

## Unmet Needs in Educating the Undereducated Adult

Frank Riessman, New York University

Riessman, a national authority in educating undereducated adults, discusses some of the problems he sees in our present educational system. He suggests providing an accelerated career-oriented education for mature adults. Deficiencies in teacher training and on-the-job training programs are discussed. He believes that a great pitfall of a teacher is that he's not able to make contact via the curriculum to the learner, and is thus unable to reach the learner. After reading this, how do you rate yourself as an educator?

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**Journal:** We're delighted to have this opportunity for you to share your thoughts with us about meeting the challenge in educating the undereducated adult. Is there anything we should be forewarned about?

**Riessman:** You'll find that I use the technique of overstating a little bit to sensitize you. I want to do this to raise issues and concepts, to start you thinking about something in some different ways, so my teaching tactics are to exaggerate.

**Journal:** What do you regard as a main pitfall in adult education today?

**Riessman:** Essentially, I think we want to be very careful not to *recycle failure*. In essence, I think we have failed in education, partic-

ularly of the poor; not only of the poor, but of most people in society. There's an enormous danger that we could imitate the early failures and reproduce them at the adult level.

Let's take a very simple illustration that's well known to you. In literacy education, for example, it's quite typical if someone is reading at a sixth grade level to improve his reading by using materials that are written at the level of content and interest of the sixth grade child. That's so painfully bad. It is just exactly the wrong way to do it.

It's most unstimulating, most uninteresting; it turns them off, doesn't contact them, and recycles failure. It produces the very failure that existed in the beginning.

**Journal:** What do you see as

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Dr. Riessman spoke on this subject at the Summer Adult Education Conference at The University of Wisconsin, Madison, July 8, 1971.

being the root of this problem?

**Riessman:** The reflection, in my opinion, is of deficiencies in the educational system that are frequently blamed on the child. Institutional failures are typically projected to the client. He's blamed for not using the service right — not that we didn't offer it right or it's not a good service. He didn't use it right. He's got a problem.

Maybe we can change him and keep ourselves constant. It's always easier to stay as we are; we like ourselves. Then we repeat the errors — the very character of the errors we started in the first place — again at the adult level and again produce a further failure or a reaffirmation of the failure.

So, we say in a sense, "You see, he didn't make it in the first place and he didn't make it in the second place. He didn't make it with remedial help." Again it's very clear that the client is the deficient one and we, the service giver, are the able ones.

**Journal:** Are there any "bright spots" in adult education?

**Riessman:** It seems to me that you could say we've gone from basket weaving into literacy training and we still have a long way to go. Of course, that's a great exaggeration. We did a lot of other things besides basket weaving in the old adult education and we're certainly trying to do some things other than literacy training in the modern adult education.

There's positive change in the present period, I think, in that the

concept of adult education has really gotten much broader and much less segregated and segmented.

Before, we thought of adult education as a separate kind of area. Now we're aware that over 60 million people are receiving education of one kind or another in our society at any one moment and the enormously varied form of adult education is going far beyond the traditional kind of extra education that some adults got in a very special way.

Today we think of adult education in terms of concepts such as recurrent education, external degrees, and the great sweep of work study programs.

There are two things worth noting about these new directions. One, that the education is career oriented — it's not simply a job. Two, that it's accelerated — it's not dragged out or prolonged. I argue that most education and training in our society is intentionally, albeit unconsciously, prolonged, delayed, protracted, stretched out.

The "Career Opportunities Program" (COP) in the Office of Education quite intelligently combines work and education so that a teacher aide — a professional teacher aide — can move up a career ladder to become a full-fledged teacher in four years while working — not by leaving the job and going to get a teacher degree, but by being involved in an education that's attuned to the mature adult. This is an adult who more quickly,

more clearly knows what he wants to do. It's a career-oriented education. It moves the person not toward just a job or series of job related skills, but toward a lifetime career.

Teacher aides can move up a career ladder from teacher aide to assistant teacher to associate teacher to teacher in steps while acquiring the college education on the job. He gets college credit for some of his work experiences and the in-service training he receives on the job.

**Journal:** Are colleges and universities receptive to this type of program?

**Riessman:** Many colleges aren't too attuned to doing this. The student acquires college courses in a different sequence, with the vocation-relevant courses first. The whole teaching of the courses is somewhat different; it's much more experience-based (an inductive curriculum) in which the problems of practice are the fundamental materials the course is built around.

It's called practice and theory. I call that to your attention because you frequently hear of courses called "Theory and Practice." It's different. This is "Practice and Theory." Practice comes first and you talk about teaching practice. You talk about work practice, the problems that come up in that experience. You try to shape conceptualizations and understandings around that experience and practice.

**Journal:** Many students complain about college courses being

irrelevant. What's your opinion of this?

**Riessman:** We have to do very careful task analyses. We have to look at what it is you want someone to do and to know by doing very specific task analysis of the work to be done. What's a teacher going to do? What's a nutritionist going to do? What's the social worker going to do? Or, what do you want them to do? What are the skills and knowledge necessary to develop that work?

It's not some vague notion that you take a lot of courses and maybe they're generally relevant. If you want some courses that are generally relevant, make it very explicit — ones that are generally relevant and ones that are specifically relevant. There's nothing wrong with generally relevant courses, but don't use them as a substitute for not knowing how to define the work to be done and developing education and training to do that work.

In the field of teaching, for example, that's exactly what has occurred. People don't know exactly what teachers are supposed to do. Worse yet, they don't know how to train the teachers to exactly do that.

Therefore, what's the nature of teacher training in the United States? It's a lot of general courses, and, then, some courses in educational philosophy and educational theory — very little on educational practice. The little that exists is highly specific, you know, like particular reading techniques.

Then, they throw the student teachers into the water . . . into some practice teaching. There's been no simulation, no practice, no role playing before that. They are thrown into a practice teaching situation that's highly circumscribed and limited. Then we throw them into the world.

But, we've never done a real careful analysis of what the skills and knowledge are that the teacher has to know to be able to do the job. Instead, the more general education is substituted, and finally we substitute the taking of tests to become a teacher. They're knowledge tests — unrelated intelligence tests.

So the teacher has had an inappropriate education in training. He takes tests to get the job. Then he goes into the job and tries to learn from practice in the real world.

It's very hard to do. It's not protected. He can't make too many mistakes; he freezes very quickly. Whatever he learns how to do, he does it quickly. He has had no chance to role play permissively, to practice, to develop in a simulated situation — the relevant skills to develop his style and skills.

I use this teacher example because it's typical of most fields. I'm not making a case about teaching as such. But the nature of the relationship of training in education in our society is an underlying issue that you've got to confront. It's not just related to the people you

teach; it's for the training of you, too.

What do you have to know how to do? Therefore, what skills and what education, what knowledge, what generic training as well as specific skills do you need? Then how do we develop those skills in you in training? What curriculum do we develop to do that? Now knowing that specifically, we include general matters that we think are related to the tasks you do. But since we don't have a clear consensus on the tasks you do, it may or may not relate.

I'm particularly concerned with it in human services. It's the way we train people so that frequently education of a broad kind substitutes for training, and the worker, the teacher, or whoever, frequently winds up poorly trained and poorly educated. He gets the worst of both. The education isn't related to the training. The training isn't related to the job. And, in other ways, the education is deficient. So he's deficient in both respects in that context.

**Journal:** How do you react to "on-the-job" training for adults?

**Riessman:** Typically in America, training is what's called on-the-job training (OJT). There's no worse way to train people. Interestingly enough we haven't observed that. There's a lot of misunderstanding about it.

The reason that you think you like on-the-job training for people, and you're quite right to like it, is

because you want the training to be relevant to the job. You want the training to enable the person to do the job. That's not the same thing as doing it on the job. You want him to be seasoned; you want him to know what the job is, what the work world is, and so on.

But think for a moment of the origins of OJT. It comes out of a whole apprenticeship model which is an intentionally slow model. Apprentice plumbers in the United States take four years to become licensed plumbers. It takes *18 months* to train a person to become an airplane pilot, which is a much more skilled job than plumbing, I assure you. The most modern training technology is used. It's loaded with simulation in a mock airplane. The student pilot tries very hard in overtrained sequences to learn how to do various things and then goes through a series of other things.

In the apprenticeship model, the practicing plumber's philosophy goes something like this: "I'm a good plumber, so I'll train you to be my assistant. I'm in no hurry for you to get in the union or for you to be a plumber because there aren't that many jobs. Let's take four years. That's fine. How do I train you? I'm going out on the job today. You come along with me and learn the job at that point." It's not the right sequence for a beginning plumber; it's not the thing he should learn first; it just happens to be what the plumber's doing on that day.

Secondly, he's a plumber, not

a trainer. He knows how to do the job. He doesn't know anything about training. Nor has he developed training materials. There's a whole variety of reasons why an OJT model is only a piece of total training, and a small piece at that. It's really a very slow, prolonged kind of model.

In adult education we're moving more toward accelerated models. We're concerned that it be adult oriented for a mature person. There's an increased awareness that adults want credentials with the education. They don't go to school just to take courses. That's a nice idea.

I went to school and took a lot of courses. A few interested me very much and I liked them. But I also, you'll notice, while taking those interesting courses, got a degree and a vocation. I have every reason to believe that poor people and adults, particularly, want exactly the same thing. They don't just want interesting, random courses; they want the courses to be interesting, but they also want the credentials connected with it and the status and vocation.

**Journal:** Many people are concerned about the relationship between "formal" and "informal" education. What are your views on this?

**Riessman:** There's a recognition today that education inside a formal setting should be related to education outside the formal setting — informal education.

There's a real problem about

that. Children in our society today are being educated as in no time in history. But it isn't taking place in the school. It's taking place on TV, and I don't mean Sesame Street. Programs you look at day and night teach you a great deal about the world inadvertently, informally, and in the form of entertainment. They also misteach you. You get as much miseducation in school as you do on TV, but people don't tell it like that as a rule.

On TV you get a lot of language; you get a lot of concepts; you get a lot of ways of looking at things; you get a tremendous amount of knowledge about the world. Young children today are remarkably sophisticated and knowledgeable about an awful lot of things you just don't want to recognize.

Now, you send such a child and such an adult — adults watch TV too — to school and you have a tremendous discontinuity because the school is geared to another age and another time and another social period. Its format and method of teaching is in lectures and tests. It hasn't really learned yet, though it's trying, to integrate the informal and the formal, the TV and the lecture; the kind of learning you learn informally without realizing you're learning it.

This has led to the favorite era of our history and culture, to what I call the "bath water era" — throwing out the baby with the bath water. There is currently a tendency (the two things go side by side) to

assume that all education can be informal and fun as it is on TV and in the street and with the people; and so we want to make the school a completely opened classroom and have the children learn from each other (which they do, of course) and act as though that's the whole of learning.

I believe that most formal education in our society has erred badly by not using the informal learning; the learning through teaching somebody else, the learning from peers, the learning that's fun, the learning from TV, the learning from the street. We've badly missed the opportunity to use that learning, particularly at the contact point as a beginning point in the education of adults and children.

There's a large and very vocal group in society that argues that we don't need schools at all. There's the swinging of the pendulum and the failure to recognize that all education can't just be fun, informal, and TV oriented; but that some education is hard, disciplined, and systematic. There's some usefulness to lectures and tests.

The basic point I'm making is that there's something in traditional, systematic, disciplined, formal education. Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water.

**Journal:** What do you see as being the main reasons for lack of success in educational ventures?

**Riessman:** The problem has been that the traditional education that teachers are given has failed. It has failed for two reasons with the

child and the adult. First of all the teachers haven't been trained to do it well. The training hasn't been on the job in relation to the job or the skills related to teaching. Instead they've been given general knowledge. They have no teaching design or teaching strategy; they have no teaching technology. It's almost hit or miss that they learned how to. Again, I'm exaggerating.

They have also failed in understanding a critical piece in traditional education logic that education is a battle, a struggle. It's leadership. Teachers have to lead, fight, struggle (I don't mean negatively, I mean with systematic reasoning) and argue for the student to see the point. The Socratic method obviously incorporates this technique to its fullest form. There's a constant dialogue in developing, arguing to see this.

Teachers have to win the student to the significance of the thing, not assume that if you're simply exposed, you'll be contacted. That is the second part of the error — we haven't learned to contact curriculum to people who aren't already vigorously interested in education as such because their parents have kept them at home for whatever reason.

A large part of our population in society that you call undereducated, but I call poor, haven't been contacted. Contact is in the first stage of any educational design. You have to connect something about the body of material that you want to teach to the interest and

the learning style of the child or the learner. That's the first piece of the strategy. If you don't do that, the rest is just hogwash. You're just saying a lot of things that are rolling past the kids and not much is happening. Most of us haven't been contacted in most subjects.

I haven't been contacted in science, mathematics, and a whole series of related areas in the languages. I've been well contacted in social studies, history, and so on. I managed to get through school in those days by general school techniques, study habit techniques, and so on . . . you know, observing what the guy says and putting it back on a piece of paper without it ever going to my mind. Most of us have learned that technique pretty well. Unfortunately, the poor haven't learned that one either. They get beaten on both sides.

But the essence of contact is relating subject matter to the child or the adult who hasn't yet been contacted, to his interest and way of learning. It might consist of using role playing or games or black history or black language as a connector. It might consist of an ideological approach. It argues in a sense why it is important to do this. Doing that alone doesn't guarantee a great deal of learning. It's a starting point.

As I said, most people haven't been contacted in some subjects. But increasing numbers of poor people coming to schools in our society, particularly in the urban city, haven't been contacted at all — in any subject area. And teachers

haven't learned contact technology. They don't know how to do it. In fact, they don't even formulate or conceptualize the problems that way. Frequently they see the kids as unruly. The kids don't want to learn. They're anti-school. As a matter of fact, it's quite the reverse. They're unruly because they're not learning, because you're not teaching them. They can sense this effect.

What I'm trying to point out is that in your strategy you have to consider stage one — contact. How do I interest this adult or child in the subject matter that I think is relevant?

Some people have come to believe that if you contact the youngster or adult, interest them a little bit, that's all there is to learning. That's an extremely unfortunate idea. It's a very low level of learning. In some cases where teachers have done it, the kids get tired of it pretty fast. They say this is like fun in the street . . . it's no more than that. It's like people get tired of rap sessions and bull sessions. It's fun for a while. In any sense of the word the type of learning that's a rehash of the movie you saw last night or the thing on TV or role playing history lessons doesn't go very far. It's just a contactor. It's just the beginning point.

Some of those rated the best teachers in our society are just contactors . . . entertainers. They use the entertainment approach as the contact and they think they've done a great deal. That doesn't go far.

**Journal:** What is the under-

educated adult like?

**Riessman:** The undereducated adult is someone who is a non-reader, nonacademic, informal. He verbalizes very well around experience, but he's not given to critical or conceptual or systematic verbalization. His experience is narrow, but he talks around that and feels that very deeply. He also feels very powerless and he doesn't know the system.

Sometimes we talk about the need to develop coping skills in the undereducated person. I agree it's very important. But I think it's important to point out and to distinguish in that framework that he has a lot of coping skills.

He copes quite well with a very difficult life in the framework that he lives in, but he particularly lacks know-how about the system, the school, the world. He doesn't know how to fill out forms. You may think that's a trivial matter, but if you don't know how to do it, you're in great trouble in the world. He doesn't know the nature, the norms of the system, the customs of the school, the traditions, the practices.

A student, for example, predicted to me that she got about an 80 on the exam. It turned out she got a 40. So I said, "How can you think of a 40 as an 80? That's a big difference." Well, it turned out that she didn't answer one question — an essay question worth 50 percent. You may think this is silly. How come she didn't know this? But she didn't know it. She also didn't know how to answer an essay question.

She didn't know "the" answer. She didn't know how to free associate, how to deduce from the free associations, how to package them, how to outline . . . skills that you take for granted—the know-how skills of the school world.

By the way, the know-how skills of a school are just a piece of the know-how skills of the total world system. If you don't have some know-how about the system and the way it functions and works, then you're going to have great difficulty.

Take the smallest example. Let me give you a perfectly trivial one that's just on my mind. There was a man who got onto the plane last night and his lack of know-how about the plane was very interesting to observe.

First of all, most people usually sit by the window or at the aisle. He sat in the middle of three seats. Secondly, he didn't fasten his seat-belt. Thirdly, he pushed the seat back, which he wasn't supposed to do. And fourthly, he asked the hostess very confusing questions about going to Minneapolis when, in fact, it turned out he wanted to go to Milwaukee.

A complicated conversation went on for a long time, leading to a great deal of confusion. They even considered holding the plane until the problem was solved. He just wasn't knowledgeable about how you go places on an airplane. He was undereducated in that area.

He wasn't, by the way, particularly poor or generally unedu-

cated. Don't assume he was. He was a middle-class man. I have the feeling he wasn't from the United States because he seemed so un-knowledgeable about what seems to me to be simple matters on an airplane.

If you want to get some notion of this (and it's an extremely important thing for you to experience) put yourself into some situation that's very foreign to you.

For example, have someone speak "pig latin" to you. It will doubtlessly sound foreign to you. Well, a lot of so-called undereducated people think that we're talking that way most of the time. And you ought to experience five minutes of my talking to you that way with occasional screened through sentences. Note carefully that it isn't all gibberish, but there are a few sentences that come through. Do it in any area.

For instance, I have trouble following directions, finding my way in places — I guess I do better with airplanes. But if I'm driving somewhere, I have difficulty with directions and I feel very confused and my total ego functions diminish. I function far less adequately than you would think.

**Journal:** What do you see as essential competencies today's adult educator needs to develop?

**Riessman:** I'm suggesting educators and servicers, not just educators, have to role reverse. In your training and development, play the client, play the undereducated person in a variety of situations. And

also play situations in which you yourself are inadequate and where your know-how is poor. This contributes enormously to your powers.

I'm very inept at working with office machines. I can't type. I can't mimeograph. I can't work any photocopy machines. And in certain situations in the office, I'm enormously powerless to do those things and I feel it, I see it. And I say, why don't I solve it? That's another question. I simply want you to see the feeling of powerlessness you get from not knowing the world and the way it's organized.

The whole mode of education of the adult educator has to change tremendously. Our forms of education, our style, our methods of technology are all not attuned to the undereducated poor; they're not tuned to the modern world. We need much more in educating, particularly in the contact stage and other areas. We need to be able to use the experience of the trainee or the student and build the concepts and ideas around his experiences. That's a very difficult task.

One of the most important ways that people learn in society is by playing the teaching role. I might discuss or present to you the logic of why it is that playing the teaching role is such a good teacher for your way of learning. I could do that fairly easily.

But, if my lesson is an experience-based lesson, a deductive-based lesson, I have to first of all stimulate you to bring me some

relevant experiences to that concept. You may want to talk about X, Y, and Z that happened in your classroom. I want to point out to you a little bit of an A, B, and C.

Have you seen any children learn from each other, teaching each other? Start at the simplest kind of level. I have to get you to look at the experiences that way. I have to get your report. All I know is what I want to say, but I don't know what you're going to say.

The traditional method of teaching is the one where I tell you what I have to say, you react to me. Then we discuss that. Your reactions to me still are open and new. We can't predict entirely what you're going to say, of course. But it's a little different from the main center of the discussion being a group discussion in which you begin with the experiences of members of the group teaching children or whatever they're doing, in relation to these experiences. I have to hear these experiences; I have to connect them; I have to use them; and I have to connect them to a body of knowledge that I want to present.

You'll notice a number of errors that can easily happen here. Most teachers who start to do this do what I call "lopping" or what's called "rapping." They have a nice bull session with the trainees about their experience and, if they're good discussion leaders (that's part of it by the way — a good discussion leader), the discussion is interesting. It doesn't particularly connect a body of knowledge

though, except very inadvertently and occasionally, and frequently the teachers give up trying because when they tried to begin with the body of knowledge and to relate it to the people in the classroom, it failed, it didn't go over, it didn't connect.

So they gave up completely. They said, "Okay, let's talk about what you want to talk about. Let's talk about what interests you." That's a contact curriculum. It's actually a contact discussion unless there are some goals and content you're moving toward. Having to do that is requiring you, the teachers and trainers, to have a very new methodology orientation. It's not an easy job.

The essential way to train people is through simulation — having them do and practice what they *are* going to do in the real world. We should practice it in a permissive, protected, friendly situation among ourselves. Not practice it on people outside, because if you do that, there are too many dangers. If you fail, you may make a mess or you may freeze your behavior at a simple mechanical level that won't work at a complicated level.

Teachers receiving in-service training have to simulate the real teaching experience, practice it all the time because training should be a constant, recurrent, ongoing thing. Just as it is for the undereducated student, it should be for you, the educator. It's isomorphic. The same thing should be occurring. You should be educated all

the time. Your in-service training should start to take a look at what kinds of methodologies and approaches you have to have. I would suggest that you start by trying out new methodologies and approaches on each other.

If you're going to lead a group, if that's a part of the new training, then you better lead a group. And leading a group isn't just having a discussion with a bunch of people. There are group principles; there are group processes.

If you're going to develop brainstorming, you're going to have to know what brainstorming is and how to develop brainstorming, how to build an atmosphere for it. You have to think about seating arrangements, about all those kinds of questions.

If you're going to try to connect materials from people's experiences in a group with content ideas, particularly those you're interested in presenting, you have to find ways of doing this. If you have to use contactors in the first stage, what are the possible contact techniques and approaches that you can use for role playing the games you saw on TV last night or a great variety of other different approaches to children teaching each other or adults teaching each other by using discussion simulation methods and so on?

What I'm arguing here is that the adult educator, not of the future, but now, has to in a sense develop a very difficult methodology, a different kind of approach. He has to

be able to use groups, be able to use the deductive curriculum that I'm arguing for. He has to be able to use role playing and simulation in the classroom because this is crucial in teaching people skills. He has to be able not just to have a discussion, but to conduct a "let's do it" experience.

You're a nutrition aide trying to convince a client to use a new diet or to change his diet. We could

talk about it. We could talk about diets and we could talk about the principles and so forth. Let's do it. Let's have a nutrition aide be this person; let's have the client be this person; let's do the problem and discuss it around that. It's a different form of the development of ideas and one has to have some training in doing that kind of thing.

**Journal:** Thanks, Dr. Riessman, for sharing your views with us.