

Partners in Training:

A Cross-disciplinary Approach to Preparing Adult Literacy Practitioners and Health Professionals

by Maricel Santos & Lynette Landry

“A maturing partnership” was how public health expert Rima Rudd described the relationship between adult educators and health professionals who collaborate to improve health outreach and services to adults with low literacy skills or limited English proficiency, in the 2002 issue of *Focus on Basics*. Here at San Francisco State University (SFSU), we are working to strengthen our graduate students’ abilities to contribute to collaborations between the health and literacy fields and ultimately to improve services in the health and adult education worlds. In this article, we focus on the scope and impact of a new course, *Seminar in Immigrant Literacies*, which aims to cultivate partnership skills in frontline professionals who work with immigrant communities (e.g., teachers, health care providers, counselors). What knowledge, attitudes, and skills do we—whether we work in literacy or health care—need to be effective partners? Organizing this seminar has moved us closer to being able to articulate answers to this broad question.

The course is offered through the university’s graduate degree program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Maricel Santos is currently responsible for teaching the course, although colleagues from applied linguistics, health education, library sciences, and nursing have helped shape the content. Lynette Landry has been instrumental in recruiting students from the School of Nursing (SON) to participate. During the summer of 2007, a pilot group of nine graduate students from the TESOL and SON programs enrolled; in summer 2008, the enrollment more than doubled, with 22 students from TESOL and SON, as well as current adult educators and health professionals working in the San Francisco Bay Area.

To frame our discussion, we begin by sharing the perspectives of two graduate students who participated in the course’s 2007 pilot. A graduate student in nursing wrote: “One of the ideas raised by the course was the idea of literacy, especially health literacy, as a political force [and] right.... From a nursing perspective, while I think the health literacy that allows individuals to take care of their bodies on a day to day basis is vital, I also think that the aspects of literacy that empower individuals and communities to create desired changes in existing health care access is critical.”

“One thing is for sure,” wrote a graduate student in TESOL, “I will never look at literacy through the same lens. The ripple effect of this course will have long lasting effects on my [teaching] career because we worked

together on real projects, which were focused on problem solving and finding applications in different communities.”

These perspectives reflect some of our course goals (see the box on page 22), which address three major themes regarding effective partnership:



knowledge of literacy; attitudes about immigrant communities; and skills for tapping into and representing immigrant experiences, managing communication, and building strong relationships. Together, these themes can be viewed as an evolving framework for our thinking about what we’d like all professionals who work with immigrant communities to have. Over time we expect to strengthen the links between “partnership” concepts with specific training activities (e.g., carrying out a service-learning project). Ultimately we want to offer training opportunities that help our students make sense of what partnerships can and should be in their work contexts.

About the Course

The course begins by having students examine the shaping role of language, literacies, and culture in contexts that immigrant families have to navigate: schools, health care settings, the workplace, and the community. We compare traditional definitions of literacy as reading and writing skills with broader views on literacy as social action and situated practice; we also explore ways that school-based literacies often overshadow everyday literacies. We discuss qualitative studies that reveal the struggles and sources of resilience of immigrant adults as they learn to

navigate new literacies. We turn this reflection and knowledge about literacies into practical ideas and focus on developing collaborative solutions that address real-life concerns affecting Bay Area immigrant communities, such as access to health care and health information. The students work in teams to design a community-based project that addresses the needs of a specific immigrant or refugee community. For example, one TESOL and SON student pair designed a service-learning model that would increase the intercultural competence of nurses and ESOL teachers to improve preventive health care to immigrant women. As part of the students' practical training, the course also includes hands-on workshops on participatory and action research methods, use of online information resources such as MedlinePlus (www.medlineplus.gov) and PubMed (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez), and grant proposal writing. See box on page 24 for selected course readings.

Why Teach This Course?

The need for sustainable health literacy partnerships to address immigrant health care concerns is critical, given the growing body of evidence linking limited literacy or English proficiency to poor health status, inadequate quality of care, higher rates of chronic disease and mortality, and excess health care costs (Schillinger, 2004; Sudore et al., 2006). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000) emphasizes that "community partnerships... can be among the most effective tools for improving health in communities." These partnerships, which bring together institutional partners such as health departments or university academics with community partners such as local adult education programs, help to ensure that adult learners who are directly affected by health problems play a part in the creation of solutions

(Rudd, 2002; Singleton, 2002; Tassi, 2007; Johnston et al., 2006).

Despite recognition of the need for partnerships, little is being done to address how to partner in the training of adult ESOL teachers or nurses. Literacy and health professionals need a common vocabulary for talking about the needs of immigrant and refugee communities. This course gives the students an opportunity to share what they know about fundamental concepts, such as literacy, comprehension, and preventive health (cf. Zarcadoolas et al., 2006). The class

discussions compel the students to examine from multiple perspectives the teaching interactions between ESOL teachers and learners and between nurses and patients.

An increasing number of San Francisco State University's TESOL and SON graduate students, alumni included, want to improve their skills to prepare to work in community-based settings. For example, many TESOL students express interest in learning how to contextualize instruction to address learners' real-life needs in multiple domains, such as work or

Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills

These are the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to work in successful partnerships that form the basis for the learning goals for *Seminar in Immigrant Literacies*.

Knowledge:

- To demonstrate knowledge of multiple perspectives on literacy, including literacy as skill, literacy as practice, and literacy as social action
- To demonstrate knowledge of the multiple contexts for literacy development, including school, home, work, community, and health care

Attitudes:

- To reflect on our own cultural backgrounds and beliefs about language, literacy, and immigrant communities, and the ways these views influence our community interactions and perspectives
- To value the complex ways that social and cultural forces influence how 'language and literacy problems' are defined and addressed
- To demonstrate commitment to the creation of language and literacy environments and positive experiences that help immigrant adults and their families see themselves as capable, competent, engaged participants of society

Skills:

- To acquire tools for inquiry (e.g., ethnographic methods, curriculum design) for exploring language, literacies, and the immigrant experience
- To acquire tools (e.g., Web-based search engines) for promoting meaningful access within immigrant communities to information and services
- To begin developing the communication and organizational skills to build sustainable community partnerships

health care. Responding to this need seems critical to improving the health and well-being of this vulnerable group. Many of the nursing school graduate students, particularly those focusing on community and public health nursing, are interested in learning strategies that can help them to work more effectively with diverse populations. Traditionally, nursing educators do emphasize that educational materials must be geared to low literacy populations, but our regular programs provide little on what that means and how to best work with low literacy populations (Owens & Walden, 2007). The collaboration with the TESOL program allows nursing students the opportunity to gain a theoretical understanding of the issues at hand, such as the difference between educational level and literacy, or that literacy involves more than just reading ability. The importance of integrating this knowledge into nursing education is highlighted in this comment, made by a nursing student enrolled in the course in 2007: "the course laid a theoretical framework for considering the many factors influencing the concept of health literacy. Since so much of community health (or acute care) nursing involves educating individuals and communities, the course's content on the varying definitions, approaches, and consequences of literacy gave me a broader context from which to consider the educational needs of my patients. If nothing else, the course reminded me that the basic assumptions that health educators have about literacy, learning, and education may need to be reworked to be more inclusive to non-traditional ideas."

The collaborative course addresses several concerns that have been identified by nurse educators as essential to assuring that the nurses

have the skills necessary to effectively work with low literacy populations, such as communicating with patients – both orally and in writing – who have limited literacy skills, and identifying community resources such as adult literacy programs that work with low literacy individuals (Owens & Walden, 2007). In addition, advocacy in the nursing curriculum can assume many different guises including

“Literacy and health professionals need a common vocabulary for talking about the needs of immigrant and refugee communities.”

advocating for patient's rights in an acute care setting by assuring that the best quality of care is being provided to advocating for improving the health status of vulnerable populations by becoming involved in the political process. This collaborative course allows nursing students to gain a much deeper understanding of the importance of advocacy to nursing practice as exemplified by the following comment, made by a nursing graduate student: "As a nurse, I strongly feel that access to health care is a fundamental human right. This access includes being able to negotiate the complicated bureaucracies in order to apply for, obtain, and successfully use available health care to its maximum potential. It also includes being empowered to raise a voice to demand the access that is missing to so many."

Challenges

We have experienced some challenges over the course of developing and implementing the course. On the nursing side, the prescriptive nature of the nursing curricula because of the requirements

of both regulatory and certifying agencies makes it hard for students to fit the class in. For students in both programs, the enthusiasm for the course sometimes competes with their desire to graduate and either enter the workforce or resume full time employment as soon as possible. Faculty are working to address these issues since this collaboration is viewed as integral to assuring that we are

providing our students with the theoretical foundation and practical skills needed to work with immigrant communities who possess a range of literacies in English and other languages.

Rewards

One of the greatest inspirations comes from seeing the graduate students

look for new ways to teach others about their own disciplines, and learn more themselves in the process. One TESOL student wrote that "[the course] blew my mind and fundamentally altered they way I understand and conceptualize literacy, schooling, and education."

Another commented, "I came away...with a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the concept of literacy. I now have a broader perspective on and appreciation of how issues of literacy are interwoven with other societal issues such as health, community development, and aging." The students begin to understand how other disciplines think about 'literacy problems' and to question their own assumptions. For example, in a recent class discussion, the students examined how public discourse around literacy in health and adult education typically favors a 'skills view' of literacy. In reaction, SON students asked a powerful question: in what ways does the idea of 'literacy as skill' not help us understand what a patient needs to know to effectively navigate the health care system? TESOL students also

posed a critical question: what are effective models for teaching literacy that go beyond reading and writing as workforce skills, and which learners benefit most from each model? While these questions do not have simple answers, it is significant that the SON and TESOL students are confronting popular assumptions about literacy and exploring multiple ways of defining literacy. This kind of inquiry lays the foundation for focused discussions about "not just whether their practices work, but for whom, in what ways, and why" (Johnson, 2006, p. 249).

These cross-disciplinary discussions are rehearsals for conversations that the students will have with future colleagues within and outside their fields of work. As we gain more experience teaching the course, we will look for additional ways to help the students learn about literacy, culture, and health through one another's professional lenses. At the same time, we do not expect TESOL educators to be health experts, nor do we expect nurses to become experts on language and literacy issues. However, as illustrated in the previous paragraph, we do expect our students to ask thoughtful questions about health and literacy and look for answers by reaching out to other disciplines. We recognize that it is often difficult for community practitioners to figure out how to access health information, decide which information is relevant to the communities they work with, and how to respond to the information they do find (see Gaventa, 1993). Our hope is that in training our students to use these information resources, they will in turn be able to train others in the community to do the same.

Looking Forward

This seminar is part of a larger initiative at SFSU to launch a graduate certificate program, under the direction of the newly established Center for Immigrant and Refugee Community Literacy Education

(CIRCLE) (circle.sfsu.edu). This certificate will enable students to carry out the community-based project they develop in the Seminar in Immigrant Literacies over a year-long period and thereby gain prolonged direct experience with community partnerships.

The planning discussions between TESOL and health (including nursing

and health education) has helped to launch the certificate efforts, and we hope the partnership lays the foundation on which other cross-disciplinary collaborations can be built such as TESOL and business to address immigrant workplace issues. Future directions for collaborative work include identifying community

Selected Readings from *Seminar in Immigrant Literacies*



Auerbach, E. R. (Ed.). (2002). *Community Partnerships*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc.



Carmona, R. (2004). "Cross-cultural communication in health care." *Literacy Harvest*, 11, 11.



Drobner, S. (2001). "Leadership through language and literacy: How immigrants repositioned themselves into active community participants through classroom discourse." *Adult Learning*, 12/13, 10-13.



Dutcher, G.A., & Hamasu, C. (2005). "Community-based organizations' perspective on health information outreach: A panel discussion." *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 93(4), S35-S42.



Gaventa, J. (1993). "The powerful, the powerless, and the experts: Knowledge struggle in an information age." In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall & T. Jackson (eds.), *Voices of Change: Participatory Research in the United States and Canada* (pp. 21-40). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.



Gee, J. (2006). "What is literacy?" In Luria, H., Seymour, D.M., & Smoke, T. (eds.). *Language and Linguistics in Context*. (pp. 257-264). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.



Hull, G. & Schultz, K. (2006). "Literacy and learning out of school: A review of theory and research." In Luria, H., Seymour, D.M., & Smoke, T. (Eds.). *Language and Linguistics in Context*. (pp. 275-305). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. (Reprinted from *Review of Educational Board*, 71, pp. 589-611).



Johnson, K. (2006). "The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education." *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 235-257.



Koehn, P.H., & Swick, H.M. (2006). "Medical education for a changing world: Moving beyond cultural competence into transnational competence." *Academic Medicine*, 81(6), 548-556.



Papen, U. (2005). *Adult Literacy as Social Practice: More than Skills*. London: Routledge.



Purcell-Gates, V. (Ed.). (2007). *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.



Stoecker, R. (2005). *Research Methods for Community Change: A Project-based Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



Weinstein, G. (2004). "Immigrant adults and their teachers: Community and professional development through family literacy." *CATESOL Journal* 16(1), 111-124.



Zarcadoolas, C.; Pleasant, A.S.; & Greer, D.S. (2006). *Advancing Health Literacy: A Framework for Understanding and Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

partners, such as healthcare institutions, that may be willing to organize health literacy classes for adult learners on their campuses. For example, health literacy could be the focus of vocational ESOL classes for hospital workers, or classes could take the form of one-day orientations designed for adult learners, such as the ones modeled by the the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center in collaboration with Harlem Hospital and featured in Andersen and Rudd's 2006 *Focus on Basics* article "Navigating Healthcare". Another approach is to establish a literacy resource center within a hospital, such as the one run by VISION LITERACY at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center (www.visionliteracy.org/health.html). Recently, one of Maricel's TESOL graduate students was asked to create an ESL class at a community health clinic in San Francisco's Mission District so that patients could have a place to study English before and after appointments. Our hope is that SFSU students who participate in the certificate program will contribute to the development of similar initiatives, enabling them to develop an understanding of the strategies that can be used to reduce health disparities within the adult learner population.

The program described here focuses on the need to educate current health care and education students, but we realize that many working professionals have similar training needs. The seminar and eventually the certificate program are open to working professionals; however we meet many professionals who would like to participate but do not have the time or resources to do so. On a hopeful note, this year we are able to award scholarships to two adult ESOL teachers (alumna of SFSU's MA TESOL program) which will cover their seminar fees. As we look to the future, we will be actively strategizing about how to address the learning needs of care providers and educators in the workplace.

To truly have an impact on health literacy and thereby reduce health disparities in high-risk populations, educators and health professionals must have a requisite skill set. This includes the ability to work collaboratively to identify interventions specific to the needs of diverse populations. Our collaborative efforts are a first step in that direction. 

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About the Authors

Maricel Santos is an Assistant Professor of English (TESOL) at San Francisco State University. As a research fellow at the university's Center for Health Disparities Research and Training, she helps design and carry out initiatives that support the engagement of adult ESL learners in health literacy training, research, and dissemination activities.

Lynette Landry is an Assistant Professor of Nursing at San Francisco State University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate community/public health nursing. She has been working with farm workers, most of whom have low-literacy skills in their native languages and many of whom do not speak English, throughout California for the past 11 years and is developing interventions to address both chronic and acute illness among this population. ❖

A Collection of Health Literacy Curricula

For more health literacy curricula designed to train adult educators and health care providers, visit this site: www.advancinghealthliteracy.com/curricula.html

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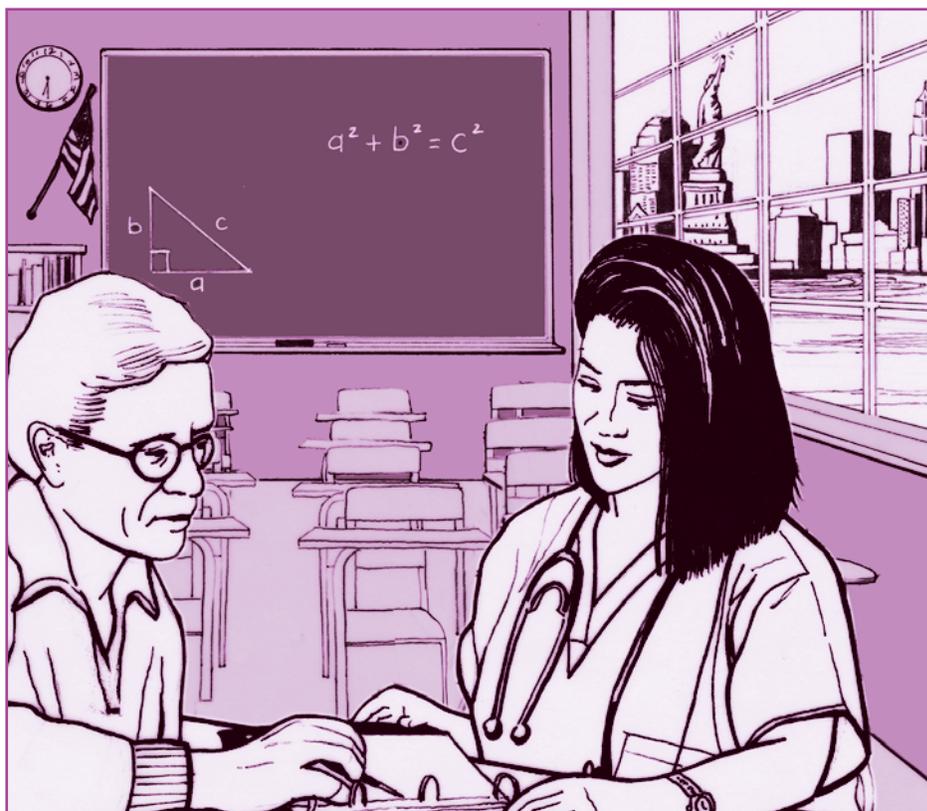
Focus on Basics

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New from World Education



Health Literate Doctors and Patients:

*The New York City Health Literacy Fellowship for
First Year Medical Students*

by Anthony Tassi & Fatima Ashraf

For the past five years, the New York City Mayor's Office has been working on health literacy issues with a broad coalition of adult educators and health care professionals. Together, we created a summer fellowship program for medical students to deepen their understanding of health literacy and improve their communications skills. Now in its third year, this innovative program has proven an effective model for non-traditional *continued on page 3*

New From **World Education**

World Education Publications & Resources

New England Literacy Resource Center

The Change Agent is published twice a year in March and September. The new issue, #27, September 2008, is on "Making Sense of Climate Change". Learn about greenhouse gases, energy-saving tricks that also save money, green jobs, justice-based solutions to climate change, and how adult learners are teaching their kids about conservation, saying no to junk mail, and lobbying their mayors to do more for the environment. For more information visit www.nelrc.org/changeagent

National College Transition Network

National Conference on Effective Transitions in Adult Education, November 17-18, 2008, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Providence, RI. Hosted by the National College Transition Network at World Education in partnership with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the two-day conference will focus on strategies and promising practices that help adult learners succeed in postsecondary education and training. To register, go to: www.collegetransition.org/conference08/registration.html

College for Adults is a website that helps adults who are attending college for the first time plan for college. The site helps learners walk through the application process and find money to pay for college classes, and provides resources to help them prepare for college-level work. College for Adults is partially funded by the Verizon Foundation. www.collegeforadults.org

The College Transition Toolkit is a comprehensive guide to program planning and implementation that draws on the expertise of practitioners from The New England ABE-to-College Transition Project and around the country. It contains detailed information to help adult educators and administrators plan for the needs of students interested in pursuing postsecondary education and training. Chapter titles include: Program Models;

Partnerships and Collaborations; Recruitment; Assessment; Counseling; Curriculum and Instruction; Planning; and Using Data for Program Development. The toolkit also provides templates that you can download and adapt for use in developing your college transition program, links to a variety of online resources, and supplementary printable resources. For more information visit www.college.transition.org/toolkit.html

Integrating Career Awareness into the ABE and ESOL Classroom curriculum guide provides guidance to adult educators on how better to equip students with career awareness and planning skills through lessons and activities correlated to the SCANS competencies. The curriculum is available in CD form, with handouts and worksheets that can be downloaded and modified. A new addition is available, published by NCTN in collaboration with the Massachusetts System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES).

Contact Leah Peterson at literacy@worlded.org or 617-385-3740 to order a copy of the *College Transition Toolkit* (\$75.00 plus \$5.00 for shipping/handling) or the *Integrating Career Awareness Curriculum Guide* (the CD is free, but costs \$5.00 to ship).

System for Adult Basic Education

Field Notes is a quarterly, theme-based publication in which Massachusetts adult basic education practitioners share innovative and reliable practices, resources, and information. Published by the System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES) and funded by the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, *Field Notes* is also of interest to readers outside the state. Past themes have included numeracy, social justice, assessment, technology, student leadership, workforce education, and learning disabilities. Find back issues at www.sabes.org/resources/publications/fieldnotes/index.htm

The SABES Math Bulletin. This bulletin is a vehicle for sharing math/numeracy research and professional literature in an accessible, abbreviated platform. It is published electronically quarterly. Funded by a Massachusetts DESE grant, available at

www.sabes.org/resources/publications/mathbulletin/math-bulletin-apr2008.pdf

The Problem Solver. This serves adult basic education (ABE) practitioners by offering math activity outlines, math problems, Web links, and stories about ABE math-related events in Massachusetts and around the United States. Past issues are available at: www.sabes.org/resources/publications/problemsolver/index.htm

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- College Transitions
- Engaging Students in Learning
- ESL Instruction
- Numeracy
- Reading
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