



Valuing Diverse Cultural Assets in Adult Education

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Adult learners, including immigrants, refugees, and multilingual learners

of English, are diverse in age, ethnicity, nationality, educational and employment background, and ability. Their perspectives, assumptions, values, beliefs, and experiences¹ collectively influence their cultures. In the same way, culture is embedded in educators' assumptions, values, and beliefs. This means the backgrounds of learners and educators can inform educational and community experiences, which exist within a greater systemic and societal context.^{2,3} To create successful and inclusive adult education programs, state officials, program administrators, and instructors should consider the impact of culture on the development and implementation of policies, programming, and services.

Culture, often passed down generationally in social groups, includes values, beliefs, languages, rituals, traditions, and behaviors.⁴ It is often evident that multilingual learners bring cultures into their environments. But adult educators also bring values, beliefs, language, rituals, traditions, and behaviors that impact the ways they interact with their environments.

Cultural proficiency is a mindset for effectively engaging in diverse environments and "learning how to interact effectively with other cultures."⁵ The term *cultural*

The **Enhancing Access for Refugees and New Americans** project aims to support adult educators in developing and delivering high-quality IELCE/IET programming in alignment with an immigrant integration approach.

Enhancing Access Spotlights describe and provide examples of specific aspects of IELCE/IET implementation.

proficiency comes from a cultural proficiency continuum^{5,6} that charts progression from unhealthy values, policies, and practices (e.g., cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, and cultural blindness) to healthy values, behaviors, policies, and practices (e.g., cultural pre-competence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency). The term *cultural proficiency* will be used in this spotlight, but adult education programs may use different terms (i.e., cultural awareness, responsiveness, humility), all of which value

*"Language Learning cannot be separated from its culture. Language is a clear manifestation of culture. A word can have both cognitive meaning and cultural meaning. Cultural meaning refers to words and expressions which represent cultural perception, values, and behavior."*⁷

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the diverse cultural assets of their learners and acknowledge the impact of culture on interpersonal interactions and environments where culture is present.

This spotlight provides strategies, resources, and examples that highlight the value and assets diversity and culture bring to adult education. It discusses the impact of culture in education, illustrates essential elements

and examples of cultural proficiency, and outlines approaches for applying a culturally responsive lens in the classroom. These inclusive strategies can be used in all adult education programming, including Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE), English language acquisition (ELA), and Integrated Education and Training (IET) activities.

Serving Diverse Learners

Nationally, in Program Year 2022-2023, 58% of participants in Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) programs were enrolled in ELA or IELCE programming or IET programs included within ELA or IELCE activities.⁸ These learners speak a range of languages and have emigrated from countries all over the world. Of those multilingual learners enrolled in AEFLA programs, English language proficiency varies across all proficiency levels, with the majority of multilingual learners enrolled at the intermediate levels (approximately 41% of all ELA participants).⁹

Learn More About Your State

These national trends may or may not represent your local community. Therefore, consider how state- and county-level data can also inform your services:

- Migration Policy Institute's (MPI's) work on [Leveraging Data to Ensure Equitable and Effective Adult Skills Programming for Immigrants](#) provides state-level data to describe immigrant populations.
- The Wisconsin Technical College System recognized that students of color were underrepresented in IET programming, so they conducted [action research](#), implemented professional development, and changed policy to better address the racial disproportionality in participation.
- The [American Community Survey](#) (ACS) offers county-level demographic data that may be useful for recruiting and designing services, as well as for reviewing whether or not populations served in adult education programs reflect their local community.

Understanding the Impact of Culture in Education

Education norms in the United States, such as the role of the teacher and classroom expectations, may differ greatly from learners' experience of education norms in other countries.¹⁰ By being culturally proficient—in other words, by being intentional about recognizing the impact of culture on learners' educational experiences and expectations—adult educators can help immigrants, refugees, and multilingual learners navigate these differences in the classroom.

Five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency

Adult educators and systems can progress along the cultural proficiency continuum by applying specific strategies when designing programming for multilingual learners. The elements listed below offer a framework for adult education providers to review and adapt their programmatic values, policies, and practices:

1. Assess culture.
2. Value diversity.
3. Manage the dynamics of difference.
4. Adapt to diversity.
5. Institutionalize cultural knowledge.

1. Assess Culture

As previously described, adult learners are ethnically and culturally diverse, whereas adult education instructors in the United States are reported as mostly white and female.¹¹ Therefore, to build cultural proficiency and positively impact programming and instruction, practitioners must recognize how their culture affects not only their learners, but also the educational and community systems in which they operate.

Practice in Action: West Virginia Eastern Panhandle Instructional Cooperative

The Eastern Panhandle Instructional Cooperative (EPIC) program, which serves two West Virginia counties, has enrolled learners who speak more than 30 languages. It uses Section 243 IELCE funds and offers access to an IET program for transportation, distribution, and logistics. After examining their own culturally informed expectations, EPIC staff reviewed their policies and adapted them to better serve immigrants, refugees, and multilingual learners. For example:

- **Flexible Attendance Policies:** EPIC staff recognize that expectations of timeliness and punctuality differ based on learners' cultural experience. Therefore, while the importance of timeliness is taught in the classroom because it directly impacts employment, learners are given the flexibility to attend classes as they can.
- **Testing:** EPIC's flexible attendance policy can result in learners becoming eligible for post-testing at different rates. To accommodate this variation, as well as learners' scheduling preferences, EPIC provides rolling testing every weekday. Learners can schedule a testing time that works best for them via a scheduling system.

2. Value Diversity

To center diversity in adult education program design and delivery, learners and other community members should be involved in developing inclusive programs, policies, and standards.

Practice in Action: Alaska Literacy Program

The Alaska Literacy Program (ALP) in Anchorage, Alaska, serves a highly diverse community of learners that represent 72 countries of origin and 56 languages. ALP operationalizes diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) through administrative and programmatic decisions and program development that meets the community's needs. For example:

- **Hiring Diverse Alumni/Staff:** ALP leadership believes that its staff should be representative of the community served. ALP hires alumni as administrative staff, recognizing the value of their knowledge, experience, and skills—including employment and language—which are identified during intake and fostered through their enrollment in the program.
- **Leveraging Learner Input:** ALP also has gained valuable feedback from learners and staff and has adjusted program policies and procedures accordingly. For example, community members expressed concerns about vulnerability when they were asked too many questions or specific types of questions during intake. These intake questions resulted in reduced program enrollment, so ALP adjusted the process by reducing intake questions to those that were essential. Subsequently, program enrollment began to increase.
- **Partnering with the Community:** ALP's Peer Leader Navigator (PLN) initiative,¹² created in partnership with The Anchorage Health Literacy Collaborative, promotes peer leadership and multilingualism in the community. The PLN trains community members to be Community Health Workers who can apply their knowledge to their communities.

Learn More About Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

Different organizations and programs may refer to these concepts using various terms and abbreviations, such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB); or Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA).

Learn more about DEIA in adult education:

- Enroll in the [LINCS DEI course](#).
- Read the CREATE Adult Skills Network's brief, [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Adult Foundational Education](#).

3. Manage the Dynamics of Difference

Adult education programs can create environments that uplift and honor different cultures, foster community through the development of culturally inclusive spaces, and facilitate conversations to work through differences. This may include working through a formal process to help learners identify needed accommodations, which could include religious or other cultural accommodations.

Practice in Action: Lewiston Adult Education and Auburn Adult and Community Education

Two programs in neighboring cities—Lewiston Adult Education and Auburn Adult and Community Education—partner to provide academic, workforce, and community enrichment programming for adult learners in the region. Both programs value cultural awareness and cultural proficiency as practitioners learn and interact with their diverse learners.

- **Providing Safe Spaces:** For example, cultural awareness has impacted programming through the intentional offering of physical spaces where adult learners can observe religious practices such as prayer.
- **Encouraging Open Dialogue:** Practitioners also deliver instruction in ways that enable learners to connect the content to their own cultural knowledge and experiences through discussion. These discussions also provide important information for instructors, especially in health care pathways classes, as health practices in many countries differ from the health practices in the United States. Learners value the opportunity to share what they know and to co-construct knowledge in the classroom.

4. Adapt to Diversity

Adult education programs should consider the diversity of their local communities and make programmatic adjustments to support the success of community members. Educators may also benefit from professional development on effective intercultural communication.

Practice in Action: Noble Adult and Community Education

Noble Adult and Community Education (NACE) in North Berwick, Maine used the following strategies to better serve the diverse communities in its region:

- **Connecting with Local Cultural Associations:** To educate themselves about their learners, NACE reached out to local cultural associations [Khmer Maine](#), [Amjambo Africa](#), and [COCOMAINE](#) to develop partnerships to support the cultural competence of staff and learners.

- **Cross-Cultural Communication:** NACE trained staff on cross-cultural communication and understanding. Staff learned to consider aspects of culture, such as different cultural views on time (clock time vs. event-oriented time¹³) and whether some cultures focus more on task completion or maintaining relationships.¹⁴ This training helped staff recognize the strengths of different cultural values and consider how to incorporate more diverse cultural values and ideas into programming.

5. Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge

To progress toward cultural proficiency, adult education programs should examine and adapt systems to be more inclusive of diverse populations. This includes identifying opportunities to institutionalize inclusive practices to encourage their sustainability and expansion.

Practice in Action: Wisconsin Technical College System

Adult education in Wisconsin is delivered through the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) and six community-based organizations. WTCS centers cultural competency in institutional practices by:

- **Conducting Research and Identifying Opportunities for Action:** WTCS developed the [System-wide Equity Report](#)¹⁵ that identifies action steps for improving learner access to programs. The steps endorse the inclusion of learner voice and data, professional development to help programs better meet learners' diverse needs, and the creation and provision of culturally responsive supports for learners.
- **Including Culture in Competencies:** WTCS developed the Faculty Quality Assurance System (FQAS) [Competency Framework](#) for all full-time and part-time instructors. The competencies focus on four areas: Curriculum & Assessment; Diversity, Equity & Inclusion; Student Success; and Teaching Methods. Within the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion and Teaching Methods focus areas, the framework calls for using cultural competency and cultural responsiveness, especially in interacting with learners and designing instructional content and materials.
- **Elevating Student Voices:** At Chippewa Technical College, students collaborated with faculty to publish [Voices of the Valley](#), a book that elevates immigrant student voices. This publication was written by immigrant students, edited by faculty, and designed by graphic design students.

Learn More About Cultural Competence

- Explore the ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System's (ATLAS's) [Cultural Competency Resources](#).
- View the Coalition on Adult Basic Education's (COABE's) webinar and slide deck on [Equity in Adult Education: The Importance of Cultural Competence and Inclusion](#).

Considerations for Applying Cultural Responsiveness in the Classroom

While the five essential elements of cultural proficiency can be implemented in a variety of ways, it can also be helpful to consider applying culturally responsive practices using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and culturally responsive teaching frameworks. Culturally responsive teaching builds on awareness and learning about others' culture, but also "validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers" diverse students through teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies.⁹

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Framework

UDL is an instructional approach influenced by universal design* that considers the various needs and abilities of learners and provides diverse options in learning environment, information delivery, and demonstration of understanding.¹⁶ UDL allows for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression to create environments that foster diverse participation. Considerations and resources for increasing these opportunities for multilingual learners are provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. UDL Principles and Application for Multilingual Learners

UDL Principle	Considerations and Resources for Multilingual Learners
Multiple Means of Engagement: Optimize individual choice and autonomy.	Adult multilingual learners often have many responsibilities and obligations competing for their time and energy. To provide adult learners with options for how and when they engage with adult education programs, providers can offer classes with a variety of schedule options (i.e., weekends) and modalities (i.e., in person, synchronous online, asynchronous online), as well as the ability to shift among these options. The Guide for Design and Implementation of Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) Models in Adult Education provides examples and guidance on how to provide learners with maximum flexibility in selecting the mode and timing of learning.

* Universal Design (UD) principles were created to be applied in the design of environments, products, and communications. (National Disability Authority, "The 7 Principles" [Centre for Excellence in Universal Design], accessed February 2024, <https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/the-7-principles/>.)

Figure 1. UDL Principles and Application for Multilingual Learners (cont'd)

UDL Principle	Considerations and Resources for Multilingual Learners
<p>Multiple Means of Representation: Promote understanding across languages.</p>	<p>Programs can provide multiple means of representation for multilingual learners by providing learners with various ways to access and engage with instructional content that uses their full linguistic repertoire. This aligns with the concept of language access, which refers to providing individuals with limited English proficiency “reasonable access to the same services as English-speaking individuals.”¹⁷ Language access provides information in a way that accommodates a wide range of literacy and language skills (e.g., offering audio versions of written materials, or materials written at multiple reading levels or levels of English complexity). Language access also provides multilingual learners more opportunities and methods to communicate. States and programs have language access plans to ensure that learners’ language needs are met (see examples from the State of Maryland and the ALP).</p>
<p>Multiple Means of Action and Expression: Enhance capacity for monitoring progress.</p>	<p>Programs should provide learners with multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge, which applies to both formative assessments in the classroom and the use of various measurable skill gain (MSG) types. For example, Rhode Island allows programs to utilize various MSG types. As part of its AEFLA grant competition, the state provides guidance on the different credentials and how they are reported in federal and state performance accountability, including recognized postsecondary credentials, demonstrated occupational or technical skill certificates, and workforce preparation competencies.</p>

Learn More About UDL

- Visit CAST’s [comprehensive tool](#) that details the principles, guidelines, and checklists of UDL in adult education.
- Enroll in the [LINCS Universal Design for Learning and Adult Education course](#) in the learning portal.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Framework

The Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching¹⁸ guides instructors through practical approaches for applying culturally responsive practices in the classroom. These approaches, along with considerations and resources for using these strategies with multilingual learners, are described in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Approaches and Applications for Multilingual Learners¹⁹

Approach to Culturally Responsive Teaching	Considerations and Applications for Multilingual Learners
Establishing Inclusion (often delivered at the start of the lesson)	To create an inclusive environment in the classroom, adult educators and learners can co-create routines and rituals. Routines and rituals help learners understand classroom expectations and plan for participation, which is an inclusive practice. Educators and learners can co-create and establish norms around peer coaching, group work, and other classroom practices, ensuring that expectations are clear for everyone.
Developing a Positive Attitude (often delivered through the lesson)	To help cultivate a positive attitude toward learning and participation in adult education programs, practitioners can work with multilingual learners to develop personal goals, which can build or reinforce learners' motivation for participation. Educators can also acknowledge the prior knowledge and experience that multilingual learners bring to the classroom by leveraging learners' knowledge, experience, education, and multilingual skills as they deliver new content.
Enhancing Meaning (often delivered through the lesson)	To help multilingual learners improve their understanding of English, adult educators can use instructional strategies such as critical and thought-provoking questioning techniques, inquiry-based learning and reflective practice, authentic problem solving, and other strategies to promote deeper meaning-making (e.g., case studies).
Engendering Competence (often delivered toward the end of the lesson)	To provide multilingual learners with multiple means of demonstrating learning, adult educators can use a variety of strategies, such as prior learning assessments, authentic products, differentiated assessments, writing, rubrics, assessments that include opportunities for student voice and reflection, and feedback that is timely, specific, and encouraging.

Learn More About Culturally Responsive Teaching

- Foundational information about culturally responsive teaching can be found in [Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice](#) by Geneva Gay and [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#) by Zaretta Hammond.

Conclusion

Culture impacts how people perceive and interact with others and how individuals see themselves. Immigrants, refugees, and multilingual learners can experience culture shock when they integrate into American society, employment, and educational systems, and culturally proficient practices can result in environments where multilingual learners feel welcome, empowered, and ready and able to learn. This spotlight outlines the continuum of cultural proficiency, describes examples of how adult education programs have applied essential elements demonstrating cultural proficiency, offers supportive frameworks to build culturally responsive practices in classrooms, and provides additional resources to learn more about valuing the diverse assets of our learners. Multilingual learners bring assets that benefit the communities in which they reside and the adult education programs they attend. Adult educators have an opportunity to learn from multilingual learners and foster environments that leverage the contributions that diversity brings.

Reflect on Your Practice

1. What culturally proficient practices are you already implementing?
2. Are there other culturally proficient practices you would like to consider implementing?

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