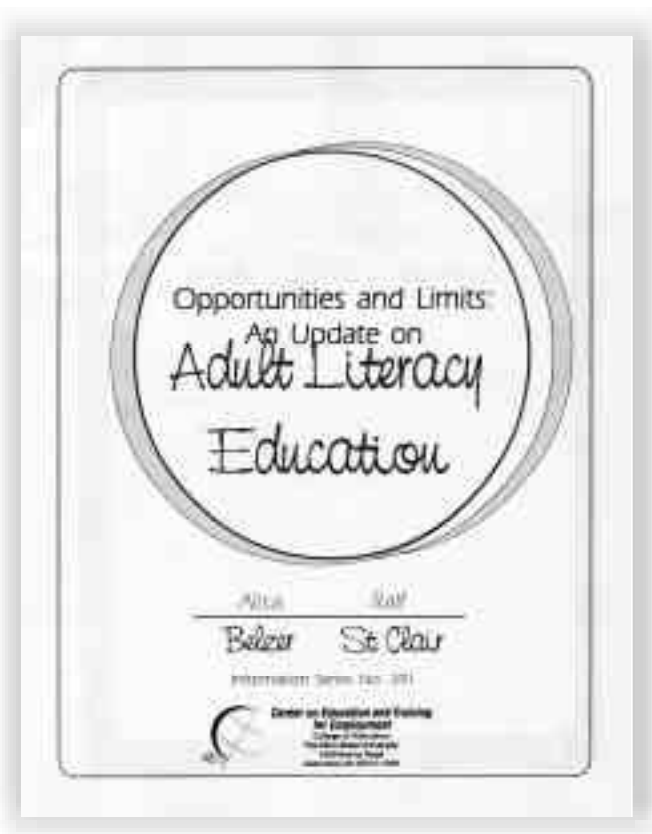


Briefly Noted

by **Maria Moriarty**



***Opportunities and Limits: An Update on Adult Literacy Education.* Alisa Belzer and Ralf St. Clair. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University College of Education Center on Education and Training for Employment. 2003.**

Opportunities and Limits is a recently published review and appraisal of developments in the field of adult literacy education in the U.S. between 1993 and 2003. It provides a concise overview of the landscape of adult literacy in the U.S. and the impacts and unintended consequences of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996) and the Workforce Investment Act (1998), both of which led to changes in the purposes, practices and, in many cases, the learner population in adult basic education programs. These changes have resulted in increased institutionalization of adult basic education. In addition, such changes have tended to encourage a fundamental move in the direction of adult basic education provision connected to employment. With this shift in focus comes a set of exacting requirements for performance accountability.

The accountability framework set in place through the National Reporting System allows programs to use any state-approved assessment instrument.

However, stringent reporting demands have led to an increasing use of standardized tests. The result has been that, although alternative performance-based assessment is not prohibited, the amount of research and practitioner work in this area has decreased markedly.

The authors note that the National Reporting System "has radically altered the discourse on assessment and is a clear example of the field moving toward systematicity and limiting the range of alternative approaches" (p. 15).

While the authors acknowledge that increasing institutionalization can be positive, because it provides more general stability in the field, they point to the more negative effects of correspondingly increased systematization. Particularly noteworthy are the areas of assessment and accountability. Systematization limits the choices that programs and practitioners can make about assessment methods and instruments and makes heavy demands on programs to be accountable for learner achievement according to pre-determined content or curricula.

In that context, the monographs and articles described below illustrate some of the challenges faced by programs and practitioners in the United States as they work to incorporate ever more demanding reporting requirements into their assessment practices. They also discuss the larger issues around learning and knowing, the general purposes of assessment in adult literacy, and how to demonstrate knowledge and prove skill development. ■

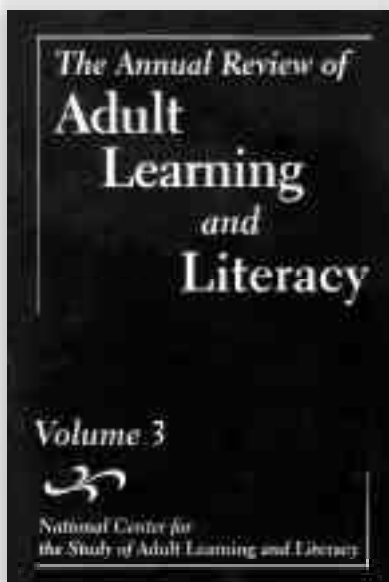
Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education. *NCSALL Reports # 1.* Juliet Merrifield. National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). 1998.

In *Contested Ground*, Merrifield explores issues in performance accountability and presents recommendations for policy and action. She identifies key challenges faced by the adult literacy field in the United States in relation to the purposes and goals of adult literacy teaching and learning and the implications for assessment and accountability.

Merrifield notes that recent research on literacy in its social context has not yet been incorporated into adult literacy assessment, practice and policy in the United States and hence the necessary debate about how performance should be demonstrated, in terms of literacy skills or literacy practices, has not been fully engaged. In addition, the broad purposes, desired outcomes or goals of adult literacy in the U.S. are not clear; that is to say whether the goal is a literate population in the broadest sense or instruction to turn out productive workers and good citizens. She also notes a disconnection in relation to the mutual accountability of stakeholders. Legislators and policy-makers have the power to make programs accountable for money spent, but learners and instructor/practitioners do not have corresponding power to demand adequate resources or to challenge policy decisions.

From a practical standpoint, existing measurement tools are inadequate and, as in the case of standardized tests, are not generally compatible with conceptions of literacy as social practice. However, the various methods of alternative assessment do not allow for comparisons across groups of learners or programs, and cannot measure against external standards, hence such methods do not satisfy policy demands.

Since this report was published in 1998, assessment in the adult literacy field in the United States has increasingly been conceptualized in terms of standardized, norm-referenced testing. The engagement with the debate about the meanings of literacy, the purposes of literacy, and the value of various methods of assessment has been arrested in favour of an accountability framework based on measurement. ■



Literacy Assessment in Adult Basic Education, in *The Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*. (pp. 84-151) Volume 3. John Kruidenier. (A Project of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2002.

In this article, Kruidenier echoes many of the issues identified by Merrifield but from the perspective of a field that has, in the context of the National Reporting System, become more institutionalized, and in which assessment, at least for the purposes of satisfying policy-makers and funders, is much more likely to be based on standardized tests and measurements.

Kruidenier provides a broad overview of the various types of assessments of literacy skills, which he defines as reading and writing, that are available to adult basic education programs in the United States. These may include informal assessment, performance assessment, norm-referenced assessment and criterion-referenced assessment. He examines and provides a detailed description and critique of the various tools currently available.

He reviews the various purposes of assessment in adult basic education, including placement, instructional planning, progress, self-evaluation and program evaluation and accountability. As Merrifield does, he recommends

ways to improve assessment and states the implications for policy, instruction and research. The article provides a comprehensive description of the assessment landscape in the United States and introduces the issues of assessment in adult literacy.

Taken together, the Merrifield and Kruidener articles offer a comprehensive introduction to issues of assessment and accountability in adult literacy in the United States, and provide a starting point from which to view the developing trends. ■



Adventures in Assessment. Volumes 12–15. Boston, MA: World Education. 2000-2003.

This annual publication is intended as a forum for literacy practitioners in Massachusetts to describe, critically reflect and share their experiences of alternative assessment practices.

The four latest volumes provide an engaging and informative view of the journey practitioners in Massachusetts have taken as they work to meet accountability demands and come to terms with state and nationally mandated testing. Volume 12 (2000) looks at practitioners' experiences with standards-based reform initiatives at the state and national levels. Volume 13 (2001) addresses how practitioners work to satisfy the increasing demands for accountability. Volume 14 (2002) continues the discussion of accountability challenges through reflecting on performance without using traditional testing. Volume 15 (2003) reflects practitioner awareness of how critically important goal setting is in the assessment process, and how difficult it is to work with mandatory assessment instruments in that context.

Volumes 6-15 are available online at www.sabes.org/resources/adventures/ ■

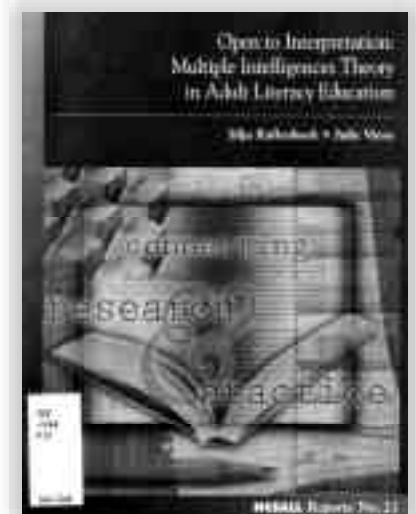
Open to Interpretation: Multiple Intelligences Theory in Adult Literacy Education. NCSALL Reports # 21. Silja Kallenbach and Julie Viens. National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). 2002.

Open to Interpretation is the report of the Adult Multiple Intelligences study that incorporated two linked qualitative research projects. The first consisted of ten studies conducted by instructors and facilitated by co-directors of the AMI study. The second was conducted by the AMI co-directors in the same learning contexts. Research methods included on-site observation, qualitative interviews and teacher journals. The study is the first systematic effort to examine Multiple Intelligences theory in adult literacy education. It focuses on how Multiple Intelligences theory can support instruction and assessment in Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education and ESOL (English for speakers of other languages).

According to the report, basing instruction on Multiple Intelligences could have far-reaching implications for policy. This is particularly so in light of the development of increasingly rigid accountability frameworks in the National Reporting System (NRS) in which states must achieve and report outcomes according to a predetermined and standard set of criteria using standardized tests. Whereas the NRS framework focuses on testing skills, assessment using Multiple Intelligences theory focuses on metacognitive skills and learners' self knowledge.

The authors highlight the need for more research in the area of assessment and Multiple Intelligences theory to demonstrate the importance of secondary outcomes, such as self-efficacy and metacognitive skills, that can be overlooked in standard testing. The findings of the study point to the effects of allowing learners to identify and demonstrate their strengths, and challenging instructors to allow learners to exercise greater control over their own learning.

Overall, the study raises critical questions about what is often missed in more narrowly focused assessment that measures skills based on specified content. It opens up discussion about just what is being accomplished in adult literacy programs, what is being assessed and why. ■



For a recent look at Multiple Intelligences in adult literacy and practical support for practitioners using Multiple Intelligences-based practices, we suggest *Multiple Intelligences and Adult Literacy: A sourcebook for practitioners* by Julie Viens and Silja Kallenbach (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press. 2003).