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*This chapter discusses underlying themes and emergent
issues related to community building and the learning and
teaching of adult ESL.*

Final Thoughts on Community in Adult ESL

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Community building is an important, if not essential, element of adult
English as a second language (ESL) learning. Communities, whether civic,
work, religious, or identity-based, are the contexts within which we cease to
be alone and become connected with others. "Community offers the promise
of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence" (Block,
2008, p. 3). When adult learners feel that they belong to a place (the ESL
classroom, the literacy program they are attending), they invest in their learn-
ing and take ownership of the curriculum. That is why the contributors to
this volume consider that adult learning in general and language learning
and teaching in particular happen best within the notion of "community."

Language is the main tool for communicating with others in our com-
munities. For immigrants and adult English learners, language provides not
only the bridge to basic survival but also the means by which they forge
relationships with neighbors, colleagues at work, and the people who work
in the shops, agencies, and institutions in their new country. Immigrating
to a new country affects a person's social identity and requires a readjust-
ment in many different areas of the person's life (Ullman, 1997), which is
why it is so important that we build community in the language classroom.

Each of the authors in this volume contributes something different to
the discussion on the importance of community building in the adult ESL
classroom. Some authors contribute by telling about their teaching experi-
ences and others by sharing some of the research they do. Together they
examine the role of community as central to ESL learning and teaching,

describing teaching strategies and exploring theories that can help adult ESL learners with this struggle to learn a new language and culture and integrate into the communities of which they have become a part.

Factors Influencing Adult ESL Teaching

It is crucial to understand who attends ESL classes and overcome the personal biases that instructors may hold toward adult learners in ESL programs. The contributors to the volume appropriately regard ESL learners as adults and advise that all instructors treat them as capable individuals and rise above any stereotypical illusions that these learners come from a background of poverty and illiteracy. Thus the authors of Chapter One set the context by describing today's immigrant population, detailing who they are and which language skills they possess and which they need to acquire. In Chapter Five, Rob Martinsen describes the importance of building trust with adult students as an effective means of developing and enhancing community.

In addition, this volume highlights the importance of using appropriate teaching strategies to engage adult learners, building community in the classroom, and opening up the boundaries of the classroom to help learners engage more fully with their communities. For example, Chapter Two explains how the whole-language approach can be used effectively in adult ESL instruction. Chapter Three describes the use of journaling.

Relevant ESL Classes

What happens in the classroom translates into the students' reality, their communities, and that reality is incorporated into class activities. The chapters in this volume add to the body of literature on adult ESL teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of offering ESL classes that will provide useful information and learning that can be applied to the learners' daily needs in their jobs, families, small communities, and the larger social community. For example, in Chapter Six, Ann Brooks explains how to make workplace ESL classes relevant to workplace issues.

The volume also emphasizes the importance of looking at the effects that identity and culture have on ESL instruction. Chapter Four describes the direct impact of social, cultural, and political events of the community outside the classroom on community building inside the classroom. These are relevant issues to adult learners and their language training.

The Importance of Community to Adult Learners

This volume stresses that learning a language is not just an exercise in mastering isolated skills such as speaking, listening, reading, or writing. It is a process through which learners develop a new identity and a new understanding of the world that incorporates the new language. Because

community building is important to adults, the language-learning transactions that occur in the classroom need to reflect both the complex community and culture-based identities of learners and instructors and the necessity of structuring language learning to incorporate the learners' need to belong to a community. Adult ESL learning can no longer be conceived of as occurring solely within the walls of the classroom.

Community Building as a Process

All of the chapters in this volume point to the concept of community building as a shared process that implies reciprocity and adults working together to negotiate meaning and share knowledge as effectively as possible. It is a developmental process, and the first step is to build trust among participants. It is important to keep in mind that community building happens when instructors and learners feel comfortable and safe with each other and collaborate in the classroom in such a way that they continue doing so when the class is over. Community reminds us of our responsibilities to the common good (Fendler, 2006). In the ESL classroom, the common good requires that all individuals in class learn to use English effectively in their various communities. Working in collaboration and working toward a common goal are also part of the process of community building.

Conclusion

This volume integrates knowledge about adult learning and adult ESL. It brings the important perspective of community to our work as language instructors and supporters of the newcomers to the English language and culture. While not attempting to provide recipes or claim to have a foolproof list of dos and don'ts for teaching adult ESL in the context of community, the contributors to this volume offer practical ideas and relevant theories born of their own professional experience in order to challenge readers to reflect on their own practices and beliefs. The editors and authors of this volume hope to inspire further conversations and encourage more discussion and knowledge sharing among adult ESL educators.

References

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