
A Teacher Steps Aside in the Multilevel Classroom

Emily Singer

I teach two small English classes at Columbia Metrowest Medical Center in Framingham as part of a workplace literacy grant funded by the Department of Education (DOE). My employer, the Worker Education Program (WEP), is a component of Service Employees International Union, Local 285, a labor union representing healthcare workers across the state. The seven students that participate work in the Housekeeping and Dietary Departments of the hospital and are all members of SEIU Local 285.

To accommodate the staffing needs of the departments, the two classes are organized by work-shifts. Three evening-shift workers attend the first class one hour prior to the start of their shift. Four day-shift workers come to the second class as their shift ends. We meet twice a week in a small audio-visual viewing room in the hospital library. As a result, classes reflect a full spectrum of typical adult learners, with wide differences in verbal and literacy abilities as well as varied experiences with formal schooling. This is truly a multilevel class.

Looking at the Multilevel Puzzle

It is my experience that there are certain challenges in teaching that require continual investigation. Like one of those small puzzles in which one must slide the squares around to form an image, teaching a multilevel class requires similar tinkering and patience. How one looks at the puzzle will shape how one goes about solving it. If we focus on one small corner of the puzzle, e.g. addressing differences in reading ability, we may find some very useful strategies for teaching, but other aspects of the puzzle may remain unsolved. If, on the other hand, we keep the whole image in mind as we try to solve the puzzle—for instance, by finding ways to keep the group unified as a whole—we may sacrifice

academic goals for social ones.

The following exploration shares with you one sequence of tinkering I did with my two classes. I share it in the hope that my process may be of use to others who are also puzzling over their own multilevel classes.

The questions I started with address both views of the puzzle. 1) How can literacy activities be more inclusive of the lower-level readers and writers? and 2) How can I (the teacher) be less central in group learning activities? The first question addresses the micro view of the multilevel challenge, while the latter aims to focus on the group as a whole.

As most of us know, adult education requires a great deal of flexibility, often imposed by funding changes, attendance irregularity, etc. This investigation was no exception. I had originally planned to explore the use of non-print materials in class (photos, drawings, music) as a means to draw lower-level readers into literacy activities. Yet, pressing circumstances arose that necessitated that I change course.

The classes had been funded by a DOE grant since February 1995. In 1996, the US. government determined that workplace literacy grants would not be refunded. Therefore, as of June 30, 1997, the classes will have ended permanently unless alternative monies have been found.

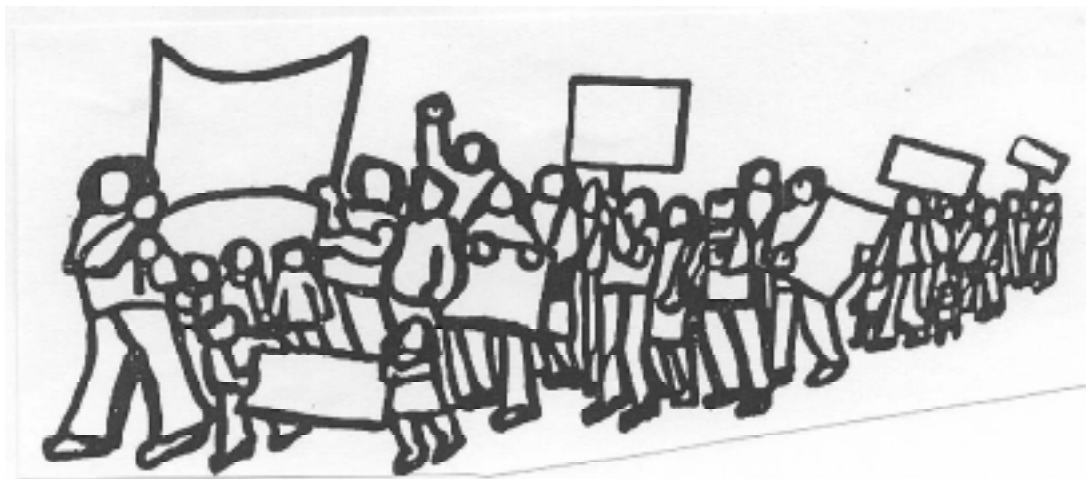
Beginning in January 1997, the WEP staff began to develop strategies to fund the English classes at our five sites after June. We began to explore if monies for “basic skills” classes could be negotiated into workers’ union contracts, and if such “contract language” could become standardized (the same language could be used in different contracts). We included union representatives in these discussions. This is a strategy that will take long-term planning, campaigning, and organizing to implement.

In terms of more immediate possibilities, our director began researching other grants. In addition, the teachers and WEP director developed a proposal asking each of our five hospital sites to continue funding the classes after June. Each proposal emphasizes the success of the program and the benefit of the classes to their institution. We decided to present the proposals at each of our monthly Planning and Evaluation Team (PET) meetings. (A PET meeting consists of a representative from hospital Human Resources, the union, workers' supervisor(s), the WEP director, at least one student and a teacher). The Columbia/Metrowest PET would meet within a few weeks.

I wanted to include students' voices in this strategizing as much as possible. I felt a sense of urgency and responsibility that students be able to

visionary language within the meetings. The committee responds positively, listens to him, and asks Enrique to gather other workers' views on needed legal protection. Enrique collects testimonies from workers in over 100 literacy programs in San Francisco, one of which convinces the task force of the need to protect low-literacy workers from unwarranted termination, a concern of many workers. Enrique participates in drafting the law which was passed by the California legislature in 1991.

I felt the issues of exclusion due to language, race and class spoke directly to the barriers that the service workers often face at Metrowest, and would continue to face in the decisions being made about future classes. In addition, I felt that Enrique Ramirez was a valuable role model for students as we explored the risks in-



define their education needs and critically explore the issues surrounding the funding of classes. The investigation of multilevel classes that follows was thus molded by the circumstances of these events, as I incorporated the pressing funding issue into the content of my classes.

Developing Inclusive Literacy Activities

As a starting point, I chose an article called "Persistence Pays Off: Enrique helps draft a law in California to protect low-literacy workers," co-written by Leslie Shelton and Enrique Ramirez, an adult literacy student in South San Francisco. The article is from the September 1996 issue of *The Change Agent*, a newspaper of social justice issues in adult education published by the New England Literacy Resource Center. The article chronicles Enrique's participation on a legislative task force dealing with the legal needs of low-literacy workers.

In the article, Enrique confronts the task force (consisting of business and labor leaders, members of the media, legislators, and academics) on their exclu-

involved in speaking out about literacy needs, both within and beyond the walls of our classroom.

Instead of chronicling each lesson, I will summarize some of the activities that were successful in the multilevel context, and some that presented problems, speculating how all activities might be further improved and drawing out implications for teaching multilevel groups in general. "Success" here is measured in the engagement of students (some or all) in an activity, and the value that they themselves ascribe to the activity.

We began with some pre-reading activities. First, we discussed the vocabulary of the title, "Persistence Pays Off." We learned the vocabulary, and talked about if we agreed or disagreed with this statement. Second, we looked at and discussed the picture of Enrique reading to his son at the library literacy program. This provided an opportunity to draw out more vocabulary and make predictions about Enrique's character, job, etc. Third, we generated questions for Enrique and hypothesized answers to these questions.

In general I found the pre-reading activities to be

successful at including all learners across literacy levels; they especially enabled the two lower-level readers to show their strengths as strong speakers. One of these students is a native Jamaican who, as he is fluent in spoken English, was able to explain the concept of “persistence” to other students. He was thus not confined to the position of always being the “lower-level” student in the class. The oral nature of the activity made it possible for all learners to contribute their opinions and hypotheses about Enrique’s character and to relate their own experiences.

Reading activities were not as successful at providing a means for all learners to show their strengths. For reading, I split the article into two parts, and divided each part into one and two-paragraph pages. In total there were nine such pages to the whole piece.

The procedure for reading typically entailed students reading a page of text aloud, pausing to ask questions about vocabulary which I would answer, and then another student re-reading the text again out loud. I had written some vocabulary words in the margins to aid students and left blanks for stu-

dents to add new words of their own. Following each page of text were questions to help students hypothesize about what would happen next, and to attempt to engage students with Enrique’s character and story.

It is clear from the above description that such reading activities remained quite teacher-centered and relied upon the stronger readers. One of the lower-level readers remarked that he felt that he couldn’t keep up with others as they read aloud. My response was to encourage him to listen during the first reading to get the main ideas, then to go back and read to understand as we read the second time. This did seem to help but did not fully address the issue that the text was too difficult for the lower-level readers to undertake independently.

It was at this point in the unit that I met with Lenore Balliro at the A.L.R.I./SABES Regional Support Center. She recommended that all students would benefit from a simplified summary of the piece. Perhaps I could even use less of the original text with the whole group, and switch to reading it for crucial points in the story line. This would enable readers to form a global understanding of the text, and make the challenge of reading a newspaper article less daunting, particularly for the lower-level readers.

Despite the challenges and teacher-centeredness

of slowly reading through the complex text, I did notice a number of positive literacy behaviors being utilized by students. For example, students were rereading portions of the article between classes, and they were using vocabulary from the article in our class discussions and in their writing. This was true of the lowest-level reader and writer as well as the most advanced.

It was also a tremendous feat for students to be reading directly from a newspaper article and understanding it, particularly since about half of the students don’t read the paper. I feel the frustration level remained manageable in part due to the small size of the class, where questions could easily be answered. I suspect that if we had continued in this way for too long, the level of frustration for some students might have overtaken the positive challenge.

To develop post-reading activities, I wrote sentences summarizing the main ideas of the first unit, blanking out key vocabulary words (“literacy program”, “speak out,” “task force,” “legislature”). Students matched vocabulary words on slips of paper to the blanks.

This worked well for all literacy levels. It allowed the lower-level students to practice word recognition and provided the higher-level readers with a context clue exercise.

The first unit of reading ended with Enrique feeling quite excluded by the task force and intimidated by the “big words” the committee members used. We made a list of “what Enrique could/should do” in this situation, discussing the difference in meanings between “could” and “should.” I wrote students’ ideas on the board and they copied the sentences into their notebooks. I created a follow-up worksheet that asked students to write advice to people in a variety of situations, including their own.

This activity also worked for all literacy levels. It enabled all students to participate in both reading and writing activities. On the other hand, like the reading activity, it continued to depend upon me to be the scribe and center. If I repeated this lesson, I might ask a stronger writer to scribe while I stay on the sidelines.

My meeting with Lenore helped me to set clearer goals for the next unit. As my Planning Evaluation Team meeting was scheduled to occur in two weeks, I needed to begin activities that helped students articulate their literacy needs and decide if/how this information should be presented at the meeting.

Before the next class, I created a simplified sum-



mary of the second half of the article and wrote four questions to focus student discussion on our class funding issues. Due to the time constraints, I used the summary as the reading text which allowed us to complete the story in half a class.

Getting Out of the Middle

The following two activities chronicle efforts I made to address the whole-view of the multilevel puzzle: developing strong inter-group dynamics that serve to unite students across differences in literacy ability. As mentioned above, I was particularly eager to explore ways that I could be less central in activities and encourage more interaction among students.

In our next class meeting, I put goals for the next two weeks on the board: 1) to prepare for the PET meeting; 2) to include everyone in discussion about future classes; 3) to get students talking more to each other than to me. We discussed the goals, which enabled me to make explicit my desire to be less central in class activities and to make room for all student voices. I pointed out how I often repeat what a student says, but more slowly for all to understand. I said that, despite the difficulty of understanding each others' accents, I saw the value of them addressing this challenge so that more conversation could occur both inside and outside of class. I asked the students to list what they "could do" if they didn't understand another student. Students said, "ask to repeat again," and "ask to say slow" or "say another word or sentence more easy." We agreed these would be guidelines for group discussions.

I then gave students the following four questions:

- 1) Why are classes at the hospital important?
- 2) How many times per week would be good? How many hours per class? Should classes meet on workers' time or hospital time?
- 3) What kind of classes are most needed?
- 4) Who should pay for the classes? (hospital/union/worker/someone else)? Why?

Each student got a chance to speak (following the guidelines). Frequently, stating a reason for classes led to an anecdote. For example, "They need bilingual people at the hospital," led to a story about how frequently Spanish-speaking workers are asked by

doctors to translate for patients. "Because they need us to do this work," another student stated. "American people don't want to do [housekeeping, kitchen work]. It is too hard. So [because they hire non-native speakers] we need classes in order to do a good job." This led to discussion about why Americans didn't want to do housekeeping jobs, anecdotes about being hired when they knew very little English, and training co-workers who did not speak English. I kept the reasons on the board for the second class to read. After a similar discussion about goals and guidelines, students from

the second class added their reasons to the list.

I noted later in my journal that I had only encouraged students once to relate to each other more than to me. I also noted that I was still playing a central role in the activity. I was standing in front of them at the board, I scribed their responses, and asked clarifying questions to generate more information. I felt I needed to come up with a different strategy for getting myself out of the middle.

For the next class, I copied their responses onto newsprint. As a reading exercise, each person read two responses aloud. Students added more reasons to

the list. One student talked about an American in the Housekeeping Department who was asked by the supervisor to take out the hazardous trash. The worker told the supervisor that she didn't have the right gloves. The supervisor got angry, but the worker still refused. The student said, "People who don't speak English can not do that. They don't know [their rights] and they can't communicate with supervisors. That's why English is important."

Returning for a moment to literacy concerns, I noticed that reading as a group from newsprint was a valuable way to unify a group around reading, in part combining the goals of both sides of this investigation. Students were focused together on one text and could all contribute to the "making of meaning" rather than working from separate sheets of paper. The more advanced writers copied the entire list into their notebooks unsolicited. I asked lower-level writers to choose a reason of importance to them to copy into their notebooks.

At the beginning of the next class, I drew a picture of a bus on the board. I drew myself in the back seat and a student in the front seat. I then wrote the following goals on the board:



- 1) to have students be leaders/drivers;
- 2) to include everyone's voice;
- 3) to listen and talk to each other.

I explained that I would take the back seat. This meant they had to decide who would write down ideas, how to conduct the discussion, etc. I said I would keep quiet unless they asked for my help.

Students in the first class chose the strongest writer to be the scribe and proceeded to talk about the questions. I wrote in my journal, "I know it worked [to be out of the middle] because I could feel the tension in myself." I could feel that my own teaching behaviors were being forced to change, and that I had to control my impulses to interfere with their process. On the occasions that I did interject, I raised my hand like a student and waited for them to call on me. This provided a little comic relief and allowed me to stay in the "back seat." I needed to do this when one worker's strong feelings were preventing her from listening to another worker's opinion. I asked for permission to interject and encouraged her to list the pros and cons of each student's idea rather than need to have one answer. I then retreated to the sidelines.

It was quite interesting to note the differences in the two groups. Students in the second class appeared to be all talking at the same time, overlapping their responses. One student was simultaneously translating for a beginning-level Portuguese speaker. They at first wanted me to scribe, and as I resisted, they convinced one of the students to do it. Again, I held my tongue and impulse to referee. This group arrived at agreement much more easily. Where there was difference of opinion, they recorded all responses.

I reflected afterwards on the importance of making my intentions explicit. I noted that students often don't jump into leadership positions in a classroom unless it is clear that this is expected of them. A teacher's behavior also determines the extent to which a student assumes a leadership role. This made me reflect on the issue of inclusion, and how being invited to participate and lead had a significant impact on their doing so.

I typed up both classes' responses to the questions under three headings: "Why are English classes important?," "We want.../We need...," and "Who's responsible for the classes?" and read them with students. (See box for a sampling of student responses to these questions.) The first class therefore had an opportunity to read the second class' ideas and discuss the differences in their responses. I also sent a copy of these responses to my director at WEP, who decided to postpone the PET meeting until she and the new union rep could speak to the students and discuss a strategizing process around the funding issue.

Sample Student Responses to the Discussion Questions

1) Why are English classes at the hospital important?

- *The classes have helped me to improve my reading and writing a lot. This is very important to me.*
- *The hospital is a public place and everything is in English. It's important we understand and speak English.*
- *It's important for us and important for the hospital. When we speak and understand English we can be more helpful to patients, nurses, doctors, supervisors.*
- *It's important for the hospital because many American people don't want to do that job (housekeeping, kitchen, etc), because this is a hard job. Spanish people and people from other countries will do it. Without it [us] the hospital has a problem. We need the classes.*
- *The classes are important because I can know what the signs in the hospital mean, also the precautions on the liquids we use, which one to use, where to use it [to read labels, and instructions].*
- *English will help us to know our rights. We can read hospital and union policies. We can talk to supervisors if we think our work is unfair, we have too much work, etc.*

2) We want...We need...

- *We want classes to continue.*
- *We need two hour class. If they say no, we want 1 1/2 hours. (Added by the second class: one student wants 1 1/2 hour classes.)*
- *We want it to be 1/2 hospital time, 1/2 worker's time.*

3) Who's responsible for the classes? The hospital should... The union should... Workers should... Others?

- *The hospital should pay for the classes. If the hospital says no, 1/2 union, 1/2 hospital. (Added by second class.)*
- *Workers shouldn't pay. Our wages are small.*
- *The union should help us.*

Summary

In response to my first question: “How can literacy activities be more inclusive of lower-level learners?,” I feel I have gained some very useful insights. Most valuable to me was learning that my lower-level readers needed to have a simplified summary of the newspaper text. Although I had been drawing on learners’ “schema” in pre-reading and reading activities, I was focusing mostly on their personal experience as it related to the text, not on facts within the text itself. Even when teaching central concepts from a text, I tended not to teach the “plot,” under the belief that I should not give the story away to students. Perhaps because higher-level readers can draw more on inferencing and predicting skills, the need for this summary for lower levels seems critical.

In my investigation, the absence of a summary in the first unit made the reading quite difficult for lower-level readers, relied on my staying central to the reading process to decipher the text, and emphasized the skills of the advanced students. In the second unit, the summary enabled the lower-level readers to understand the story quickly and without much effort.

In subsequent units, I have found that lower-level readers also benefit from having a taped version of a text that they can listen to both prior to and following reading. If the reading on the tape is slow enough, one student also enjoys reading with the tape. Perhaps an advanced student could record the tape, particularly if he or she speaks the same language as the beginner so that the familiar accent might even aid in comprehension.

On a constructive note, the amount of review, discussion and repetition we did in the first unit made a big difference in comprehension for all levels. It is important to remember to plan this time into a unit.

The group reading activity from newsprint was inclusive of all levels, and kept students unified as a group rather than focused on individual copies. The level of interaction in the reading activity increased

dramatically, including translation, discussion, and listening to each other.

Finally, in terms of literacy activities, this investigation taught me the value of having interactive follow-up activities, involving word recognition, sequencing, and writing for all levels. This includes opportunities to copy as well as generate sentences, and making sure that enough time is allotted to writing. Half an hour seemed to be the minimum needed to get students in my class started, especially reticent writers.

In terms of group dynamics, getting out of the middle was my primary goal and I was more successful at it in the second activity. I believe what made it possible was making this goal explicit to students and then stepping out of the way and staying there so that it could happen. In the future, I will continue to explore ways to let students decide on the structure of activities and encourage more leadership and interaction within the class.

At Metrowest, there are significant factors that unite students in the classes despite differences in literacy ability, such as shared work responsibilities and stresses, problems with supervisors, language barriers, and union issues, to name a few. Similarly, the subject of my activity—that is, the

need for English classes at the hospital—is a need shared equally by all class members and created a great deal of solidarity within the group. Although this may be unique to an on-site workplace literacy class, looking for unifying themes may be a useful strategy for working with other multilevel classes. Finding ways that all learners can show their strengths and experience also serves to equalize the levels, as was evident within this group.

In one of those small picture puzzles I referred to earlier, there is always one square missing which allows you to manipulate the image. Similarly, it is a given that the “multilevel” picture is never fully complete but rather is constantly changing. •

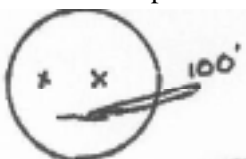



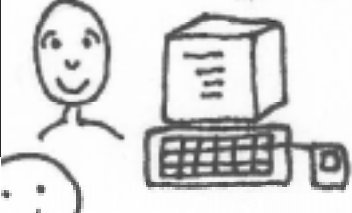


Giving Advice Using “Could” and “Should”

The purpose of this lesson is to engage all learners in discussion and critical thinking activity and to provide a literacy activity accessible to all learners. The following activity reflects issues raised in my own class, so I recommend choosing situations that are relevant to your students’ lives and/or readings. The lesson works well for a mixed-level class because it involves a lot of student interaction, can be fun and entertaining, and encourages learners to analyze situations more deeply. Here’s how it goes:

1. Introduce the idea that students will be giving advice in this activity. Ask students to give specific examples of when they ask for and give advice.
2. On 3 x 5 cards, write situations such as the following:
 - I have a fever, and don’t feel well. I’m afraid to call in sick. What could/should I do?
 - I am Enrique. I feel nervous because I have to speak to the legislators today. What could/should I do?
 - There’s no money in our union money for classes. What could/should we do?
3. Each person picks a card and role-plays asking for advice. It may help if you do the first one to model it. Students respond using “could” and “should.” In doing so, explain the difference in meaning between “could” and “should.”
4. After each person in the group has had the opportunity to role play, follow up the activity with a worksheet such as the one below. Students will write down the responses they gave and received. Depending on the students’ writing ability, lower-level writers may only complete the situation they role played, and more advanced writers may complete more or all of them.

Sample worksheet:

	1. "I don't feel well. I think I have a fever. I'm afraid to call in sick."	_____
	2. Enrique felt nervous about speaking to the legislators.	_____
	3. There is no money in our union contract for English classes.	_____
	4. Lali feels very tired after work.	_____
	5. Nil wants to learn to use a computer.	_____

—Emily Singer