

## How Adult Literacy Advocacy Can Succeed

Whatever the outcome of the past year's adult literacy campaign, advocates in nearly every state are now organized. We have a foundation upon which to build our most effective national adult literacy advocacy effort ever. We must re-dedicate ourselves to next year's campaign and to the coming years, but this time we need not only to work hard at it but also to be smarter. This article describes what we need to do differently in order to succeed, in order to reach more of those who might be our allies if they understood what we were advocating.

### Assumptions:

1. If adult literacy education – the work that teachers, tutors, and other practitioners and adult learners do – were well understood, it would be a bipartisan priority for Republicans and Democrats, and for conservatives as well as liberals/progressives;
2. The way we describe our work now, many conservatives, and the political middle-of-the-road, do not agree that it should get more government support; and
3. Our messages – what we project to the general public about our work -- are flawed. They stereotype adult literacy education as “liberal,” “do-gooder,” or “noble work, but only for volunteers.”

What would a successful adult literacy advocacy campaign look like? Here are six indicators by which to assess political advocacy campaigns, including ours.

### A successful advocacy campaign:

1. identifies and embraces positive values which unite a large number of people in support of adult literacy education who might otherwise be divided;
2. *frames* these values. Advocates use these clear, simple frames consistently and repeatedly in messages to the public;
3. is well-organized;
4. uses the media effectively;
5. is well-financed;
6. has leaders who understand that there will be ups and downs and that many years of sustained effort may be needed, and who are in this for the long haul.

When we assess our adult literacy advocacy campaigns by these standards, it is clear that we can do better. Perhaps, like *Sisyphus*, we have been pushing a boulder up hill. It rolls down on us, and we just try to push harder. But maybe we don't have to push up hill, and maybe there are lots more potential allies to help us push.

We now have more need for adult literacy education in the U.S. and fewer resources to meet that need, even without the Administration's proposed cuts to the federal budget. Learners and practitioners want to have a stable, adequately-funded system with well-trained teachers and tutors who are effective in meeting learners' needs. Yet, after three

decades of legislation, adult literacy education in the U.S. is at best a marginal program, one that Congress could end at any time, not an established system; and adult learners are allocated only a tiny portion of national and state public funding compared with education funding for children or for adults in higher education. We need to understand why this is and what to do about it.

For adult learners, practitioners, and for many supporters on the liberal side of the political spectrum adult literacy education is understood to be a worthwhile activity that provides eligible adults with an opportunity to learn to read, learn English, brush up on basic skills before job training or college, and get the self-confidence and “soft skills” know-how to meet their needs, their family’s needs, and the needs of our communities and the economy. Adult literacy education is a bridge out of poverty to (better) employment. Indeed, most practitioners and learners believe it is *the* bridge.

But many Americans, especially those on the conservative side of the spectrum, may see this differently. Through informal research, I have found that most people haven’t thought much about adult literacy education. When they have, most assume the “problem” is being solved through public school evening adult classes or through volunteer programs. Indeed, some conservatives think that adult literacy should be addressed only through volunteer programs. Some people, who have seen articles about the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) results, assume that either the problem is too big to do anything about or, because the findings don’t fit their experience, that the NALS must be an enormous exaggeration of the problem. To me, a surprising number of people do not believe – as you probably do – that adults *deserve* to have adult basic skills services provided with public dollars. They believe that these adults “had their chance in elementary and high school and wasted the opportunity.” They believe that if they need *remedial education* now they should study on their own, pay for classes themselves, or find a volunteer to help them. They believe that immigrants do need to learn English, but that it is *their* responsibility to pay for classes, not *ours*.<sup>i</sup>

Why is this? George Lakoff, in his short but compelling book, *don’t think of an elephant! KNOW YOUR VALUES AND FRAME THE DEBATE*,<sup>ii</sup> argues that conservative politics in our country is based on a set of values that begin with the importance of a strict father who protects and supports the family, teaches children right from wrong, and helps them acquire internal discipline to be obedient and act morally.

*“In this model...a good person – a moral person – is someone who is disciplined enough to be obedient, to learn what is right, do what is right and not do what is wrong, and to pursue her self-interest to prosper and become self-reliant. A good child grows up to be like that. A bad child is one who does not learn discipline, does not function morally, does not do what is right, and therefore is not disciplined enough to become prosperous. She cannot take care of herself and thus becomes dependent.*

*When the good children are mature [i.e. adults] they either have learned discipline and can prosper, or have failed to learn it. From this point on the strict father is not able to*

*meddle in their lives. This translates politically into no government meddling.*” (Lakoff, p. 8)

People who hold this view don't want tax dollars to go to adults who, from their point of view, are *undisciplined* and who *did not take advantage of their chance*. They don't want to *reward bad behavior*, to give them what they haven't earned and thereby *keep them dependent*.

Some who hold these values will not be persuaded to support adult literacy education, especially those on the far right, but if our message were framed differently many more conservatives might support adult literacy. I am not suggesting that we change our practice, although there is always room for improvement in our field. I am urging that we change how we talk and write about what we do. I am not suggesting just *wordsmithing*, and certainly not manipulation, “spin,” distortion, or lying. I am suggesting that we accurately and truthfully re-frame how we describe adult literacy education so that those who could be our allies can support it. I am suggesting that we look for frames that unite rather than divide, that bring the widest spectrum of people together to support adult literacy education. To do that, we need to understand where we – in the field -- have shared values, and we need to communicate those values more clearly so that our natural allies outside the field will support us.

How do advocates frame adult literacy education now? What is our message? Perhaps our best-known message was developed by an advertising agency for the Ad Council campaign in 1984, “All you need is a degree of caring.” This might be the right message to attract volunteer tutors, but it may not be the right message for achieving public policy advocacy goals or for gaining public support for funding adult literacy education.

For over a decade, first as the moderator, and now as an active participant on the (AAACE) National Literacy Advocacy electronic list (“listserv”), I have urged its activist subscribers to support

Spending more public dollars for adult literacy programs (including volunteer programs) for all adults who need literacy, basic or secondary skills, and for immigrants who need to learn English.

Although I never tried to frame this as a message, essentially that's what it has been. I would guess that most readers of this article understand and agree with that message. But many Americans who vote are not persuaded, and many would disagree with it. They don't want the government to spend more. They don't think free public education should be extended to *all* adults. And while they certainly want all immigrants to learn English, they believe that the hard-working ones with the right values will, without their support. Furthermore, they see the work we do – as we have described it – not as education but as a social service, more *feeding of the government spending beast*. So what can we do about this? Cognitive scientist, George Lakoff, would advise us to reframe our message.

There has been no recent effort in the adult literacy education advocacy community to do this, although another cognitive scientist and adult literacy education researcher, Dr. Thomas Sticht, has for several years on the NLA electronic list urged us to do so. If we did this, what would this reframing process look like? First we need to develop the concept(s) or idea(s), and the words or phrases that frame the values we are advocating. For example, if we believe that:

1. Basic skills education for adults enables them to help themselves, improve, get better economic opportunities for their families, and participate more in their communities, we need a phrase that frames that value or concept. It is helpful to pick a metaphor, one that accurately describes the idea so that the largest number of people can recognize the value and support the concept. For example, consider the phrase *basic skills boost*. The frame emphasizes education, and uses a metaphor that suggests help for those who want to do it themselves. Many of us believe that when they work hard at it, and with assistance from us, adult learners pull themselves up and achieve their goals. Adult learners may like this image, too. It acknowledges their effort. Anyone who has tutored or taught knows that learning basic skills as an adult is not a handout. It's hard work. And there is now evidence from research by Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn that school drop-outs often try self study as adults. They sometimes succeed without programs, but many need a little help, and most make faster gains with self study *and* program assistance.<sup>iii iv</sup>

Some might rightly object that this frame obscures that adults at a low literacy level need more than a *boost*. They need years of direct instruction and practice. So we may need another phrase to go with this one, perhaps *for some, longer-term instruction*.

2. Some adults need and will make good use of adult learning opportunities, but not necessarily all 90 million Americans will. (The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey results suggested that nearly half of the nation's adults, 16 years and older, perform at the two lowest levels of adult basic skills proficiency.) We believe our job is to help those who step forward, who cross the threshold to ask for help, especially those who do so freely, and for whom it is a risk or sacrifice. We might describe them as *deserving*, using a word conservatives also understand.

Some practitioners might object because they believe that all adults are deserving. Indeed, some, and I am one, advocate adult literacy education as a universal right. But *universal right* and *deserving adults* are not contradictory. This is because most of us believe that adults should have the opportunity to enroll, not be required or mandated. And most of us believe that adults should continue to receive this help only if they make progress.

But why use this word *deserving*? It reframes the issue for some conservatives. Although they may believe that most adults who did not succeed in school “had their chance,” these conservatives will also acknowledge that there are worthy exceptions. For these people, providing a *boost* or *helping hand* is not a reward

for bad behavior; it's just *fair play*. For example, many conservatives would agree that adults who were children with undiagnosed learning disabilities did not have a chance and *deserve* to learn to read as adults. They may feel that young children *deserve* to have a parent who can read to them or help them with schoolwork, if the parent is motivated to learn. They would agree that hard-working adults whose jobs have disappeared in the rapidly changing economy, if they are ready to be helped, *deserve* an education or training boost to their next job. Indeed, some conservatives could see this happening to their own jobs and empathize with an adult learner's desire for assistance. Some conservatives might also agree that adults who have seen the light and admitted their mistakes should be rewarded with a second chance.

Conservatives may feel that immigrants who did not have the advantage of schooling in their country may be deserving. Some may feel especially sympathetic to immigrants who worked hard and achieved in their countries but who, for political circumstances beyond their control, now find themselves as refugees or asylum seekers, who want to continue to work hard here, but lack the English skills to do so. Many conservatives are aware that these immigrants are our new work force, a source of American economic growth. We could point out that for many of these adults this is their *first chance* for an education, that they deserve the opportunity to learn English, and that this will support their – and our – economic advancement.

3. Adult literacy education services pay off for adult learners, for their families, and for our communities; they are an important *investment*. Advocates have used the word, *investment*, but so far it hasn't been persuasive. It 's the right frame, but it is incomplete. Those who care about investments want to see a good return on the investment. As a field we need to be able to show that adult literacy education is a sound investment, not a wasteful one. And this frame is only part of a message; it appeals to economics only, not values. We need to link it with other frames like *basic skills teaching boost* and *deserving*.
4. As we reframe adult literacy education to capture a wider spectrum of voters and their elected representatives, we need to underscore the frame of accountable education. We don't need to substantially improve our accountability practices, at least not at this point. We need to let the world know that we *are* accountable, that we already have measurable outcomes, and that hard working adults do improve their lives through the education opportunities we provide.

Some possible frames for a new adult literacy education message might be:

*A basic skills boost, and  
for some, longer-term instruction,  
is a good investment  
in deserving, hard-working adults  
who will then be better able to work,*

*help their children in school,  
pay taxes,  
and in other ways contribute to their communities  
and the economy.*

This may not be exactly the right message, and it isn't catchy or memorable. Together, we could do better than this. It is not important that you are persuaded that this is the new message we should carry forward, but rather that our current messages don't serve us well, and that we need new messages that honestly express our values in ways that a broad majority of American voters will support. We need a *think tank*, and a good process through which we, as a community of advocates, can create new messages and test them with focus groups that include the full range of the political spectrum. Then we need to choose a few messages, and persuade our various constituencies in the adult literacy education community to use them and to "stay on message" when we advocate with legislators and others.

Let's return to the standards for a successful advocacy campaign. We need to:

- 1) frame how we describe adult literacy education differently to affect a broad spectrum of voters and legislators;
- 2) develop messages with these frames that voters and their elected representatives will support, and "stay on message" until they do;
- 3) continue to strengthen our organizing efforts throughout all the states;
- 4) learn how to use the media well, and launch a new national adult literacy education media campaign;
- 5) get adequate financing for these advocacy and media campaigns; and
- 6) encourage and support new leaders who will stay with this for the long haul.

Let's look at the last three standards, and what we need to do.

#### 4. We need to learn how to use the media well, and launch a national media campaign

We have a few good examples of this from our current advocacy campaign [<http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/AleCampaignNewsArticles>] but a few are not enough. For a national media campaign, we need to have hundreds of articles in every state, along with letters to the editor, and op ed pieces. We need to be on radio talk shows, on TV, and in Web logs (*blogs*). Our message needs to get out everywhere, repeatedly. We need adult learners who are good public examples of that message -- of how the *investment* has *paid off* -- who would be willing to be public speakers or, as some states call them, literacy ambassadors. We need them in every state. The national adult learner organization, VALUE, has been preparing adult learners to do this through their leadership training activities. [ <http://valueusa.org/> ] .

#### 5. We need to get adequate financing.

Adult literacy advocacy may never have highly-paid lobbyists. But we can do better. The National Coalition for Literacy recently stepped up its role, and several of its

member organizations have played big parts in the current campaign, among them ProLiteracy Worldwide (and its state affiliates), LiteracyUSA, TESOL, VALUE, and COABE. As members of these organizations, we need to let them know that we support their using our membership money for advocacy activities. But this level of effort is not enough. We need money to finance a national media campaign with ads on television and in magazines. We need another, even better, national ad campaign like Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS) in the mid 1980's.

6. We need more young leaders who will be committed to adult literacy for the long haul.

Many reading this article have already been adult literacy education advocates for years, although few of us planned it that way. We also need advocates who are in their twenties, thirties and forties, who will say "This is my issue. I am in it for life. Thirty years from now I want to look back and see big changes in our field." I would like the National Coalition for Literacy (NCL), and its member organizations, to galvanize young leaders in our field and build them into a core group through a national congress of advocates. The congress could convene practitioners and learners from every NCL member organization, to create new strategies, and to dedicate themselves to this cause. Those of us who have been around awhile need to encourage younger people to be advocates, mentor them, introduce them to, and help them to carry on the important advocacy work which we have only just begun.

Adult literacy education advocacy can succeed. We can get the resources we need to build a top-quality adult literacy education system. We are already much better organized than ever before, and we must keep that up. But we must be smarter about how we do it. Let's begin by reframing the issue. Let's bring the nation's adult literacy advocates together for a national congress. Let's launch a national media campaign and, in the process, raise some money for advocacy. And let's remember that, over time, we can prevail because what we are advocating is right and because it makes good sense.

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<sup>i</sup> Don't just take my word for it; begin your own informal research. Ask conservatives you may know – or go into online chat rooms and ask – "Do you think we should spend more government money (tax dollars) on education?" Then, "If so, does that include more money for adults to learn basic skills? And for immigrants to learn English?"

<sup>ii</sup> Lakoff, George *don't think of an elephant! KNOW YOUR VALUES AND FRAME THE DEBATE* Chelsea Green Publishing, September, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Reder, Stephen and Strawn, Clare *Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills*. Focus on Basics, Volume 4, Issue D, .2001 <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=287>

<sup>iv</sup> Reder, Stephen. *Giving Literacy Away, Again: New Concepts of Promising Practice* To appear in: A. Belzer & H. Beder (Eds.) *Toward defining and improving quality in adult basic education: Issues and Challenges*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum (in press).