

# Research to Practice



## Authentic Literacy Instruction

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Over the past several years there has been some controversy over the most effective way to teach reading. In an effort to investigate some of the issues surrounding this controversy, a team of researchers studied adult literacy classes to determine which instructional situation seemed more effective for adult students and how many classes used this instructional situation.



### The Good News

A study was conducted with 159 adult literacy students in 22 states to determine which instructional situation, school-like or authentic, led to increased use of literacy outside the adult education classroom. The researchers interviewed the students and their teachers and observed in classrooms in an attempt to classify each teacher's instructional method and to measure the amount of literacy each student engaged in outside the classroom.

For the purpose of the study the researchers defined school-like literacy instruction as that which focuses on the skills of reading and in which published workbooks are used. Authentic literacy instruction used materials identified by the students as relevant to their lives, often materials that were brought in by the students. Authentic literacy instruction also included skill instruction, but the skill instruction was embedded in the context of the real-life materials.

The study found that adult literacy students who attend authentic literacy instruction classes showed significantly more positive changes in literacy practices outside the classroom than did students who attended skills-based classrooms. While the number of days of class attended and the level of literacy when entering the class also influenced the amount of literacy use outside the classroom, the strongest predictor of literacy use was the type of instruction used in the class.

The researchers concluded by stating that if the goal of literacy classes is to increase literacy use outside of class, then classes should be based on authentic literacy instruction.

### The Bad News

Unfortunately, according to a companion study conducted by the same research team, only 25% of adult literacy programs use authentic literacy instruction. This companion study looked at 271 adult literacy programs distributed across the United States. The researchers used surveys mailed to the programs to determine what kind of literacy instruction was being used. According to the results of the surveys, an overwhelming majority of the adult literacy classes that responded reported using school-like literacy instruction. In these classes the materials/workbooks used were published especially for adult new readers and a skills-based approach to teaching reading was used.

### What We Can Do

As adult literacy practitioners, we want our students to achieve the highest level of success possible. As can be seen from these studies, one of the best ways to do that is to use authentic literacy instruction with our students. Our students have diverse needs for literacy in their lives, from filling out applications and reading notices from utility companies to reading their Bibles or reading books to their children. We can use these texts our students identify to provide practice with real-life reading. Words from these texts can then be used for any needed "skills" work: word families, syllabication, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, decoding, etc. By using authentic literacy instruction with our students, we are ensuring their continued use of literacy beyond the classroom.

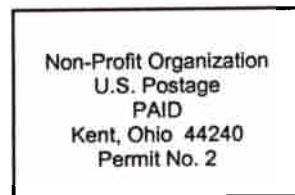
A literacy student who wanted to read picture books to his children would be an example of an opportunity to use authentic literacy instruction. The student brings in a picture book he wants to read to his children. The teacher reads the book orally, next the student and teacher read the book together, then the student reads the book orally. The teacher and student discuss the use of the book in the home. The teacher and student can work together on reading skills by using words from the picture book to add to a word bank or to use for work with word families.

For more information on using authentic literacy instruction in the adult classroom see the OLRC *Research to Practice* publication "Text Considerations in Literacy Teaching and Learning" by Tim Rasinski and Nancy Padak available on-line at <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/0200-14.htm> or from the OLRC office at 800-765-2897 x 20759.

**References:**

Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S. & Jacobson, E. (2000) Adult literacy instruction: Degrees of authenticity and collaboration as described by practitioners. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 33:4, pp. 571-593.

Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E. & Soler, M. (2002) Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37:1, pp. 70-92.



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