



# ENGAGING ADULTS WITH LOW LITERACY LEVELS

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# WHY ME? SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

- Who am I?
- Why am I here?



# OUTLINE

- Learning Disability vs Low Literacy
- Impact of Literacy at Macro Levels
- Why/How Low-Literacy Adults Read
- Addressing Low Literacy Levels in Adult Readers
- Selecting and suggesting texts
- RA Activity
- Q and A

# LEARNING DISABILITY VS LOW LITERACY

- A **learning disability** is a neurological issue that interferes with someone's executive functioning. There is a structural/functional cause within the brain.
- **Low literacy** is a skill-based issue where someone lacks proficiency in reading ability.

# LEARNING DISABILITY VS LOW LITERACY

## Learning Disability

LD areas of difficulty may include:

- Difficulty with reading/writing/math
- Poor memory
- Difficulty following directions
- Inability to discriminate among letters/numbers/sounds
- Eye-hand coordination problems
- Difficulty with sequencing
- Disorganization
- Difficulty adjusting to change

## LD Strengths

- Problem-solving skills
- Persistence
- Empathy
- Personality
- Creative Thinking

# LEARNING DISABILITY VS LOW LITERACY

## Low literacy

- People who – in general – can only understand a short, simple statement about their own life.
- Need things to be expressed very clearly and simply.
- Areas of difficulty may include:
  - Difficulty with reading/writing/math
  - Difficulty following written directions
  - Inability to discriminate among letters/numbers/sounds

*\* Imagine the gap between understanding a short, simple statement about your everyday life and trying to choose a mobile phone or comprehend the probate process online*

# LEARNING DISABILITY VS LOW LITERACY

## Both

- High frustration level
- Low self-esteem
- Can be a cause of violent behavior

# IMPACT OF LITERACY AT MACRO LEVELS

## Crime

- 2/3 of children who cannot read proficiently by the end of 4<sup>th</sup> grade will end up in jail or on welfare
- 75% of state prison inmates are functionally illiterate

## Children and Education

- Of the 23% of Americans who are illiterate, 20% graduated high school
- Children of low-literacy parents begin school significantly behind their peers
  - There is a direct correlation between a young person's test scores and the grade level attained by their parents

## Workforce and Economy

- Adult illiteracy costs the US more than \$225 Billion annually in non-productivity and lost tax revenue
- There is an 8.6% increase in employee productivity for each additional year of education
- A 1% increase in the literacy rate = a 1.5% increase in the GDP



According to the US Department of Education, 54% of US adults 16-74 years old lack proficiency in reading (below a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level)

# IMPACT OF LITERACY AT MACRO LEVELS

## Workforce and Economy

- Income
  - Average annual income of adults at the lowest levels of literacy = \$35,000
  - Average annual income of adults who are just below proficiency = \$48,000
  - Average annual income of adults at bare minimum of proficient = \$63,000
- Other factors
  - When accounted for, the difference in wage between lowest level and minimum proficiency = \$23,979
  - Between not-quite-proficient and minimum proficiency = \$13,193

*\*"Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy Nationally and Regionally in the United States," Dr. Jonathan Rothwell, Gallup Principal Economist*

# WHY/HOW LOW-LITERACY ADULTS READ

- Work environment
  - Average daily reading time of 113 minutes
- Reading to Do
- Employment goals (to gain or upgrade employment)
- Hopes related to children
- Self-Improvement
  - One of the most frequently-cited motivators – =/> vocational goals
  - Becoming a better person
  - Learning new things
  - Being independent
- Diversion
  - Older and younger people, less middle-age

# ADDRESSING LOW LITERACY LEVELS IN ADULT READERS

Traditional approaches used to provide education for children do not work well for adults because:

- Many roles/responsibilities and thus many competing demands for their time
- Bring a wealth of new concepts, knowledge, and experience on which to build new learning (or which are preventing new learning)
- Things they seek to learn must be meaningful and applied immediately in their daily lives
- Situational barriers such as: work schedules, childcare responsibilities, transportation, cost/perceived cost
- Attitudes and feelings about school and learning that affect their decisions about further education

# ADDRESSING LOW LITERACY LEVELS IN ADULT READERS

## Qualities and Coping Strategies of Adults with Low Literacy

- **Strong, resourceful, skilled, knowledgeable**
  - Use technology for information and communication (particularly ESL community)
- **Self-reliance and independence**
  - Learning the routine format of bills and forms
  - **Making educated guesses**
  - Using written text for specific purposes – such as words to look up in a dictionary
- **Survival**
  - Avoidance of situations where literacy or language demands exceed their skills

# ADDRESSING LOW LITERACY LEVELS IN ADULT READERS

Adults are more likely to invest the time and energy in opportunities if those opportunities:

- Are provided in supportive environments that reduce the stigma attached to low literacy
- Utilize materials and methods that respect the strengths, experiences, and goals of learners
- Offer content that builds on daily life experience
- Can be delivered in ways that allow flexibility and choice so that individuals can learn at their own pace, on their own time schedules, and under conditions that work best for them.

# ADDRESSING LOW LITERACY LEVELS IN ADULT READERS

## “Make or Break” Factors

- Courage on behalf of the reader
- The first meeting determines whether or not they continue
  - Assurance that this activity/interaction will be a positive experience
- Shame and embarrassment about revealing a long-kept secret
  - Many adults have learned to compensate and pass as literate
- Painful past experiences with schools and teachers

# SELECTING AND SUGGESTING TEXTS

- Do not rely on readability formulas
- Use clear language
- Avoid common labels
- Emphasize abstract qualities
- Find the words your readers are using
- Dual modality (i.e. visual and audio)

# RA ACTIVITY: PROFILES

**What** do you think is important to keep in mind when talking with this person?

What **books/resources** would you recommend?  
**Why?**

- *1 fiction/1 non-fiction resource*

**Consider:**

*What are your general thoughts about this person?*

*What are you thinking about when talking to them?*

*What kinds of questions would you ask them?*



# Profiles of Struggling Adult Readers

Michaela Stone is a 32-year-old white, female refugee from Belarus. Two years ago, she emigrated with her father. She has a Russian bachelor's degree in accounting and a master's in accountancy teaching. She had been teaching accounting and statistics in a college there.

She lives alone and knows few of her neighbors. Her father lives nearby in subsidized housing. She currently works as a bookkeeper with a non-profit community center for Russian emigres. Although she speaks English with her co-workers, much of her job requires her to speak Russian.

To supplement her income, she works 7 hours a week as a bookkeeper for a small dental practice. In addition, she still cooks and cleans for her father, which leaves her little free time for community activities or continuing education. Most of her free time is spent reading, in both English and Russian.

In order to help her assimilate, she watches TV to gain cultural information and get ideas for conversation. Her goal is to improve her English so that she can pass the Test of English for Foreign Learners and enroll in college. She took it once and was 10 points away from passing. She says she will take it again when she has time to study.

# Profiles of Struggling Adult Readers

Tom Addington is a 27-year-old laborer who lives with his wife and 3 young children in a rented house in a rural area. He describes himself as a family man, and his children are very important to him. He does mostly seasonal farm labor and is currently paid by the hour in exchange for rent, but next year he hopes to grow his own tobacco “on shares” since he owns no land of his own.

He doesn't have a bank account and has never filed a tax return. The family receives food stamps and is on WIC. He has never been able to get a driver's license due to his low reading skills. He lives in an area where the only public transportation is the school bus and the shopping town is 20 miles away. To shop, go to the doctor, or visit their kids' school, he and his wife have to ask family members for a ride.

He dropped out of school when he was 17 and feels resentment towards school because he never learned to read well. He is confident in his math skills and possesses strong technical skills. His only adult schooling occurred in a correctional institute when he was “in a little bit of trouble.” He was pleased with the experience, although “I'm kinda bashful, you know. Cause I just won't let anybody come in and try to learn me to read, something like that, 'cause I know it makes them angry, and I get angry and just don't want to do nothing.”



# **RA ACTIVITY:**

STRUGGLING READER PROFILES

## Michaela:

- When she first came to the US, she spoke no English and forced herself to read in English for 1 hour every day.
- She enrolled in several education classes: a basic literacy course, an accounting course, and 2 English courses.
- She carried a dictionary with her everywhere "...always with me. For two years, in my purse."
- When she first arrived, she worked as a cleaner in an apartment building. "People would tell me that I couldn't get a job as an accountant. You can get a job at a hotel or cleaning up someone's mess. Why they did that, I don't know. It was mis-instruction. It made me think I was nothing."
- She has begun to teach Russian to three Americans: "We read and write and speak Russian and English. Maybe 1 hour, 2 hour a week. Then I learn something about American lifestyle. Cultural exchange. To meet American people. To learn something from them."

## Tom:

- Tom's home has few amenities – there is no water and no bathroom in the house.

- Most of Tom's life is taken up by his children: "I love my kids, very much...And I guess the biggest majority is taking care of them. I don't mind that too bad 'cause if a man's gonna amount to anything, he's got to get out there and work for it...It's kinda hard on me every day 'cause, you know, I never know where I'm gonna get ahold of the next penny at."

- When he was in classes in the correctional institute, he was surprised to learn that he was only at a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level.

- When he was in school, "...they just passed me to get rid of me...they wouldn't try to learn me nothin' so I quit going...I was willing to learn how to read, grow up to be, you know, maybe something better than what I'm doing now besides farm work, maybe you know be on a public job makin' good money, something like that, doin' carpenter work or something."

# Q&A



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