) benefits and thus needing to attend 20 hours of class per week are required to report and track their own learning progress on a monthly basis. The purpose of this requirement is certainly understandable – to encourage learners to be self-responsible for their own learning. However, questions such as *“Do you feel that you are making satisfactory progress? Do you feel that you are getting all of the resources and assistance you need to be successful?”* seem to invite learners to set their own benchmarks of success and gauge learning progress in relationship to those benchmarks, which is an explicitly self-authoring skill.

Something 'more' than literacy and language skills alone are necessary for learners to succeed with CASAS competencies, SCANS skills and compliance with

accountability procedures such as goal-setting. Comings, Reader and Sum (as cited in Drago-Severson, 2004) state that:

...the main literacy problem of U.S. workers is not that of illiteracy in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a problem of limited skills that restrict workers' ability to perform higher skilled jobs and take on the more complicated duties that are required of workers in the New Economy. (p. 4)

As educators, it is critical for us to consider how these additional skills that our learners are being asked to acquire align with their own developmental capacities.

If we assume that the learners in Drago-Severson's (2004) study represented a relatively average developmental range of adults, we can assume that our own ABE/ESOL classrooms include a combination of instrumental, instrumental/socializing, socializing, socializing/self-authoring, and self-authoring learners. We can also expect that classrooms comprised of refugee and immigrant learners, who have often witnessed or suffered violence and other human rights abuses and oppressions, may contain a higher percentage of learners suffering from trauma than the average population would contain, and trauma can also delay development (Hoare, 2006). The inevitable range of developmental stages, and their distinct abilities and challenges, that learners come to our ABE/ESL classrooms with, compared with the challenges that our standardized tests and policies demand, invite us, as educators and policy makers, to take pause.

As we consider the policies that influence the developmental challenges that adult learners face, along with the practices that best support learners in meeting those challenges, it behooves us to become explicitly familiar with their developmental needs. As Drago-Severson (2004) states, "...we would be wise to consider how our programs, curricula, and classroom practices might inadvertently require adults to perform tasks and demonstrate competency at a certain way of knowing" (p. 193).

We must pay attention to not only the content and knowledge, but the developmental skills that our learners need to develop in order to pursue their educational and professional goals and dreams. A constructive-developmental framework can help us to refine our own understanding of the elements of the most optimal *holding environment* for our learners, not only as they acquire language content, but as they grow in their developmental capacities.

With this framework, we can return to the concept of transformational learning and appreciate its role in the context of ABE/ESOL. Our concern can expand to include providing the support, challenge and continuity necessary not only for learning English, but for encouraging continued developmental growth. A constructive developmental lens challenges us, as educators, not only to identify and adapt unintentional developmental biases in our policies, curricula and pedagogy, but to recognize and honor the unique position we are in to support the type of developmental growth and transformational learning that Drago-Severson's (2004) research suggests our ABE/ESOL classrooms are ripe holding environments for, and that some of our learners may need to pursue their goals and dreams.

**AUTHOR**

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