

How Policy Changes Affect Local Immigrant Learners

Susan Finn Miller

“Teacher, what’s going to happen now?” This was a question nervously posed to me by an adult learner in my English as a Second Language (ESL) class on Wednesday, November 9, 2016, the morning after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

Civics education is an important component of what we do in adult ESL classes. Therefore, in the fall of 2016, although most of the adults in my class were not yet citizens, and, therefore, not eligible to vote, I wanted the learners to understand the upcoming election and especially the significance of red and blue states as reflected in the electoral college. While learners had strong political opinions about who they wanted to win the election, my stance was always strictly nonpartisan. Over several days, learners worked in small groups to research the number of electors in each state, and they learned that the candidate who won at least 270 electoral votes would become president of the United States even if that person did not win the popular vote. Students learned that in 2000 Al Gore lost to George W. Bush, even though Gore had won the popular vote that year. In 2016, we saw electoral college history repeated.

While Clarena Larrotta has offered a national perspective on the impact of recent immigration policies on the lives of the adults we serve

in literacy programs, my goal is to share the experience of one community.

Since 1991, I have worked in a local adult education program in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, teaching English to immigrants and refugees. Like many adult literacy practitioners, I have met people from around the world in my classes, many of whom have faced unspeakable tragedy and pain in their lives before coming to the United States. For many decades, our country, through the goodwill and generosity of our citizens, has been a refuge to those in need.

In fact, my city has a long history of welcoming those fleeing danger and persecution. There is a large community of Mennonites and Amish whose ancestors found a new home in this area seeking religious liberty centuries ago. Because welcoming the persecuted is part of our heritage, many people currently living in Lancaster share a conviction that helping those in need is a moral imperative.

In January of 2017, the BBC featured Lancaster in an online video calling my city the “**Refugee Capitol of the U.S.**” As reported by the BBC, “Since 2013, Lancaster has taken in over 1,300 refugees,” which is “20 times per capita more than the US as a whole.”

Among our more recent arrivals are families from

Syria and Somalia, two countries whose people are now banned by our government's travel restrictions. Tragically, Syrians and Somalis who have already settled in our community fear they may never again see some of their loved ones who were left behind. In addition to these travel restrictions, the current administration is also seeking to end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program, which has provided legal protection for individuals from certain places who have experienced tragedy due to extreme violence, war, or natural disaster. Many thousands of individuals from Sudan, Haiti, El Salvador, and Nicaragua under TPS, who have been living in our country for decades, may now face deportation.

I have met and taught hundreds of individuals from these countries in my ESL classes over the years. I know a woman, who at 19 – fully aware of the dangers – walked to the United States from El Salvador. There was a man from Somalia in my class whose response to the oral language assessment question “What do you like about Pennsylvania” was “There is no war here.” I know a woman who was late for a meeting with me because she had to wire \$20 to her daughter and grandchildren back home because they hadn't eaten in three days. I've encountered individuals from Haiti who lost everything, including family members, to the devastating 2010 earthquake.

I've met many refugees and immigrants who have been traumatized by violence, poverty, and natural disasters, and yet the enormous stamina and resilience most of them demonstrate is a testament to human potential and strength. I know foreign-trained physicians from Haiti, Cuba and Iraq who are now providing much needed health care here in the U.S. A brilliant former student from Iran received an award for the highest score on the GED and is now attending college pursuing a career in health care. There are many refugees, for

example from Nepal and Myanmar, who volunteer their time in our public schools because they want to give back. There are untold numbers of hard-working immigrants who have started their own successful businesses.

In our community, we've heard of raids in workplaces, and immigrants being deported. We worry that raids might even happen in our classrooms. Learners who had TPS status for many years are concerned about their families being turned upside down if they are forced to leave. How do families who have children who were born here and are U.S. citizens handle such chaotic disruption? What of the rights of natural born citizens? Also heartbreaking are stories we hear from those who dreamed they would one day have the opportunity to be reunited with family members by sponsoring them to come to the U.S. Those dreams have been shattered.

Unfortunately, those making immigration policy are blind to the many powerful ways immigrants contribute to our communities. These new immigration policies, in addition to the overwhelming stress experienced by those with uncertain status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the horrific treatment of families seeking asylum at the border where children, including even infants, have been separated from their parents, are transforming the United States from a country that has long reflected the words etched on our beloved Statue of Liberty to one that cowers in fear and lashes out cruelly to those who are different.

With the critical distinctions that Native Americans were here long before any Europeans arrived and many Africans were brought here in chains to be enslaved, the United States is a nation of immigrants. A majority of us can harken back to ancestors who came here seeking

safety, freedom and a better life. While each new group of immigrants has often faced persecution, diversity has made our country strong and, dare I say, “exceptional.”

I’m proud to report that, in Lancaster, leaders from government, business and civil society have recognized that immigrants enrich our community and are necessary to keep us economically strong. In 2017, Lancaster was one of 25 cities to receive technical assistance from the New American Economy and Welcoming America. This award included a research study to explore the impact immigrants and refugees have had on our community. Through the Gateways for Growth study, we learned that these new residents “contribute over **\$1.3 billion** to our annual GDP, this translates to **\$155 million** in state, local, and federal taxes paid, bringing **\$440 million in yearly spending power** to our community.” Immigrants are also “more likely to be self-employed and are responsible for creating or retaining over 1,000 manufacturing jobs” in our community.

As noted by John Feinblatt, President of the New American Economy, “While Congress debates the value of immigration, in city after city, the evidence is already in—immigrants revive neighborhoods and drive economic growth.” Local leaders in Lancaster, including the president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce, have echoed this sentiment with conviction and enthusiasm during public gatherings and in newspaper op eds.

Due to the understanding and vision of local leaders that immigrants are needed to keep our economy strong as well as the compassion of much of the faith community and others in our area, I believe that we will weather this current hateful storm. As noted in the Gateways for Growth report “immigrants and refugees are part of our

community’s DNA.”

It is abundantly clear that this new political landscape has created challenges for adult educators and the learners we serve. While we need to be respectful of diverse points of view, many of us are understandably deeply concerned. Thankfully, several years ago, our community formed a coalition of local organizations to support immigrant and refugee integration. This coalition, which meets regularly, represents refugee resettlement agencies, providers of health care, adult and K-12 education, housing, and employment services as well as representatives from the various immigrant groups and the faith community. There is even a volunteer group that restores computers to donate to immigrants and refugees in need. Through our coalition, we are seeking to educate both those at risk from the new immigration policies and those of us who work with immigrants and refugees. Workshops on the legal rights of immigrants living in the U.S. have been offered to immigrants and the general public. We are learning how to legally protect the most vulnerable.

On November 9, 2016, like most of our country and the world, the learners in my ESL class were shocked when Hillary Clinton lost the electoral college. Despite my deep sense of foreboding about the future, I realized how important it was for me to convey to the class the principle of the peaceful transition of power, which is perhaps the single most essential key to maintaining a stable democracy. That day in class, we listened to excerpts of President Obama’s speech as well as Hillary Clinton’s concession speech. In their words, both Obama and Clinton highlighted this quintessential aspect of our democratic system.

I told the students that it was not possible to predict exactly what the future would bring

with this new president. However, almost immediately we began to see the hateful rhetoric toward immigrants and refugees turned into policy. In response, there has been an enormous groundswell of activism across the nation, as well as in our community, among those who are standing up for what is right and good.

On November 8, 2016, our country changed in dramatic ways; however, given the vision and compassion of the American people as well as

the ingenuity, strength, and resilience of the immigrants and refugees who have been woven into our communities, I have to remain hopeful that goodness will prevail. I have said many times that each day seems to bring a new heartache, but despair is not the answer. The antidote to despair is to work with others to actively advocate for what is right. Thankfully, over the last two years, we have seen that joining together with those who share our values has become commonplace across the country. We must be steadfast in these efforts.

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Showing Up for Immigrant Learners (and Each Other)

Andy Nash, World Education, Inc.

We are witnessing a mounting campaign in this country to blame immigrants and refugees for our economic insecurity, rampant violent crime, and a diminished social safety net. Under this banner, our government is using immigration policy to turn away asylum seekers and refugees, separate children from parents, and threaten the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of communities that have lived in the United States for a generation and consider this their home.

Turning us against our immigrant neighbors is not a new trend. It is an example of a time-tested divide-and-conquer strategy that is quite effective at redirecting legitimate grievances (low wages, unaffordable health care, etc.) away from the powerful who benefit and toward an easily identifiable (by accent or skin color) “other.” And the result of this targeting, as Larotta notes in her piece, “Immigrants Learning English in a Time of Anti-Immigrant Sentiment,” is that many immigrant groups are reporting increased incidents of intimidation and harassment, and many English language learners who come to our programs describe living in fear.

Educators everywhere are trying to figure out how to address this new reality – how to make sure that all students feel safe and able to learn, how to encourage critical thinking about daily events, and how to break

down the manufactured fear of black and brown immigrants that keeps us from coming together to build alliances. None of us wants to be the frog in the proverbial pot that waits as the temperature slowly rises until it’s too late to do anything.

There are things we can do. Some involve challenging the conditions that fuel immigration - the poverty, repression, and danger that drives people from their homes - and others focus on creating the conditions *here* that nurture connection to one another and discovery of the commonalities and differences in our experiences.

In adult education classes, we can demonstrate our commitment to creating safe learning spaces for all, and to thinking critically with our students about the causes and effects of this ongoing campaign. Below, I share and build upon some of the promising practices I’ve seen implemented in adult ABE and ESOL programs.

For Classroom Teachers

In the classroom, we need to think first about immediate harm reduction, and then we can plan for a curriculum that includes serious practice of the critical analysis skills highlighted in our rigorous learning standards.

Build safety through community. Immigrants

attend all kinds of adult education classes, not just English language classes. Many teachers include activities that engage students in sharing their experiences and finding their commonalities – not just personal characteristics such as how many sisters they have but talking about how an issue touches their lives on a daily basis – getting their kids to eat, finding a living-wage job, dealing with weather (climate change) disasters. Sharing experiences puts the voices of students at the center, developing their agency in naming, discussing, and analyzing issues and ideas. And building relationships with real people is a powerful inoculation against hate.

There are practical ways to do this kind of community-building that also attend to language learning, with all the related grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary building. You can find wonderful examples in the archived webinars of the Immigrant Learning Center¹ and the New England Literacy Resource Center². See also *The Change Agent*³ and Welcoming America's toolkit for adult educators⁴.

Teach analysis of the big picture. While it's important to note current events as they are happening, educators don't have the capacity to respond to daily upheavals – nor is it helpful to focus on what drains and disheartens. We can instead help students step back and study an issue more deeply by organizing instruction into thematic units that encourage students to name their concerns, ask and investigate their own questions, and develop the language skills to express informed opinions. This would include opportunities to consider “why” questions – why this? why now? – that honor the ability of students at any level to draw on their learning and their life experiences to analyze what they see.

Here's a quick mention of some topics, skill areas, and questions you might include in a unit:

- Media literacy: What is reliable news? What is fake news? Why is there fake news? How do we distinguish objectively descriptive from subjectively persuasive language and evaluate the bias of a text/source? (Resources: Mind Over Media⁵, The News Literacy Project⁶, “Don't Get Duped”⁷)
- History: People created our institutions and systems (our schools, our economic system, etc.) and people can change them. History offers up many examples of how communities and social movements have been able to advance justice in the past and can do so again. History also helps us understand the origins of current policies, attitudes, and behaviors. But since that history is usually written by the “victor,” we need to check multiple sources and remind students to consider: Whose perspective is reflected here? Whose is missing? (Resources: Teaching for Change⁸, Zinn Education Project⁹)
- Critical analysis: How is a problem defined by different stakeholders? What questions do we need to ask in order to fully understand an issue (e.g., Who benefits? Who is hurt? Who is making money?)? (Resources: Right Question Institute¹⁰)

In developing a unit on Immigration (for ESOL or ABE), in addition to all the level-specific lessons we might do about the fact that people throughout history have been on the move (using maps, graphs, images, and other visuals to support learning), we might consider the categories above to help frame class discussions and activities:

Building community: What do you know about your own family origins (Native American, immigrant, refugee, or enslaved)? What is a question you have about your family origin?

History: Why do people come here? What is

happening in their countries? (Extra credit: What role has the U.S. played in their countries? In your own?)

Critical analysis: How do asylum-seekers describe their reasons for coming to the border? What does the administration suggest are the reasons? What does the evidence suggest?

Media literacy: How is terminology used (asylum-seekers vs. invaders) to influence a reader about immigration? What other language devices are used to persuade readers?

Find each other. It can feel disorienting to work in a field that has become almost solely focused on workforce preparation in a time when basic human dignity and connection are on the line. To keep moving forward, concerned educators need to support one another as we continue our own self-education, speak up where we can, share resources, and reflect on the assumptions underlying our work. What are the implications, for example, of defining the purpose of adult education to be almost exclusively well-being through individual employment? What will we do when we're expected to turn away students based on a newly criminalized immigration status?

We can help each other grapple with these perplexing questions and find the courage to follow the internal moral compass that points us toward protecting the rights of our immigrant (and otherwise targeted) friends. (Resources: LINCS discussion boards, Facebook groups, local immigrant and racial justice groups).

For Program Leaders

Program leaders have a crucial role to play in communicating support for all students.

Explicitly demonstrate solidarity with vulnerable students. Adults who are at risk of being targeted

(immigrant, LGBTQ) anywhere in the community need to know that the program is a safe space. Leaders in many programs are making it clear (through banners or public statements) that hate is not welcome in their programs and that all residents are invited there to study and learn. Such declarations set the tone of the program and model how to speak up in solidarity with our neighbors.

Organize program-wide projects. Celebrations of any sort that bring students together informally to learn, mingle or break bread do a lot to build community and dispel fears. And as Larotta suggests, creating space for program-wide learning (bringing in speakers to talk about community resources, events, or issues; organizing student-researched voter education campaigns; hosting “Know your Rights” workshops and legal clinics; or hosting an awareness event about the upcoming Census 2020 – the importance and the risks) opens up opportunities for students to interact about a topic of common interest. Very important is introducing students to community organizations, both service organizations that can help them build their support networks and activist/advocacy organizations they can join to organize collectively for themselves.

For Adult Education Advocates

Advocate for inclusive services. Funding sources each come with their own rules and regulations. At a time when federal and some state funders are looking for ways to limit the access of our immigrant students to all kinds of services, it is incumbent upon us to push back on those restrictions and to seek out other funding that allows us to continue full services to all residents of our communities. The recent proposal to broaden the way the government determines who may be a “public charge” (and therefore ineligible for public services) is just one example of efforts

to vilify and exclude current and future language learners from our programs.

Build alliances. Adult education advocates have historically been guided by the maxim that we need to focus our advocacy message exclusively on adult education funding. And while that targeted message has yielded certain results, the practice of staying in our advocacy silos competing for funds has not advanced a united cross-issue movement that reflects the intersectionality of our students' (and our) struggles. Adults are not just immigrants or students or parents or patients or workers, and now more than ever we need to build alliances with all the movements working to help people get free. The Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, for example, has allied with labor organizations on the *Fight for \$15* and with

immigrant rights organizations on many issues; and conversely, those organizations have added adult education funding to their own priority lists.

Conclusion

I would like to be part of an educational community that helps one another find the courage to creatively resist unjust immigration and economic policies where we can. I don't want to have to look back one day and wonder what I was doing as xenophobia was being used to destroy lives and entrench the powerful. I am so grateful to the adult education coalitions, justice organizations, and individual educators who are refusing to be too busy to respond to these dangers. I hope we can all find ways to show up for our immigrant learners and each other.

For More Information

- ¹ Immigrant Learning Center (www.ilctr.org/promoting-immigrants/ilc-workshops/)
- ² How to be an Effective Ally to Adult Students, The New England Literacy Resource Center (<https://bit.ly/2AyjzaU>)
- ³ The Change Agent magazine for teaching resources and compelling student writings (changeagent.nelrc.org).
- ⁴ Welcoming America's *Instructors' Toolkit for Building Bridges Across Communities* (<https://www.welcomingamerica.org/content/instructors%E2%80%99-toolkit-building-bridges-across-communities>)
- ⁵ Media Education Lab's Mind Over Media webpage (<https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/>) offers teaching resources to support students to think critically about propaganda and the messages all around them.
- ⁶ The News Literacy Project, (<http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org>) is a national education nonprofit offering nonpartisan, independent programs that teach students how to be critical media consumers in the digital age.
- ⁷ Alicia Shepard, Don't Get Duped, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/2016/12/12/savvy-news-consumers-guide-not-get-duped>)
- ⁸ Teaching for Change (teachingforchange.org)
- ⁹ Zinn Education Project (Zinnproject.org)
- ¹⁰ Right Question Institute (rightquestion.org)