

FUNTIONAL ILLITERACY: MINISTERING TO FUNCTIONALLY
ILLITERATE ADULTS BY EMPLOYING MODERN EDUCATIONAL
PHILOSOPHIES

BY

GREGORY W. HEIN

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PROFESSOR STEPHEN H. GEIGER, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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Abstract

This study is meant to familiarize pastors and ministerial educators with functional illiteracy in America. Often this subject is addressed in terms of youth who are functionally illiterate or non-English speakers who are functionally illiterate in English. However, this study is directed at working with English-speaking adults who are functionally illiterate. This issue is addressed by first explaining the evolution of the term “functionally illiterate” into what it means today. Secondly, various American studies on the subject of adult functional illiteracy are analyzed and applied to the challenges faced by a minister of the gospel.

This study then identifies the various schools of thought regarding reading education. These methods and philosophies are explored because educators of reading have developed many great ways to teach those who are illiterate. Their theories can then be applied to the specific needs and tendencies of adults. All of this research points to the need of functionally illiterate adults for an education which acknowledges their personal skill sets while enabling them to utilize the information being taught.

Introduction

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”¹ The inspired writer of Psalm 119 sings the praises of God’s Word as he rightly should. Our Lord reveals through his Word his love for us, who he is, and what he has done and will do for his children. What a tremendous blessing that he would preserve his will through written word so that generation upon generation could learn of it and grow in it. But what if someone can’t read those words? Is this individual excluded from the blessings God’s Word has to offer? He is certainly not, yet it can hinder him. Since pastors and teachers are literate, our brains therefore work in a different way from the illiterate, and it can mean we aren’t presenting God’s saving Word to them in a way they can understand. Thankfully, this is a methodology problem that can be overcome if we take the time to learn how to do it.

It is possible to look back and see how the church has addressed this problem in the past. Medieval Europe seems to have been a time of especially rampant illiteracy², and yet the church dominated the lives of average people. There were certainly issues with the information the church taught, but there were still plenty of methods people inside of the church tried to use in order to make the illiterate masses aware of what the Bible contained.

This biblical instruction was done through multiple techniques. Plays were perhaps the most vivid and attention-grabbing method of informing the common, illiterate masses of Bible stories. There were even plays performed to specifically illustrate the different parts of the Nicene Creed.³ These plays were performed as a means to present the contents of the Bible in a way that could instruct both morality and doctrine.⁴ Another common form of illustrating scenes from the Bible was the art found within or on a church itself. Sculptures and base reliefs were often artfully crafted on the church building or placed within it.⁵ These works of art depicted well-known Bible characters or even entire scenes and stories. Stained glass pictures were another common technique and are perhaps the most often repeated technique today. These

¹ Ps. 119:105

² It is argued about the degree to which illiteracy existed among the common people. The common consensus is that most commoners were not of the ability to read very well if at all. Franz H. Bäuml. “Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy. *Speculum* 55, no. 2 (April 1980), 238.

³ Leonard, Richard C. “The Word Made Visible,” Laudemont Ministries. <http://www.laudemont.org/a-twmv.htm> (accessed February 2013).

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

windows served to remind the people of stories they had previously heard and even lessons that had been taught.⁶ Symbols depicting pictures and characters could provide people with the constant reminders needed to internalize information within their long-term memory.

Although illiteracy was a fact of life for a great part of the Medieval European population, the church still found multiple ways to convey biblical teachings. They recognized the importance of doing this in several different ways and doing them well. Today, the illiterate population in America is by no means the majority, but there is a greater number of people in this demographic than most Americans are generally willing to admit. We usually use the term “functionally illiterate” when this demographic is discussed in American society. This demographic certainly carries a stigma with it, and is usually seen as a group of people who have “failed.”⁷ Therefore these people are either overlooked by a great number of institutions or not given the specialized attention they need. This should not be the case for ministers of the gospel. The goal of this thesis will be to present pastors with some educational approaches which would best help someone who is functionally illiterate in America.

In order to equip ourselves to better serve this often neglected demographic, we must begin by determining what functional illiteracy is. The narrow definition describes a people who cannot function with reading and writing at a level that allows for success in a technologically advanced society. This generally affects the kind of job they have and the style of education in which they can participate. Historically, educators and most of society have lumped this group of “illiterate” all together. Therefore many people approach all illiterate in the same way. However, some educators have recently approached working with the illiterate using a different style called comprehensive illiteracy. This approach offers a more detailed and personalized method of working with someone who is illiterate. It pushes educators to work past any cultural barriers and to focus on who that person is: that he or she is an intelligent human being who exists in a community and has developed from a particular set of experiences.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Kenneth S. Goodman. “Acquiring Literacy is Natural: Who Skilled Cock Robin?” *Theory Into Practice* 16, no. 5 (December 1977), 313.

Even though there are many different kinds of people who are illiterate, I have focused the thesis on how to help adult, English-speaking illiterates. I feel this might be the most neglected demographic because these individuals are not so easily identified. In America, many adults are able to do their jobs without having to expose themselves as illiterate, so this makes it harder to identify the help they need. However, there is still a fair amount of statistical data that can be explored which shows this is a large demographic in American society and a growing demographic as well.

This thesis will not instruct how to help an illiterate person develop literacy but instead how to best teach new information to this individual. We should not assume people are less intelligent merely because they are not literate. Illiterates do, however, process information differently than those who are literate. Educators who teach reading have developed many effective ways to aid in the learning processes of illiterates. Therefore, I have explored different methods proposed by this educational field in order to glean techniques and philosophies, not to teach literacy, but to help with any kind of instruction for adult illiterates.

These explorations have led to the conclusion that functionally illiterate adults need to be taught using techniques that connect new information to prior knowledge and experiences. This type of approach will allow these adult learners to work with the new information rather than having it only presented to them. It also will help them discover techniques that work best for them in order to further their own learning. This type of teaching which emphasizes self-application and individualization will encourage the adult to grow as a lifelong learner.

A functionally illiterate adult's unique situation makes a focus on lifelong learning a worthy goal for an educator. A Christian educator will especially want his student to desire a continual growth in knowledge and understanding of his or her faith. A Christian's faith benefits greatly from the study of God's Word, and this benefit is a tremendous blessing in the face of all the attacks from the devil and from one's own sinful flesh. A functionally illiterate adult needs to be presented with biblical information in a way which is understandable and to be empowered with the right tools to pursue a life of spiritual growth.

I have included a few teaching techniques which should serve as helpful tools in this pursuit. Telling stories and using pictures are helpful in teaching both lessons from the Bible and

doctrinal truths. Mnemonic devices are helpful for the student to use when thinking through new teachings and trying to remember what has been taught. All these techniques will be presented from the unique perspective of the functionally illiterate adult. They are by no means the only techniques to be used, but they should serve as a starting point for what an educator may use in the future.

My hope is that this paper will present a very real problem which is faced in ministry today. Taking the time to provide quality biblical education to functionally illiterate adults is an endeavor which will take understanding of who the functionally illiterate are and how best they learn. This is not only a scholarly pursuit; it is in fact the biblical approach to take.

Scriptural Basis

Few would deny the excitement injected into them by the words of Jesus' Great Commission to the Christian church: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."⁸ This command drives the church ever onward to search out and find souls that are lost and thirsting for the water of life only Christ can give. We want so badly to look at those around us and rejoice with them in their faith, and to be able to experience the joy Paul expressed when he addressed the Colossians:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.⁹

Paul was thankful for the fruits he could see in the lives of the Colossians and for their clear faith in the gospel of Jesus because this meant they knew the wonderful hope of heaven that Paul himself knew.

However, notice that the eternal confidence they possessed only came to them through "the word of truth." The Colossians did not discover Jesus through private meditation. Nor did they gain hope and faith by studying the world around them. We know this because Paul tells us how they came into contact with this powerful message.

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit."¹⁰

They knew of the "word of truth" because they heard it, and they heard it in a way that they "understood" what was said to them. Paul uses the powerful word ἐπέγνωτε here. This verb implies a more intense knowing than γινώσκω, with an added emphasis on knowing or

⁸ Matthew 28:19,20a

⁹ Colossians 1:3;6a

¹⁰ Colossians 1:6b-8

understanding completely.¹¹ This kind of “understanding,” took communicating the message of Jesus to the Colossians in a way that encouraged the audience to first spend time listening. We see that from the word ἠκούσατε coming before ἐπέγνωτε.

I am not saying the Colossians *believed* the “word of truth” because of the finely crafted teaching they received. Scriptures makes it clear that the Holy Spirit works through the testimony of the gospel, and only he is able to turn our hostile, sinful hearts to him.

This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.¹²

The testimony that God himself brings to us is what converts us from people without hope to believers who live with confidence in the sure salvation of God’s Son. He implants this greatest of testimonies in people’s hearts, so it is his power alone bringing lost souls into his loving arms. However, we cannot forget the ways God uses to get this saving testimony to people’s ears. In the aforementioned Colossians’ verses, Paul mentions the man, Epaphras, and labels him a πιστὸς διάκονος, a “faithful minister.” Paul can say this about Epaphras because God used him to bring this testimony to the Colossians. Paul does not give us a clear list of everything required to be a πιστὸς διάκονος, but we can safely assume it implies time and work spent with the Colossian church. It was through his work as a πιστὸς διάκονος that these people had the opportunity to “listen” to the gospel testimony and “understand,” even if he was not the one who caused them to believe it. God uses faithful ministers, who are still nothing but jars of clay, to bring his message to the ears and hearts of people everywhere.

We can see further examples of a faithful minister’s attitude elsewhere in Scripture. We have realized that work and time are definitely a part of faithful ministry in order that those who listen may hear in a way they understand. But to whom do we speak? Jesus gave us the answer to this question in the Great Commission when he said “all nations.” No matter what gender, age,

¹¹ Bauer, Walter, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Second Edition*. Edited by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. 2nd ed. (The University Of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 291.

¹² 1 John 5:6, 9-10.

cultural background, social strata, or educational history, every person in the world is meant to hear the saving testimony of Christ. The global inclusivity of this command can appear quite daunting. There are certain people in the world who are easy to overlook if we do not have regular interactions with them, but that ease is hardly an excuse to ignore Jesus' inclusive command. Christians should dedicate themselves to reach out to all people so that no one is overlooked. This is not a daunting command but a driving force for a Christian's life. The goal of this paper is to encourage Christians to be driven in finding those who are often forgotten about and to take the time to lovingly and carefully instruct them in the gospel of Christ.

The perfect life and ministry of Jesus is an insightful source about who deserves our time and efforts. By his actions, we can see that even though society may leave certain groups of people overlooked, he displayed effort and love in order to seek out those neglected people. One such occasion occurs in John chapter four when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman of ill repute. First of all, since she was a woman, there was no reason for Jesus as a Jewish male to begin a conversation with her.¹³ Yet he asks her for a drink of water. This brings up the second reason Jesus had no reason to give this woman the time of day: she was a Samaritan. We know the woman herself thought this was strange, because she said to Jesus, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"¹⁴ The apostle John seems to make an aside in order to highlight how unusual this situation was when he says, "For Jews do not associate with Samaritans."¹⁵ The woman certainly did not expect this treatment from Jesus, because the Jews, through their disassociation with her people, showed her that she wasn't important. Now Jesus is here showing her how important she truly is. She gets personal time with the long-awaited Messiah himself even though she has not been having God-pleasing relationships. The impact this brief interaction makes on her life is clear. This one moment Jesus lovingly and patiently took to teach a Samaritan woman the simple truth about the water of life led to incredible things. "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony."¹⁶ The blessings of the gospel message were multiplied in this place that Jesus could have easily avoided, because he led this woman to faith and used her to help many

¹³ Gary P. Baumler. *The People's Bible: John*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House), 62.

¹⁴ John 9:4

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ John 4:39

more people. It took time and it took Jesus making the first move in order to reach out to her, but he did this because she needed his message as much as anyone else.

This was absolutely not an isolated incident, either. Jesus made a habit of finding those whom society ignored, and he showed them that they too had a place in his kingdom. Luke 19 gives us the account of Zacchaeus, who, even though he was not poor, was still rejected by his community. The job he possessed as chief tax collector in the region allowed him to “become very rich.”¹⁷ However, with this wealth came the scorn of his fellow citizens. The job of tax collector was well known to include cheating citizens out of their money, and it was also seen as collaborating with the hated Roman government.¹⁸ It would have seemed logical to the Jews for Jesus, a now famous rabbi, to have ignored this despised individual. But this was not Jesus’ response at all. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus looking for him from a tree, Jesus called out his name and said, “I must stay at your house today!”¹⁹ The Greek shows Jesus put an emphasis on the necessity of his going to Zacchaeus’ house in the phrase “δεῖ με μείναι .” Literally it says, “It is necessary for me to stay.” It was a necessary part of Jesus’ plan to visit Zacchaeus, and because of this, he endured scorn from the Jews as well. When they saw Jesus leaving with Zacchaeus the crowd responded by saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’”²⁰ The attention Jesus gave to Zacchaeus was not appreciated by the community, but that did not affect Jesus’ ministry. He approached those whom it was “necessary” to approach, and he treated them with the same love and concern everyone else received. The result was that Zacchaeus repented of his ways and changed how he lived his life. Jesus emphasized the true repentance Zacchaeus showed by saying, “Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”²¹ Jesus brought salvation to another soul and even change to a community by enduring ridicule and seeking out someone society rejected.

In the end, there is no need to look to the way Jesus treated other people, because we only need to look at ourselves. The mere fact that the Lord saw a world full of sinners and still sent Jesus to suffer and die on our behalf is perhaps the best illustration of how dedicated Jesus was to helping those who could not help themselves. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:

¹⁷ Lk. 19:3

¹⁸ Victor H. Prange. *The People’s Bible: Luke*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 204.

¹⁹ Lk. 19:5

²⁰ Lk. 19:7

²¹ Lk. 19:9

While were still sinners, Christ died for us.”²² The world was rejected by God because of its sin, but Jesus came anyway and was willing to give up his own perfect life in its place. He proved with his life that he meant what he said to Zacchaeus: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”²³ All of us were in that group. All of us were lost. Jesus’ love still desired to seek us out and give us what we needed. His relentless love is the only reason we are no longer lost. Jesus’ sacrificial actions set an example for us, motivate us, and even empower us to seek out others who are lost. His love drives all Christians to look into every part of society and to reach out to them with his saving message.

Jesus didn’t give us a concrete evangelism plan when he said “go,” but he did tell his disciples “follow.”²⁴ As we think about the neglected in our society, and specifically the functionally illiterate, we can “follow” Jesus in how he approached society’s neglected in his day. He made the attempt to approach them, he met them at their level, and he loved them. Now we can go and do likewise.

What is Functional Illiteracy?

Now, in our age, we need to understand what is meant by the label “functionally illiterate” in order to best reach the functionally illiterate community. The word “illiteracy” by itself, in its simplest definition, means “the quality or state of being illiterate; especially: inability to read or write.”²⁵ However, it is believed this narrow definition does not sufficiently describe the issue of illiteracy. The term used more often is “functional illiteracy,” and it has been in use for several decades.²⁶ This may sound like a more narrowed term, but it can still be quite vague. Merriam-Webster gives its definition for functional literacy as “a person who has had some schooling but does not meet a minimum standard of literacy.”²⁷ This definition is still hardly clear, and so academia has sought to understand what is exactly meant by the word “functional” and what it implies.

²² Romans 5:8

²³ Lk. 19:10

²⁴ Matthew 4:19

²⁵ Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illiteracy>.

²⁶ David Harman, National Institute of Education (U.S.), and National Adult Literacy Project (U.S.). *Functional Illiteracy in the United States: Issues, Experiences, and Dilemmas*. (National Institute of Education, 1984), 1.

²⁷ Merriam Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/functional%20illiterate>.

There are generally two perspectives people take when trying to determine what functional illiteracy is. “The first [perspective] analyzes the issue by emphasizing the personal/individual dimension, viewing literacy as something individuals have or do not have.”²⁸ This perspective seeks to explain illiteracy by trying to identify what the purpose is for obtaining literacy. They understand literacy from a skill-based viewpoint, and they see its benefit only reaching a personal level. Thus literacy is part of a set of skills an individual possesses in order to benefit his or her life.²⁹ There is not much difference here between this perspective and the most basic definition from Merriam-Webster, because, according to this philosophy, “essentially, being functionally literate means that an individual can read and understand certain texts.”³⁰ This definition simply adds the idea of what the purpose of the skill is. Functional illiteracy, then, becomes a description of anyone who does not possess the skill of literacy and its ability to improve his or her life.

The second perspective also seeks to define functional illiteracy by first explaining the concept of literacy. The people in this group focus “on the social dimension and therefore, an individual’s literacy depends on the social context and the use people give to it.”³¹ Therefore, according to this perspective, illiteracy is not simply a personal problem, because it belongs to the broader framework of the society and culture in which it exists.³² This definition hopes to acknowledge that no written or spoken word occurs inside of a vacuum.³³ Instead, everything about literacy involves the culture around someone who is literate and their literacy assists that culture in return.³⁴ It is the individual’s environment which then determines what exactly it means to be functionally illiterate or literate, because how literacy is perceived and used will change from society to society.³⁵

²⁸ Sofia Valdivielso. “Functional Literacy, Functional Illiteracy: The Focus of an Ongoing Social Debate.” *Convergence* 39, no.2 (2006), 2.

²⁹ Shabhita Jain. “Sociological Background of Adult and Lifelong Learning.” *Learning Package on Participatory Adult Learning, Documentation and Information Networking*. 2006.
http://www.unesco.org/education/aladin/paldin/pdf/course01/unit_05.pdf (accessed February 2013), 5-6.

³⁰ Harman, 5.

³¹ Valdielveso, 2.

³² *ibid*, 2.

³³ Harman, 5.

³⁴ *ibid*, 5

³⁵ *ibid*, 6

More recently there is yet a third perspective of what constitutes functional illiteracy and literacy. It claims to take its philosophy on the use of literacy one step further than previous ones.

Comprehensive literacy goes beyond that, not denying the fact those skills are necessary but taking into account the existence of other non-functional skills that are equally important. A more complex approach to the construction of the literacy concept will enable us to go beyond the lack of certain abilities and help us discern the multidimensionality of reality.³⁶

The philosophy of comprehensive literacy seeks to address the issue of functional illiteracy by incorporating everything about an individual. It takes into account that an individual, especially an adult, possesses life skills outside of literacy that benefit him or her and the surrounding society. These truths about people are what comprehensive literacy hopes to acknowledge by using the term “multidimensionality.” Society should understand the complex reality behind every individual’s situation instead of pigeon-holing the goals of literacy and the one hoping to attain literacy.³⁷ So this approach seeks to help an individual use literacy both on a personal improvement level by adding new skills and on a societal level by better understanding environments and culture. Comprehensive literacy seems to synthesize the previous two literacy perspectives to create an approach which could be easily tailored to fit varying personalities and backgrounds.

This synthesis is important because each definition of literacy highlights a different facet of the overall issue. The first definition gives literacy a sense of attainability by viewing it as an individual skill. It defines literacy in a straightforward manner and gives it a clear purpose: literacy is the ability to read and write, and it will improve the individual’s life. The simplicity of this perspective has the potential to give an individual a clear goal to attain. The second definition counters the rigidity of the first by allowing the culture of an individual to define what literacy is. This perspective protects individuals from being forced to conform to any other culture’s idea of what literacy needs to be. Both have valid points, and that is why comprehensive literacy synthesizes them into one idea. The use of literacy is a fluid notion based on the environment of the individual. It is also an attainable skill. Comprehensive literacy’s focus

³⁶ Valdielveso, 2.

³⁷ *ibid*, 3-6.

on discovering the different situations of students allows educators to discover how best this skill can be used inside of their cultures.

The synthesized approach to understanding functional illiteracy was used by a couple of major organizations that wish to promote literacy among all people. They define functional illiteracy as not meeting their definition of functional literacy. One such organization is an American one, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This organization gave the following definition for functional literacy: “Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”³⁸ Their definition is very similar to the one produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).³⁹

A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group, community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community's development.⁴⁰

These two organizations have formulated definitions that acknowledge the complexity of an individual as it affects the issue of functional illiteracy while also defining literacy as an attainable skill to be taught and learned.

Statistics

America has a century-and-a-half-long tradition of compulsory education,⁴¹ and is the richest country among even first-world nations. Yet, there is a continued element of illiteracy found in our country. Despite constant initiatives developed by government agencies and nationwide programs implemented by the president, this continues to be a concern of major

³⁸ National Center for Education Statistics (U.S). “Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS).” 3rd ed., 2002. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93275.pdf> (accessed February 2013), 2.

³⁹ This is an organization which was instituted by the United Nations in 1946. Its goal is to “contribute to peace and security in the world by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, culture and communication in order to further universal respect for justice and the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion.” Quote taken from *What is UNESCO?* This is an article published by the UNESCO official website: http://www.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_469D89AC6C3CA63FE001E4FB28813107538B0100/filename/w_unesco.pdf.

⁴⁰ Jain, 6.

⁴¹ Harman, 1.

proportions.⁴² Generally, illiteracy is addressed within the twelve-year school system our government requires its citizens to participate in. However, this required participation does not mean illiteracy is nonexistent among everyone who has graduated from the system. Illiteracy persists greatly among the population above the age of sixteen, and it does not appear it will be disappearing anytime soon.

Statistics show that chances are high a pastor would serve someone who is functionally illiterate at some point in their ministry. Arguably the most comprehensive study done in America on the number of adult illiterates was conducted by the NCES. In 2003, they implemented the *National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NAAL) which was a follow up to the previously most comprehensive study from 1992, the *1992 National Adult Literacy Survey* (NALS).

This project's specific focus on adults who struggle with illiteracy sets it apart from numerous other illiteracy studies. "The NAAL is a nationally representative assessment of English literacy among American adults age 16 and older."⁴³ Over 19,000 adults participated in the national and state-level assessments, representing the entire population of the United States. Samples were drawn from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The NAAL compared results from 1992 and 2003, and so provided the first indicator since 1992 of the nation's progress in adult literacy.⁴⁴ By doing this, the NAAL could show what progress has been made and what challenges still lie ahead for those interested in improving literacy levels among adults.

Both studies were done with the desire to assess adults under broader definitions of literacy and illiteracy.

Many past studies of adult literacy have tried to count the number of 'illiterates' in this nation, thereby treating literacy as a condition that individuals either do or do not have. We believe that such efforts are inherently arbitrary and misleading. They are also

⁴² *ibid*, 1.

⁴³ National Center for Education Statistics (U.S.) "What is NAAL?" About NAAL. <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/index.asp> (accessed February 2013).

⁴⁴ *ibid*.

damaging, in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.⁴⁵

The NCES needed to develop a different form of assessment to accurately reflect the newer definition of literacy they would be using. They decided to develop three basic categories to assess: prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy. NCES defines prose literacy as “the knowledge and skills needed to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts such as books, newspaper articles, or magazines.”⁴⁶ Document literacy is defined as “the knowledge and skills needed to search, comprehend, and use information from noncontinuous texts, such as maps, schedules and catalog order forms.”⁴⁷ Finally, quantitative literacy is “the knowledge and skills needed to identify and perform computations using numbers that are embedded in printed materials.”⁴⁸ All three of these categories seem extremely useful for society. For the purposes of this thesis I believe the prose category to be the most pertinent, because prose literacy would relate to someone’s ability to read the Bible or devotions.

Surprisingly, there was not much of a change between the NALS and the NAAL studies. This is unfortunate, because the numbers gathered in 2003 are rather sobering. In the prose literacy category, 14 percent of Americans are below basic literacy levels, and 29 percent are only at the basic level.⁴⁹ Only 13 percent of American adults are considered proficient in prose literacy. This means, with a combination of the below basic and basic literacy levels, 43 percent

⁴⁵ National Center for Education Statistics (U.S.). “Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS),” xv.

⁴⁶ National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S.). “Basic Reading Skills and the Literacy of America’s Least Literate Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) Supplemental Studies.” 2009. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009481.pdf> (accessed February 2013), iv.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, iv.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, iv.

⁴⁹ According to the NCES’ home website, they divided the participants of the NALS and the NAAL into four literacy levels: Below Basic, Basic, Intermediate, and Proficient. Below Basic was characterized as having no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills (about 2nd grade reading level or below). Basic can perform simple and everyday literacy activities (about 3rd or 4th Grade reading level). Intermediate can perform moderately challenging literacy activities (about 6th Grade reading level). Proficient can perform complex and challenging literacy activities (8th Grade reading level or higher). These definitions can be found at http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp. People were placed into these categories based on a rather complicated algorithm. They used this algorithm on the surveyed adults’ test scores from the *Fluency Addition to NAAL* and the *Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment*. The results of the algorithm does not measure the skills of the surveyed adults based on a specific grade level. The grade levels I inserted behind each literacy level are based on a comparison of a chart found on p.22 in *The Results from the NAAL: Supplemental Studies* with a chart based on the oral reading rates determined in the *National Assessment of Educational Progress*. The aforementioned algorithm can be further studied on pages 50-52 of *The Results from the NAAL: Supplemental Studies*.

of American adults would not be able to read the Bible on their own or in a way where they could understand anything more than the most straightforward of passages.

Inside of this group of adult illiterates there is yet another subgroup that a pastor may have the opportunity to serve: the incarcerated population of America. Both studies chose to assess this population separately from the general population. They chose to have separate studies done, because, already in the NALS, they realized that “adults in prison were far more likely than those in the population as a whole to perform in the lowest two literacy levels.”⁵⁰ They deduced that this difference between populations was due to disproportionate percentages of adults who were from demographics more associated with low levels of illiteracy. These high percentages would include people from demographics such as male, minority, young, and poorly educated adults.⁵¹ The NAAL includes assessments of almost 1,200 inmates from 107 prisons, including 12 federal prisons, in 30 states.⁵² These assessments were categorized and measured in the same way as the general population.

Under the prose category, adult prisoners were found to have 16 percent in the below average level and 40 in the basic. The numbers found in the below average level are not very different from the general population. However, the basic level is quite different, and this results in 56 percent of the prison population being functionally prose illiterate. As of 2003, there were 1.4 million adults incarcerated in state or federal prisons in America, and that number was half a million more than were incarcerated ten years earlier.⁵³ These numbers are not going down. There were over two million adults incarcerated in 2010 according to the International Centre for Prison Studies.⁵⁴ Pastors can expect increasing opportunities to serve prisoners in the future, because the trend over the last twenty years shows this population will only keep increasing.

⁵⁰ National Center for Education Statistics (U.S.). “Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS)” xix.

⁵¹ National Center for Education Statistics (U.S.). “Prison Component.” About NAAL. http://nces.ed.gov/naal/fct_prison.asp (accessed February 2013).

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ National Center for Education Statistics (U.S.). “Literacy Behind Bars: Results from the 2003 NAAL Prison Survey.” 2007 http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007473_1.pdf. (accessed February 2013), 11.

⁵⁴ International Centre for Prison Studies. “World Prison Brief.” http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb_country.php?country=190 (accessed February 2013).

It appears adult illiteracy in the general population will also not disappear in America any time soon. Statistics about the lack of reading proficiency in late middle school students and high school students point to this unfortunate conclusion.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, more than two-thirds of all eighth graders are not proficient readers or writers, and half of those read below what the Department of Education defines as a basic level. In writing, only about one-quarter (24%) of twelfth graders were judged proficient in 2007, an improvement from 1998 when only 22% were judged proficient (NAEP, 2008, p. 37). At grade 8, 71% of English Learners were rated "below basic" in reading in 2005 (NAEP, 2008).⁵⁵

These numbers are grim, but they are America's reality. Pastors need to be aware of the great array of people they will meet in their ministry, and the functionally illiterate will absolutely be a part of that array in the future. This reality needs to be faced, so it can become possible to prepare for it. Preparedness requires time and work, but all these people's souls are well worth it.

Literature Review: What is the best way to address functional illiteracy?

Functional illiteracy is indeed a complex issue, and so education for adults who are functionally illiterate should be approached with quite a bit of thought. Educators who specialize in teaching reading are a group of people who have spent a lot of time figuring out the best ways to educate those with functional illiteracy. As stated in the introduction the goal of this thesis is not to teach pastors how to teach literacy, but instead to know the most effective ways to provide instruction. If people who teach reading do in fact know a lot about how an illiterate mind understands, organizes, and remembers information, then pastors should take heed of all the work they have done in this field. Therefore various philosophies and methods educators use when instructing an illiterate adult will now be examined.

Two major methods exist in academia, and they grow out of two different educational philosophies. The first method is the phonics method, and this grows out of the behaviorist philosophy.⁵⁶ The second is the whole language method which grows out of the constructivist philosophy.⁵⁷ Both methods and philosophies also seem to be supported by separate credible

⁵⁵ Kris D. Gutiérrez. "A Comprehensive Federal Literacy Agenda: Moving Beyond Inoculation Approaches to Literacy Policy." *Journal of Literacy Research* 41, no. 4 (October 2009), 476.

⁵⁶ John Reyhner. "The Reading Wars." http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/Reading_Wars.html (accessed February 2013).

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

organizations. The National Reading Panel of America (NRP) supports phonics-based learning,⁵⁸ while UNESCO appears to support a whole language approach.⁵⁹ The debates inside of the academic world between these two methods are commonly referred to as the “reading wars”, and they have been going on since about the 1950’s.⁶⁰ This review will attempt to analyze the mentality behind the phonics approach and behaviorism and the whole language approach and constructivism.

Phonics and Behaviorism

In 2000 the NRP presented a significant report called *Teaching Children to Read*. Their report would lead directly to America’s current educational policy, *No Child Left Behind*, which was established in 2001. Phonics instruction is summarized in this report by the NRP as “a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling.”⁶¹ This correspondence between letters and sounds are called phonemes.⁶² Phonemes are the smallest unit of a spoken language, and phonics instruction teaches students to manipulate these phonemes according to a specific set of rules associated with the particular language. Phonics, therefore, is “a ‘bottom up’ approach where students ‘decode’ the meaning of a text.”⁶³ This is in line with the classic definition of literacy which describes reading as encoding and decoding a text.⁶⁴ Thus the focus of phonics is to be able to sound out the phonemes on a page (decoding) and to correctly put the phonemes together in writing to construct words (encoding). This appears to work well for “normally achieving students”, but it is not as helpful for improving reading abilities among disabled readers.⁶⁵ According to NRP, phonics instruction produced the biggest impact on reading growth for those in kindergarten and 1st grade, but it “failed to exert a significant impact on the reading performance of low-achieving

⁵⁸ National Reading Panel. “Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications For Reading Instruction.” 2006. <http://www.dys-add.com/resources/SpecialEd/TeachingChildrenToRead.pdf> (accessed February 2013), 7.

⁵⁹ Although UNESCO does not explicitly say it approves of the Whole Language approach, one can come to that conclusion by examining the philosophies it teaches. This will become plain during the Literary Review.

⁶⁰ Reyhner. In the 1950s the "Dick and Jane" readers published by Scott Foresman used a "whole word" approach, but then Phonics proponents led by Rudolph Flesh in his 1955 book *Why Johnny Can't Read* attacked the whole word approach.

⁶¹ National Reading Panel, 7.

⁶² *ibid*, 7.

⁶³ Reyhner.

⁶⁴ Harman, 5.

⁶⁵ Reyhner.

readers in 2nd through 6th grades."⁶⁶ Children who cannot grasp the concept of phonemes are not able to use the phonemes for efficient reading. Phonemes are a tool that phonics instruction teaches students to use. Children who do not understand the tool will not understand how to use it, but the ones who do understand will theoretically be able to pick up any piece of literature and read the words off the page. It is this versatility of the phoneme tool which gives the phonics method its strength.

Behaviorism is generally the philosophy that influences the implementation of a phonics curriculum.⁶⁷ This philosophy is seen as an attempt to influence students in their will and motivation to learn. It also seeks to create an environment where learning can be done in the most effective way possible.⁶⁸ The teacher is held responsible for creating this environment, and so the learning experience is focused on what he can do for the students. The students then take a passive role as the information is presented to them. The phonics method works well with this philosophy, because both phonics and behaviorism view teaching as an efficient process. This process consists of a teacher presenting a specific body of information and a student receiving exactly what is presented to him or her.

B.F. Skinner's work as a psychologist and professor of psychology at Harvard University was a major driving force in the modern behaviorism movement in the 20th century. "B.F. Skinner has been the dominant force in translating behaviorism into recommendations for school practices."⁶⁹ Skinner uses the idea of behaviorism largely to create a certain type of educational environment in which reinforcers can encourage this efficient learning process. "Skinner believes that 'inner' states are merely convenient myths, that motives and behaviors are shaped by environmental factors."⁷⁰ He advocates creating the right kind of stimuli in order to shape a student's reaction to education.

In his essay, "Beyond Freedom and Dignity," he says, "When a bit of behavior is followed by a certain kind of consequence, it is more likely to occur again, and a consequence

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ James Wm. Noll, ed. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Educational Issues*. 24th ed. (Dubuque: McGraw Hill, 2007), 33.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 33.

having this effect is called a reinforcer.”⁷¹ More succinctly, this concept is called “operant conditioning.”⁷² Skinner claims that the reinforcers used in operant conditioning, whether they be positive or negative, can control people and create a desired education. Skinner sees this as a natural process and as the most effective method to condition someone to act in a way that they are supposed to act.⁷³ He admits his advocacy for using operant conditioning may offend some people’s concept of what freedom is if they define it as “the absence of aversive control,” but he does not see this as a problem since he believes “the feeling of freedom becomes an unreliable guide to action as soon as would-be controllers turn to nonaversive measures.”⁷⁴ In other words, Skinner is saying true freedom isn’t a lack of control from an outside source. Outside reinforcers may, in fact, be what are needed if they can motivate someone to change their behavior for the better. Feeling free isn’t important, but instead one should focus on improving. In terms of classroom management, then, no one should brand control over the way students act and learn as wrong. Giving students what feels like “freedom” may actually hurt them. Therefore, it is ill-advised to free people completely from control but instead “analyze and change the kinds of control to which they are exposed.”⁷⁵ Behaviorism, as used by Skinner, controls a classroom and learning experience with the right kind of reinforcers in order to motivate and guide students to learn.

E.D. Hirsch Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, is in strong agreement with both the NRP and Skinner. He takes the fundamental ideas of phonics and behaviorism and attaches them to a concrete style of teaching. In his essay, “Reality’s Revenge: Research and Ideology,” Hirsch defends a teacher-centered classroom setting which uses a content-based style of teaching.⁷⁶ He decries those who call for a “progressive” change in education. This progressive style of education would use more of a student-centered environment mixed with project-based learning.⁷⁷ He is convinced the style of teaching he advocates is the best way to

⁷¹ B.F. Skinner. “Beyond Freedom and Dignity.” 1971, as found in Noll, James Wm., ed. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Educational Issues*. (Dubuque: McGraw Hill, 2007), 34.

⁷² *ibid*, 34.

⁷³ *ibid*, 37.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 37.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 39.

⁷⁶ E.D. Hirsch. “Reality’s Revenge: Research and Ideology.” 1996, as found in Abbeduto, Leonard, ed. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Educational Psychology*. 4th ed. (Dubuque: McGraw Hill, 2006), 166-167.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 167.

encourage high-order⁷⁸ thinking in students. Hirsch would argue that a student needs to possess a concrete set of knowledge in order to approach a high-order thinking type problem. This is the concept of a content-focused education. “Once basic underlying skills have been automated, the almost universal feature of reliable high-order thinking about any subject or problem is the possession of a broad, well integrated base of background knowledge relevant to the subject.”⁷⁹ Hirsch understands that a mind needs certain core content in order to understand how a problem actually works, and then it is possible for someone to attempt to solve the problem. His teacher-focused agenda grows out of his belief that the best way to attain a core content of knowledge is by a body of knowledge being presented to students. He cites a study done in New Zealand in the 70’s and says, “Students who spent most of their time being instructed or guided by their teachers did much better than students who did projects or were expected to learn on their own.”⁸⁰ According to Hirsch, this method works better because a teacher is an expert with the core knowledge and is able to cover more of the knowledge if he or she is in total control of presenting it. Hirsch’s ideology is in line with the phonics approach to teaching children a certain set of basic reading rules and behaviorism’s philosophy of being in complete control of everything happening in a learning environment.

Whole Language and Constructivism

The opposite side of the reading wars has been labeled the “progressive” education movement.⁸¹ This movement seeks to use the whole language method in place of the phonics method. Dr. Jon Reyhner, an education professor at Northern Arizona University and a commissioned author on the U.S. Government’s Indian Nation’s Task Force on education, compares whole language to phonics. “Whole language is considered a ‘top down’ approach where a reader constructs a personal meaning for a text based on using their prior knowledge to interpret the meaning of what they are reading.”⁸² Therefore, whole language emphasizes

⁷⁸ Actually, Hirsch calls the concept of high-order thinking a “mirage” in the way progressivists in education approach it. But he still acknowledges high-order thinking as a possibility. Usually he mentions it in reference to thinking like an “expert.” But in general, high-order thinking simply implies students who “think independently about unfamiliar problems they will encounter.” *ibid*, 160.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.161.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.167.

⁸¹ Steve Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Marilyn Bizar. “Sixty Years of Reading Research—but Who’s Listening?” 1999, as found in Abbeduto, Leonard, ed. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Educational Psychology*. 4th ed. (Dubuque: McGraw Hill, 2006), 270.

⁸² Reyhner.

comprehension of what is being read over a mechanical reading. Reyhner believes this is a helpful style of understanding reading, especially in English, because “it is estimated about half the words in the English language cannot be pronounced correctly using commonly taught phonics rules.”⁸³ The National Reading Panel of America has even admitted the phonics method is not very beneficial for struggling students.⁸⁴

Reyhner suggests the weakness of phonics is especially highlighted when it is taught to students outside of the general American homogenous demographic. One of the great benefits of whole language is that it “encourages teachers to find reading material that reflects these students’ language and culture.”⁸⁵ The whole language approach does this by trying to relate the new information being taught with the student’s own experiences and interests.⁸⁶ This concept is called “activating background knowledge.” A teacher will activate what the student already knows by building a curriculum which presents literacy in a way that encompasses their everyday life. They accomplish that by using a variety of techniques and stimulating information.

With whole language, teachers are expected to provide a literacy rich environment for their students and to combine speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Whole language teachers emphasize the meaning of texts over the sounds of letters, and phonics instruction becomes just one component of the whole language classroom.⁸⁷

According to Reyhner, whole language advocates do not totally do away with phonics instruction, but instead they present it as one of many tools the students can use. They try to surround students with teaching tools that have meaning and importance. The teachers connect the students to these tools in the hopes that they better comprehend what they are studying. Leonardo Abbeduto, the editor of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Educational Psychology*, explains some of the key aspects of whole language very well.

With this approach, from kindergarten on, students are engaged in activities that look very much like "real" reading and "real" writing. The whole language approach grew out of the idea that literacy skills are a natural by-product of engaging in authentic (i.e. personally meaningful, goal-directed) literacy activities. Proponents of whole

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Refer back to page 9 of the Thesis where the NRP’s views on Phonics are addressed.

⁸⁵ Reyhner.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

language see a parallel between the way in which children learn spoken language and the way in which they learn to read and write.⁸⁸

Whole language claims to be a more “organic” approach to obtaining literacy. Students are engulfed in a literacy rich environment which can take into account their unique backgrounds and experiences. Therefore the environment is shaped by the uniqueness of the students rather than the students being shaped by a skills-based set of prescribed rules. Jon Reyhner himself, however, admits that one of the challenges to whole language is the amount of pressure on the teachers to create these curriculums.⁸⁹ It takes a lot of work to construct this environment and to be willing to tailor these environments to the specific group of students or individual student they may be teaching.

Admitting that challenge contradicts some critics of whole language who claim this approach leaves the students to do whatever pleases them. Steve Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Marilyn Bizar, authors of *Rethinking High School*, in their essay, “Sixty Years of Reading Research – But Who’s Listening?,” address this apparent criticism.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the debate is that whole language is mischaracterized as merely turning children loose to do their own thing, with no support or guidance from the teacher. In the good whole-language classrooms we’ve observed, nothing could be further from the truth. Whole language is, in fact, a balanced and mainstream approach to teaching and learning.⁹⁰

Turning a classroom from a teacher-centered atmosphere into a student-centered one does not destine a classroom for chaos. The teacher is still responsible for order and direction, but he will have a different goal in mind for the students than a phonics-based teacher has. “Conservatives think of education as socializing students to the status quo, while progressives view it as an opportunity to teach students to critique and question the world they’ve inherited.”⁹¹ The progressive teacher doesn’t look at every single student and assume they are able to relate to a prescribed set of content. Instead he desires to let the student participate in his own learning and come to his own discoveries concerning new information. Whole language uses strategies such as “including extensive use of good literature, a focus on comprehension, and the use of

⁸⁸ Leonard Abbeduto, ed. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Educational Psychology*. 4th ed. (Dubuque: McGraw Hill, 2006), 270.

⁸⁹ Reyhner.

⁹⁰ Zemelman, Daniels, and Bizar, 277.

⁹¹ *ibid*, 276

developmental spelling for beginning writers”⁹² to accomplish this goal. By using several methods instead of one, a whole language teacher presents several opportunities to students to discover how best they learn and how this new knowledge applies to them.

The philosophy of constructivism unquestionably influences the whole language approach. Constructivism can be defined as a “learning theory based on the idea that children learn by connecting new knowledge to previously learned knowledge.”⁹³ Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky pioneered this philosophy and coined the term, “zone of proximal development (ZPD).”⁹⁴ ZPD operates with the understanding that if students “cannot connect new knowledge to old knowledge in a meaningful way, they may with difficulty memorize it (rote learning), but they will not have a real understanding of what they are learning.”⁹⁵ Vygotsky suggests students learn best when the new information is only a little outside of their current knowledge base, and then they are able to introduce new concepts into their current understanding with the help of someone who is more experienced.⁹⁶ A constant connection with previously known information makes it easier to understand why something is being taught and learned, and that understanding makes it easier for a student to want to learn the new information. This desire, then, leads to more significant comprehension and self-application.

Professor Mark A. Windschitl, who is a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Washington, wrote the essay “The Challenges of Sustaining a Constructivist Classroom Culture” to help explain how the constructivist philosophy fits into a classroom. Windschitl explains the overall approach a constructivist teacher uses as he plans the classroom experience. “Constructivism is premised on the belief that learners actively create, interpret, and reorganize knowledge in individual ways.”⁹⁷ A teacher with this philosophy will make his classroom more project-based as opposed to a lecture- or recitation-based learning experience. He will teach like this, because it gives the students many more chances to teach themselves a

⁹² *ibid*, 278

⁹³ Reyhner. He defines constructivism in the context of education for children, but it does not have to be limited to strictly teaching children. It’s an overall educational philosophy.

⁹⁴ *ibid*.

⁹⁵ *ibid*.

⁹⁶ *ibid*.

⁹⁷ Mark Windschitl. “The Challenges of Sustaining a Constructivist Classroom Culture.” 1999, as found in Abbeduto, Leonard, ed. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Educational Psychology*. 4th ed. (Dubuque: McGraw Hill, 2006), 151.

new concept or to be involved in peer teaching.⁹⁸ The hope is if the students are more involved in their own learning, then they will be more invested in applying that learning to themselves and their everyday lives. Windschitl explains what this learning may look like:

Such experiences include problem-based learning, inquiry activities, dialogues with peers and teachers that encourage making sense of the subject matter, exposure to multiple sources of information, and opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding in diverse ways.⁹⁹

Constructivist teachers guide students along in this project-based curriculum which encourages as much student involvement as possible. As the students work, they will reconcile these new experiences with their own past experiences, culture, and social contexts.¹⁰⁰ Windschitl believes this is a better approach than to drill the students into recalling a “laundry list of facts,” because “students’ background knowledge profoundly affects how they interpret subject matter.”¹⁰¹ Students who are able to interpret new subject matter according to what is important to them will be able to comprehend that knowledge better. This greater comprehension is encouraged when they are given opportunities to immediately apply the new knowledge to solve problems within projects.

Implementing this philosophy is not an easy task. Windschitl admits that it takes a great amount of work to switch from a conservative education culture to the constructivist environment. “Most of us are products of traditional instruction as learners: we were exposed to teacher-centered instruction, fact-based subject matter, and a steady diet of drill and practice.”¹⁰² Since most people have been taught according to the conservative method, it simply makes sense to teach people in a way that is familiar. Our personal educational histories influence our mental models as we plan a classroom experience.¹⁰³ Windschitl also notes that it takes much effort to manage a classroom according to constructivism. Teachers need to be experts in what they’re teaching in order that they may be prepared to explore the subject-matter in a variety of ways.¹⁰⁴ It appears at first that this is an incredible amount of pressure to put on a teacher, and maybe it’s

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 150.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 151.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 151.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 150.

¹⁰² *ibid*, 152.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 152.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, 153.

an unrealistic idea to think that every teacher can be an expert to this degree. Constructivism, however, is not wholly unattainable, because it doesn't actually require teachers to completely throw out the more familiar conservative styles of teaching. "The question is not whether to use lecture or discussion, but how to use these techniques to complement rather than dominate student thinking."¹⁰⁵ Constructivist philosophy merely helps a teacher think about how to use old and new techniques in a balanced way to more effectively engage students. Different classrooms will look different as they explore these techniques, because different students have different needs. Every teacher is different as well and their own abilities will dictate how they are able to carry out these techniques. What is most important for a constructivist teacher is that he or she remembers, above all else, to respond to the students' needs.¹⁰⁶

How This Fits in with Christian Adult Education

Generally speaking, most educational studies are conducted with children in mind. The majority of philosophies about literacy instruction are usually focused on how to develop literacy in grade schools and high schools. The goal of this thesis is not to determine which method or philosophy is best suited for children. Instead it is important to explore how these philosophies can be used for teaching adults, and especially adults who are illiterate. There is some difficulty here, because there simply is not as much research concerning adult education as there is for children.

The situation today has not changed much from the late 1980's when Bowren (1987) bemoaned the fact that research on reading instruction for adults "has long floundered as an educational stepchild. While the research in reading instruction for children is voluminous, that in reading for the adult population is meager."¹⁰⁷

Our educational system focuses an incredible amount of research and energy on equipping children in the early years of elementary school, but the children who do not perform adequately in those years often slip through the cracks afterwards.¹⁰⁸ Many who are interested in adult education are not informed of new educational techniques, or the techniques do not even exist. Sir John Daniel, president of the Commonwealth of Learning, criticizes the trend he notices

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 153.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 152.

¹⁰⁷ Daphne Greenberg, Laura D. Fredrick, Trudie Ann Hughes, and Camilla J. Bunting. "Implementation Issues in a Reading Program for Low Reading Adults." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45, no. 7 (2002), 626.

¹⁰⁸ Gutierrez, 477.

among adult educators. “Adult educators have a reputation for being boring, sanctimonious, backward looking and paternalist. They have a propensity to miss the boat when new developments of importance in adult education appear on the scene.”¹⁰⁹ Too often it seems pastors could fall into this criticized category. WELS pastors receive only three semesters of formal training in education and are not exposed to a variety of tools or literature concerning the subject. Since pastors teach God’s Word, the most important information anyone could learn, it would make sense that they take the time to diligently study how best to convey that Word. There is plenty for a pastor to learn and apply from educational studies despite the lack of specific adult research.

The organization UNESCO was mentioned earlier in the thesis. They have dug quite deeply into the world of adult education in their quest to provide equal educational opportunities across the world. In 2006 an Indian team presented a document to an International Workshop in Delhi called *The Learning Package on Participatory Adult Learning, Documentation and Information Networking* (PALDIN). This PALDIN approach seems to advocate philosophies similar to whole language, constructivism and comprehensive literacy. Ajay Kumar’s chapter on “The Philosophical Background of Adult Education” draws the obvious, but often overlooked, conclusion that teachers need to approach adult education differently than teaching children. This starts with using different terminology. Usually when educators talk about teaching they use the term “pedagogy,” but this word refers to the instruction of children. Instead, Kumar wants educators to use the term “andragogy,” which refers to the instruction of adults.¹¹⁰ Simply using different terminology can help change one’s mindset when thinking about instruction.

Kumar shows similarities with constructivism because he greatly emphasizes the importance of relating new information with previous knowledge. Most constructivists talk about the importance of activating background knowledge when instructing children, but Kumar suggests this concept is even more important for adult education. Adults have more life experiences to draw from than children do and therefore more opportunities to create meaningful

¹⁰⁹ Jain, 2.

¹¹⁰ Ajay Kumar. “Philosophical Background of Adult and Lifelong Learning.” *Learning Package on Participatory Adult Learning, Documentation and Information Networking*. 2006.
http://www.unesco.org/education/aladin/paldin/pdf/course01/unit_03.pdf (accessed February 2013), 33.

connections of their own.¹¹¹ It is the teacher's job to present opportunities for those connections to happen. Kumar strongly encourages making those connections as practical as possible to the life of the student.

Another significant difference is that adults often seek practical applications and uses of knowledge, which they wish to learn effectively. They need to foresee a goal orientation to their learning with a reasonable expectation that the new knowledge will help them further that goal.¹¹²

Making the new information applicable to students' everyday lives will not only make it easier to learn, but will also increase their motivation to learn more. Adult students are very busy and have many responsibilities that take up their time. They will not continue working on their education if they do not feel invested in what they are studying.¹¹³ Kumar feels that rote learning and a teacher-centered environment do not meet these needs for adult learners. Adults will see that style of instruction as "meaningless stimuli" and they will become frustrated by it and feel their time is being wasted.¹¹⁴ An adult educator must recognize the many skills an adult student has already acquired in order to survive in his everyday life. A teacher should show respect for those skills by helping the student find how the new information can relate to him. "Learning is interesting when it is based on felt needs and perceived interests and when it is based on comprehension, critical and analytical understanding, and its contextual application."¹¹⁵ However, learning can only be based on the students' felt needs and perceived interests if the teacher knows what those needs and interests are and works to connect the new information to them.

The philosophy and techniques of whole language and constructivist learning appear to account for all these things Kumar says are important in adult education. They allow the teacher to concentrate on the background and experiences of the student, and they encourage using a project-based classroom environment in which to do it. These approaches also account for the modern definition of functional illiteracy because they acknowledge the student as a whole person who has unique strengths, needs, and experiences as an individual. This mindset will

¹¹¹ *ibid*, 33.

¹¹² *ibid*, 33.

¹¹³ "Preliterate' English-Learners Torn Between School, Work." *Vocational Training Newsletter* 32, no. 26 (2001): 8.

¹¹⁴ Kumar, 33.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 33.

hopefully keep an educator from treating functionally illiterate adults as inferior, because it will encourage him to create a whole educational experience which acknowledges the skills the students do have while at the same time introducing new information. According to Kumar, education which revolves around this respectful treatment of students and provides ample opportunities to apply new information will produce the most effective education possible for adults.

A major goal of all this personalized education and application is to promote lifelong education. The style of education many people are used to involves regular test-taking to assess skills inside of an educational system and then graduation from the system when the assessments are done to meet the prescribed standards.¹¹⁶ Thinking and teaching like this can possibly encourage people to develop some unhealthy mentalities. They think that after graduation they have no need for education, or they may think that without graduation they have not learned anything. The latter mentality can even lead to an aversion to any kind of formal educational experience.¹¹⁷ However, a teacher shows a student that education is a part of life and lasts a lifetime when he emphasizes the purpose and application of new knowledge. A “lifelong learning discourse” will remove both the perception that education ends with graduation and the fear of beginning an educational course when the pursuit of learning is seen as a lifestyle.¹¹⁸ Given all these possible benefits, UNESCO’s opinion seems to be that the whole language method and constructivist philosophy are the best approaches for an adult educator to use in order to achieve an effective personalized learning experience for adult learners.

Whole language and constructivism are not magic bullets, though. There are still flaws in these philosophies. The concept of “constructing your own meaning” could be taken into dangerous areas. As Christians, we surely do not want to make God’s Word say what we want it to say instead of letting God speak for himself. The whole language approach to reading could lead to certain post-modern philosophies which teach that there is no objective truth. Zemelman and his fellow authors even say as much:

¹¹⁶ Jain, 6.

¹¹⁷ “Preliterate’ English-Learners Torn Between School, Work,” 4.

¹¹⁸ Jain, 7.

If you believe that books – especially religious scriptures – have only one correct meaning that is inherent in the text, you are not going to be very friendly to schools that teach children to explore a wide range of books and ideas, to write and discuss their own responses, to make critical evaluations of what they read, and to develop strong and independent voices as authors.¹¹⁹

These authors wrote this quote with a couple of significant assumptions: first, that there is no objective truth, only the subjective truth one finds based on his experiences; second, that believing in the existence of objective truth limits your ability to think. These assumptions greatly contradict the scriptural teaching of the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible. Christians believe a person truly can read the Bible and find an absolute and unalterable truth which exists outside of an individual's subjective interests. To believe anything different is tantamount to lying to oneself. "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing."¹²⁰ Pastors cannot encourage people to look at what the Bible says and then construct a meaning which is not actually there.

However, even though Christians believe and teach the Bible as absolute truth, church members ought to still think for themselves. They need to. With so many people on television specials, in magazines, or on the internet trying to disprove orthodox Christianity, members need to be enabled to evaluate those false teachings against God's Word. Students' confidence can be built up as they are taught to face these challenges in a way that encourages the knowledge and skills they already possess and by treating them as adults. There is no reason to throw out the positives of whole language and constructivism because some negatives exist. Dutiful educators will use these approaches to discover the background knowledge of their students, tailor their curriculum to meet their needs, and empower them to use this new information to benefit their lives.

The special situation of functionally illiterate adults puts them in exceptional need of this kind of attention. They will not be able to search through pages of passages in order to understand where doctrines come from. They will not be able to pour through the Bible on their own, referencing parts of Scripture to review what they've learned. The reality of these

¹¹⁹ Zelman, Daniels, and Bizar, 277.

¹²⁰ 1 Timothy 6:3-4

challenges means they can be more susceptible to false teachings they hear, or they may not have as many opportunities to have their faith strengthened with God's Word. They need to be taught in a way which will equip them with the necessary tools to grow in their faith and wrestle with the Word on their own. Perhaps one of these tools is phonics method repetitive memorization. A constructivist philosophy does not contradict this method when it is one part of a whole educational approach. The point of the whole language approach is not to do away with all memorization, but to allow the student to work with the information in a way which encourages comprehension and application. The best tools to do this will be discovered when a pastor makes the effort to get to know what applications are most meaningful and what the student is capable of doing. This will take time and care, because often adults who are illiterate perceive education to be intimidating. These perceptions may grow out of either past negative experiences in a formal classroom setting or simply a lack of any experience.¹²¹ The purpose of Christian education, however, is not to force someone to fit into a prescribed formal educational atmosphere. A Christian lives a life of learning and seeking to grow in the truth of our Lord's Word. When the Psalmist wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path,"¹²² he didn't mean this only happens inside of a sixteen-week Bible instruction course. He meant it as a way of living. Hopefully a pastor's careful instruction can encourage functionally illiterate adults to see this lifelong learning concept so they too can enjoy a life of enrichment in the gospel message.

Helpful Methods for Functionally Illiterate Adult Instruction

Several kinds of techniques will be necessary to provide the kind of learning environment discussed above. In order to begin the process of thinking through what a variety of educational tools could look like I have researched three different techniques. The first two will show ways of presenting new information to functionally illiterate adults: storytelling and using pictures. These are not new techniques, but there are many helpful tips to keep in mind when using these techniques to specifically teach someone who is illiterate. Then, different kinds of mnemonic devices can aid a student in reviewing learned passages or doctrines when they are not able to read them over alone. These are definitely the most basic of techniques, but reading about them

¹²¹ "'Pre-literate' English-Learners Torn Between School, Work," 4.

¹²² Psalm 119:105

from this unique perspective should provide a manageable starting point for future curricula for illiterate adults.

Storytelling

If a teacher decides to use a story to teach new information, then the purpose of it must be to make the information memorable. There are certain tricks one can use to accomplish this. Walter Ong has done much research concerning societies that have never become literate, but have maintained a strong oral tradition. In America, almost all people in some way or another are influenced by literacy, so picking an individual who is illiterate and applying Ong's same points is not quite the same. An illiterate adult in a literate society grows up being used to the categorizing nature of written culture as opposed to non-categorical oral culture.¹²³ However, there are certain psychological similarities between an oral society and an illiterate adult. Therefore it is beneficial to listen to the methods Ong has discovered inside of these oral cultures and to apply them to teaching an illiterate adult in America.

It is first important to realize the memorization potential of a student who is not dependent on the written word. The student's brain has naturally developed unique techniques to survive in a world which predominantly categorizes information based on literary structure. Ong says that "oral cultures cannot generate such categories, and so they use stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate much of what they know."¹²⁴ Functional illiterates, though, have developed a certain kind of formulized structure from the amount of numbers and content they deal with at work or elsewhere in a mostly literate society.¹²⁵ Therefore there is a little more foundation for an instructor to work with when dealing with someone who is from a completely oral society. This foundation can be built on by presenting new information with a story and doing it with a formula that specifically caters to that illiterate's way of categorizing. A formula that historically has worked very well for oral learners is an "episodic structure."¹²⁶ Dividing up stories into clear episodes provides a framework for remembering what has been talked about in the past. An illiterate student may not be able to reference chapters in a book, but review in the

¹²³ UNESCO. "Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Literacy for Life." 2006. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/reports/2006-literacy/> (accessed February 2013), 149.

¹²⁴ Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. (New York: Routledge, 1982), 137.

¹²⁵ UNESCO, 149.

¹²⁶ Ong, 141.

form of discussing different episodes can work very well. An instructor can do this with a high level of confidence for long-term retention if it is done in a formulaic way. There will probably not be a verbatim memorization of the story by the student, but themes and key concepts are definitely attainable.¹²⁷

An episodic formula can be attained by telling the stories in ways that have characters and themes which distinguish them from one episode to the next. “Oral memory works effectively with ‘heavy’ characters, persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public.”¹²⁸ Ong notes that memorability concerning key figures is assured when adjectives are used that describe a certain type of figure. He lists a few examples: “wise Nestor, furious Achilles, clever Odysseus.”¹²⁹ These weighted adjectives help the listener organize the characters and the experiences of the characters because “colorless personalities cannot survive.”¹³⁰ These are important tips for any storyteller, because a listener is able to pay attention more readily when he is able to follow and understand the main points of a story. Repetition of specific, colorful adjectives draws the listener into the story and gives the brain something to firmly grasp. In this way a listener has his emotions evoked, and he becomes more invested in what he is hearing. A pastor is especially equipped in this way, because the Bible uses a great number of adjectives and descriptions of the people in biblical times. Most importantly, a pastor should consider the various names of God and how those can serve as teaching tools to describe his different activities.

Using weighty adjectives does not have to be applied only to specific characters, but it can also be applied to themes and formulas. Ong found that people inside of oral cultures who were tasked with passing down long narratives and stories generally did not concentrate on details, but rather on “themes and formulas.”¹³¹ Handed-down concepts are important to these people, and so an almost protective aura surrounds the way these stories are treated by the people who tell and hear them.¹³² The same precious attitude can be cultivated with an illiterate adult in America, because the gospel truths a pastor teaches contain the power of the Holy Spirit. A

¹²⁷ *ibid*, 141.

¹²⁸ *ibid*, 69.

¹²⁹ *ibid*, 69.

¹³⁰ *ibid*, 69. Specific number groupings are thought to provide a similar outcome.

¹³¹ *ibid*, 142.

¹³² *ibid*, 41.

pastor can especially speak of the truths of Christ's work with the pictures that the Bible provides such as court room scenes, washing, rebirth, new garments, etc. Each of these pictures contains its own little story, and these stories are what an illiterate mind grasps. A pastor can be confident that not only will teachings be more effective when told using weighty adjectives and vivid pictures because of psychological reasons, but also because the Holy Spirit will be working through them.

Storytelling can also help a student apply the new information. This is definitely an important point to consider, since this thesis already discussed the importance of an adult being able to work through what was taught. Stories in the form of specific case studies could be an effective way to engage an illiterate student and also encourage him to apply truths of the Bible. It would be better for the pastor to use a real event for the case study rather than to create one. This would be best because the more real it is for the pastor telling the story, the more real it becomes to the listener. The listener will see how invested the pastor is in solving the problem, and this will help motivate him to want to help solve the problem too.

Storytelling is a powerful way to engage illiterate adults when the teacher uses the added techniques of episodic presentation, weighty characters and themes, and verbal imagery. These techniques help engage the listener in easier memorization and opportunities in self-application. Thankfully, Bible instructors have many opportunities to implement these techniques, because the Holy Spirit saw fit to fill Scripture with a vast array of great narratives.¹³³

The Use of Pictures

An illiterate adult does not need to be limited to only auditory learning. Closely linked to using storytelling would also be the teacher's use of pictures. Previously in the thesis, the benefit of a rich learning environment was discussed under whole language teaching, and the presence of many different kinds of pictures would contribute greatly to this environment. Pictures, however, can do much more than simply being pleasant to look at while a person learns. A great amount of perception and critical thinking skills can be evoked when a picture is used correctly in teaching.

¹³³ An additional resource for ideas on how to present Biblical teachings with stories is the senior thesis "The Biblical Use of Narrative and the Benefits of its Inclusion as the Primary Method of Instruction for Adult Converts to the Christian Faith," written by Brian Roloff. This thesis may be found at <http://www.wls.wels.net/files/Roloff.pdf> (accessed March 2013).

Sometimes the use of pictures is labeled as being meant strictly for little kids, but the truth is “that many of today’s finest picture books have mature themes or intricate illustrations that are beyond the grasp of primary-age readers.”¹³⁴ There are many fine quality pictures which are meant for someone who is perceptive and critical. This is an important point to make with an illiterate adult, because he might at times feel inadequate for not being able to read. A teacher can help a student not feel this way if the picture is used in order to analyze details for extended meaning.¹³⁵ In other words, a teacher should work through the picture with the student rather than simply pointing to the picture and telling the story to the student.

There are a few steps to take to ensure this analysis may take place. First, it is important to understand that the picture will be used much in the same way a body of text would be used. One way to do this would be to incorporate the reader-response theory (RRT). “This theory has four basic stages: engaging the reader, entering the story, exploring the story, and evaluating the story.”¹³⁶ A teacher who is applying pictures can use this theory when he thinks of “reading” a picture. A picture includes the same elements a student would find in any reading selection such as details to find, a story to unfold, and further consequences to predict. Engage the student by having him list objects in the picture. Enter the story by examining the dominant visuals. Explore the story by describing the action and use of objects or symbols. Evaluate the story by finally interpreting the full story and creating possible future pictures.¹³⁷ This does not have to be the entirety of the lesson, but this can be a great way to involve an illiterate student and encourage him to use his critical thinking skills.

Also, as discussed in the constructivist philosophy, a teacher will keep in mind the students’ background knowledge. Choose a picture with elements pertaining to the experiences of the student or one that contains elements the student will be able to identify. “If a picture needs background information or experiences, then [the teacher] should ensure that these experiences are provided before attempting to utilize the picture.”¹³⁸ A teacher will always keep in mind the necessity of connecting the student’s previous knowledge to the new knowledge

¹³⁴ Jerry Flack. “Sophisticated Picture Books for the Middle Grades.” *Teaching Pre K-8* 24, no. 8 (May 1994), 1.

¹³⁵ Joseph M. Piro. “The Picture of Reading: Deriving Meaning in Literacy through Image.” *Reading Teacher* 56, no. 2 (October 2002), 2.

¹³⁶ *ibid*, 3.

¹³⁷ *ibid*, 8-9.

¹³⁸ R. Lloyd Ryan. *Using Pictures in Teaching Art and Other Stuff*. 1993.
<http://www.mun.ca/educ/faculty/mwatch/vol2/ryan2.html> (accessed February 2013), 4.

being presented. Therefore, the picture needs to be “appropriately complex” and leave “room for some judgment, some critical thinking, some learning, some hypothesizing and testing hypotheses, some detail finding, some identification processes, and so on.”¹³⁹ This allows the student to bridge the gap on his own and start making sense of the picture instead of having all the new information lectured to him. Clearly, using pictures to teach an illiterate adult will take time, planning, and a fair amount of searching. However, this is a great way to allow the student to participate in “reading” a story and to be an active part of the lesson.

Mnemonic Devices

The previous two techniques are great ways for presenting and even working with new information, but personal recollection of material is another subject. A pastor will not be with his student all the time or be available for answering questions at every moment, so the illiterate student needs strategies to be able to review information on his own. Mnemonic devices are one possible solution to that problem. Francis Bellezza did a study on classification and uses of mnemonic devices, and he defined them as devices “considered to be a strategy for organizing and/or encoding information with the sole purpose of making it more memorable.”¹⁴⁰ These strategies are built upon “cognitive cuing structures” which are typically made up of either visual images or of words in sentences or rhymes.¹⁴¹ The images or words used are often not related to the information they cue at all, and yet these are the things used by the student to recall information through a self-reviewing process. This is done by associating information to be remembered with one or more mnemonic device.

There are generally two major categories of mnemonic devices: organization mnemonics and encoding mnemonics. “An organizing operation is one that associates or relates in memory units of information that at first appear unrelated. An encoding operation transforms a unit of information into some other form so that it can be fit into some organizational scheme.”¹⁴² Organizational mnemonics are the more commonly used form of mnemonics and usually are done with either a keyword procedure or as a peg-type mnemonic. A keyword technique consists

¹³⁹ *ibid*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Francis S. Bellezza. "Mnemonic Devices: Classification, Characteristics, and Criteria." *Review of Educational Research* 51, no. 2 (1981), 252. For the purposes of this thesis I give a rather cursory explanation of how mnemonics work and the different types. This article is very thorough on the subject for anyone interested in further studying mnemonics.

¹⁴¹ *ibid*, 252.

¹⁴² *ibid*, 253.

of taking the desired piece of information and focusing in on a key aspect of it, and then this key aspect becomes what a student remembers. This technique could be used in such instances as “the association of names of historical figures with their achievements, the association of the names of capital cities to the appropriate states, [and] the association of cities with their products.”¹⁴³ Keyword mnemonics can be very helpful when a student needs to remember a single piece of information. Peg-type mnemonics are great for chaining several words or concepts together into one mnemonic structure. This happens by picturing mental images of concrete objects and then attaching those images to what is supposed to be remembered. These images become the “peg” which the mind uses to recall the desired piece of information. “An added feature of most peg-word systems is that there is a method for remembering both the peg words and their order. In the rhyming peg-word each peg word rhymes with the number indicating its position in the list: ‘one is a bun, two is a shoe, three is a tree,’ and so on.”¹⁴⁴ The peg-type method has great strengths in helping create memory hooks for lists and strings of words. This could be beneficial for remembering lists of names, dates or maybe even chapters in the Bible with key doctrinal teachings.

Encoding mnemonics is also a useful device and seems to happen very naturally. This type of mnemonics focuses less on a pattern of sounds or a chain of thoughts, but instead it focuses on linking one thought with one mental image. “Given a word representing a well-known person, place, or thing, most people when instructed to do so have little difficulty forming a ‘visual image’ of what the word represents.”¹⁴⁵ Encoding can lend itself very well with developing memory aids for abstract words. A student could hear an abstract word and transform it into a visual image or another word that is higher in imagery value. Another possibility, in the case of many biblical words, is to emphasize the picture which accompanies the meaning of a word. Then, a student encodes that mental picture into the meaning of the word whenever he hears it. The mental association between word and picture becomes the mnemonic device.

Mnemonic devices seem to have a wide array of possible uses. They could be used for something as simple as remembering the books of the Bible in order to distinguish canon from apocrypha. Mnemonic devices could also be used in connection with the weighty adjectives

¹⁴³ *ibid*, 252.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*, 255.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*, 258.

discussed under storytelling or with the images of biblical abstract concepts (e.g. justification, sanctification). A pastor and a student could even work together to design unique mnemonic devices which help bring to mind specific proof passages. The visual nature of many biblical teachings connects well with illiterate adults' need and strong ability to focus on visual aids. Mnemonic devices take advantage of the visuals already being taught and use them to create memory hooks for the student.

Conclusion

The Lord deemed the spread of his Word to be so important that he commanded all of his believers to carry out the mission. Not only are believers to share the Word but also to teach and instruct people in the Word. This mission is meant to benefit all people no matter their nationality, past experiences or education. The temptation for a pastor or for an instructor is to overlook parts of society which seem more challenging, because they are different than him. It can be intimidating to try and discover the ways different demographics learn best.

Unfortunately, functionally illiterate adults are often part of this overlooked group of society. It is usually easier to lump them into the general crowd of students in the congregation or classroom instead of taking the time to give them the individual attention they need. They cannot be taught in the same way literate adults are taught, because they do not possess the level of reading and writing skills which pastors and teachers usually assume of an adult. At the same time, this lack of skills does not have to equate to a lack of intelligence. An instructor can greatly assist the educational life of an illiterate adult simply by acknowledging that he or she is an individual with a unique set of skills and experiences. Therefore, an illiterate adult should neither be lumped into a crowd of literate students nor into a crowd of illiterate students.

A focus on individual attention will help keep a pastor or teacher from approaching an illiterate adult's education with a content-based goal. Generally speaking, adults do not learn well when information is presented to them in a way that does not connect to their everyday lives or involve them in the learning process. Instead, adults enjoy working through challenges, problem-solving and finding immediate application. Illiterate adults are no different. Therefore, the ideal adult education classroom will be student-centered and not teacher-centered in order to

provide them with this kind of learning environment. The whole language method and constructivist philosophy encourage this approach to education for illiterates.

Teachers who use this approach will benefit their students for a lifetime, because it provides more opportunities to give illiterate adults what they need. Students need to have their skills and life experiences acknowledged and then to have new information tied to those experiences. A student will develop longer-lasting retention and greater meaning when new information is tied to things he already knows and when he receives the opportunity to make self-applications. Greater retention and meaning will encourage the illiterate adult to keep pursuing a life of education in God's Word. This lifelong education philosophy is especially necessary for Christians in today's world of constant information bombardment. A biblical teacher will want to equip his student in any way possible so that he may live a life of faith being strengthened in the Word.

In the end, a Christian instructor will always keep in mind two important principles no matter what instructional approach or methods are used. First, one needs to use love and patience in order to provide the level of individual instruction a functionally illiterate requires. Second, Christians can be confident God's power is always working through his Word, and because of that he has given his people exactly what is needed to carry out his mission. These principles will help Christian instructors to enjoy the journey of discovering the needs and gifts of all the different people in this world.

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