Stereotypes and their Roots in Adult Education

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Anke Grotlüschen, Professor for Lifelong Learning at the University of Hamburg, Germany, has recently worked on the Level One Survey (LEO) in Germany. She was previously involved in the development of formative assessment tools for literacy, and was a member of the OECD/CERI What Works Project on Formative Assessment (Looney/Schuller). Her PhD thesis on Adult e-Learning used a Critical Psychology approach. Anke would like to explore the idea of "Level One" from the viewpoints of both the learner and society. She is also interested in finding links between Level One research in Germany and international literacy research.
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Sometimes, participants in adult education (AE) and training programs belong to special sub-groups of the population, such as those with the lowest levels of literacy\(^1\) or, from a historical perspective, Marxist workers in 1920s Germany. The core hypothesis of the full paper is that AE studies tend to generalize information about sub-populations found in participant research. The underlying assumption behind the generalization is that sub-population members who participate in AE might be more or less representative of the whole group. Those who design AE programs for this sub-group use information gathered from participating members about their life circumstances and what they might want to learn. Recent findings from a German comparison of participants and nonparticipants show that this can lead to false conclusions. They found that the positions of participants and nonparticipants are structurally different, and they speak differently about issues such as skills and competences, experiences with learning, or the wish to continue learning.

As an example, much research on participants in adult basic education (ABE) with the lowest levels of literacy tells us that they are excluded from labour markets, are most often unmarried, face unsatisfactory health conditions, live in segregated areas of our cities, and report negative school experiences. Yet our large-scale studies show a different picture. Those with the lowest levels of literacy who do not enter ABE classes often have jobs, are married, and remember normal school experiences. This suggests that the idea of the totally excluded and deprived “functional illiterates” might be a cliché. Illiteracy, as currently defined by researchers, may not even bother some of those designated as illiterate.

To answer the question of why studies with participants and nonparticipants might lead to different research conclusions, one has to consider three factors: literacy proficiency levels, socio-demographic variables, and attitudes. Several structural differences exist between participants and nonparticipants. These are based on the socio-demographic reasons people have for enrolling in courses, their level of proficiency and the shared values among researchers, teachers, and learners regarding the value of lifelong learning and the value of the chosen subject. In our research in Germany, we did not test for these differences and therefore cannot conclude that they are the only ones that will show up when participants and nonparticipants are compared properly. Nevertheless, researchers who use findings from participant research might consider whether the three differences could lead to biases and specify the kinds of biases — before generalizing results to the rest of the population.

This paper also looks at this issue through an historical lens, using the example of research on the participation of blue-collar Marxist workers in AE programs in Germany in the 1920s. The belief at the time was that people who wanted a revolution would need better education to be able to rule a social and democratic society. AE became a topic in the German constitution in 1919, and nearly two thousand Volkshochschulen (folk schools) were founded in the following years. The most famous example was the

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\(^1\) In Germany, we refer to this group as the “functionally illiterate.” I have explained the rationale for this in presentations at an earlier Institute. However, I recognize that generally in North America, the accepted term is “those with low levels of literacy.”
so-called Schule der Arbeit (School of Work) in Leipzig, where students could live together, cooperate, and learn intensely through the method of working groups. The school, led by Gertrud Hermes, also carried out a major research project in AE with 1,255 participants designed to measure Marxist workers’ attitudes, beliefs, and readiness for a revolution. While Hermes only draws conclusions regarding workers with a Marxist orientation and states that her conclusions do not claim to cover the entire class of workers, her research and her experiences suggest that she considered the group studied as representative of all Marxist workers.

To show that participants and addressees are structurally different from each other and to investigate the circumstances under which AE is in danger of using conclusions drawn solely from research with participants, this paper compares two major recent German studies on adult literacy — the AlphaPanel and the LEO-Level-One-Survey. AlphaPanel is a learner study consisting of three panel waves with 524 participants in the first wave. The Level-One Survey (LEO) is a representative household survey led by our research group at Hamburg University, Department for Lifelong Learning, and with considerable advice from the AlphaPanel research group. The survey also carried out an additional sample with about 1,300 interviewees at a low educational level. This was the first such general study that did proficiency testing with participants who were at Level 1 (in IALS). Even though this survey could not tell us how much learners benefit from attending AE courses, it did allow us to compare several aspects of the test results and proficiency, socio-demographic background, and attitudes regarding school experiences. Some of the conclusions are:

a) The proficiency of those entering classes is substantially lower than the proficiency of those who are “functionally illiterate” and not attending ABE classes.

b) Socio-demographic variables such as the employment situation and family life differ between participants and the population sub-group.

c) Attitudes towards learning a particular subject as well as learning in general are reported differently depending on whether the interviewer knows that the individual attends a class or not.

One of the best known earlier research findings concerns school experiences of functional illiterates. Several qualitative studies report bitter experiences and being treated with disregard at school, combined with teachers’ sense of helplessness to support the student’s learning or to intervene in negative situations. While the AlphaPanel confirms these results with regard to ABE participants, surprisingly, the LEO survey does not. We found contradictory statements about school experiences with widely different responses between participants and nonparticipants to questions about school absenteeism, fear of teachers, feeling bad in school, and having difficulties with learning. One explanation for these divergent results is the different designs of the two surveys. The interview situation at the AlphaPanel was such that both sides knew that the interviewee had low levels of literacy and was therefore attending a course. This seems to lead to the need to explain why the participant has low literacy levels, which in turn leads to participants remembering and expressing rather negative school experiences. During the LEO survey, on the other hand, the researcher asks questions about school experience before the test takes place, so no one knows anything about the literacy performance of the interviewee. This also means the interviewee has no reason to externalize the causes for his or her low performance.
These findings do not suggest that qualitative research results or results from research with participants would necessarily lead to wrong conclusions. Both approaches can lead to accurate and important results regarding level-one learners who enrol in courses. But the differences we have found between participants and nonparticipants might suggest that we need to construct a different image for nonparticipants. Our research suggests that the image of the totally isolated, deprived and mistreated “functionally illiterate” seems to be a stereotype.