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Transforming Classrooms with the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm®

Nan Frydland, Neighbors Link, Mt. Kisco

Abstract

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®); is a model of instruction that addresses the needs of learners who come from collectivist cultures (especially LESLLA learners and those with limited or interrupted formal education) and encounter obstacles with Western-style formal education based on their different cultural expectations, values, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001; Lurhmann, 2014; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). This paper reports on the implementation of MALP® at a community-based organization in a New York City suburb. During the course of this project, cultural dissonance was reduced, learners developed literacy skills, created a learning community, engaged in academic tasks, and became more actively involved in taking responsibility for their own learning. Additional examples of MALP® practices in other settings illustrate how this model can be incorporated within curricula to transform classrooms and produce successful outcomes for learners.

Keywords: LESLLA learners; SLIFE; MALP®; refugees; curriculum framework; project-based learning; classroom practices; critical thinking

Introduction

An issue that has long plagued programs in the adult education sector is the lack of preparation by both instructors and administrators for incorporating LESLLA learners and Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) into their ESL programs. Experienced, educated teachers often work in programs run by administrators with little understanding of the pedagogy underlying teaching adult immigrants, and even less concerning the teaching of low-literate adults who are unfamiliar with Western-style education. In 2003, I was one of those ill-prepared teachers hired without formal education in the field. Like many adult learners, I relied on independent study and online searches for the knowledge and materials to prepare me for a career change. With four weeks to prepare for my first teaching job as an adjunct instructor in an Intensive English Program, I chose Marianne Celce-Murcia's *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (2001) and *Fifty Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners* (Herrell, 2000) from my online search. Celce-Murcia's book led me to study the work of John Fanselow (the power of observation), Paulo Freire (liberation pedagogy), David Nunan (learner-centered curriculum), and Bonny Norton (identity politics), toss out irrelevant textbooks, co-create curricula with students, incorporate projects and portfolios into my teaching, and encourage critical thinking and social activism in my classrooms. Herrell's book helped me draft lesson plans and infuse them with activities and objectives based on theory and research I had yet to understand.

But, after moving to a New York City suburb, I discovered that three years of teaching experience and two college degrees in English were deemed inadequate to teach in a college ESL program. A master's degree in TESOL was a new requirement for these positions. While I was considering a return to school for this purpose, a neighbor recommended volunteering at a local community center serving a population of Central American day-laborers. Unfamiliar with ESL instruction in this environment, I obtained permission from the director to observe classes with the intention of becoming a volunteer teacher.

Many of the ESL instructors I observed at the community-based organization, Neighbors Link were freshly-minted and sent from the local community college with the directive "English only" in the classroom. They used traditional teacher-centered techniques such as standing in front of the room and pointing to pictures in a textbook, engaging few learners. Most of the men in the classroom sat on the periphery, wearing earbuds connected to cellphones. The teacher handed out worksheets that students, bent over and silent, struggled to finish. There were no notebooks, no textbooks other than the one the teacher displayed. It struck me that most of these teachers probably lacked the instruction they needed to understand how to engage these learners. When I completed my observations, I imagined delivering a course focused on speaking skills relevant to learners' lives, such as getting a job and following instructions. I imagined real tools in the classroom that

would form the basis for students engaging with each other as well as the teacher. Finally, I realized it would be useful to revive my high school Spanish for use in the classroom. I called the course *English for Work,* and after approval from the Center's director, I started teaching a three-hour Saturday morning class in September.

On the first day of *English for Work*, several clients from the Center helped me unpack renovation and landscaping tools from my car. I opened toolboxes, distributed drills, paintbrushes, saws, and the like, on plastic tables in the classroom, and motioned to the men to pick up the tools. Slowly, the men stood up and came to the tables with somewhat bewildered expressions. I told them, first in my beginner Spanish, and then in English, that if they didn't get a job that morning, I would be their teacher, and I asked them what they wanted to talk about. The men picked up the tools and spoke to each other, and then to me. Although I was unaware of it at the time, I was already implementing some of the principles of an innovative approach to reaching LESLLA learners, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, or MALP®.

MALP® Foundation: the Intercultural Communication Framework

MALP® finds its basis in the underlying cultural differences in ways of learning between LESLLA learners and other ESL students. Most of these learners come from collectivistic cultures and have little or no experience with formal education. They are sometimes referred to in the literature as SLIFE when discussing programs for adolescent learners with this background. Learners from collectivist cultures, such as LESLLA learners and SLIFE[1], often experience cultural dissonance as they encounter unfamiliar Western-style ways of learning like those presented in formal education settings in the United States (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). According to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) traditions promoted by Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1994), teachers must examine their own cultural assumptions and beliefs and see how they influence their educational practices (Fanselow, 1992), and also understand students' cultural assumptions and beliefs, in order to bridge the gap between them (Nieto, 2010). Without this cultural competence, teachers will be unable to understand the nature of the dissonance and reach struggling students.

Grounded in CRT, the Intercultural Communication Framework (ICF), created by Helaine W. Marshall out of her own teaching experiences (1994), provides a way of examining cultures, identifying and accommodating differences in order to transition learners to a new culture. The ICF is based on three overarching principles: "(1) Establish and maintain an ongoing two-way relationship; (2) identify and accommodate priorities in both cultures; and (3) make associations between the familiar and the unfamiliar" (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013, p. 14). How is this accomplished? The first principle requires appreciating that students from oral or collectivist cultures have much closer relationships with teachers than those in the industrial West and the need for these relationships intensifies when learners suffer culture shock in classrooms. Infusing interpersonal information in lesson plans creates the two-way communication that learners are accustomed to.

In the first meeting of a class, for instance, teachers can show photos of their families on their phones and ask students to share theirs. The act of modeling a task becomes an opportunity for teachers to volunteer information about themselves. When language is a barrier between teacher and learner, securing a "cultural broker," an individual who can be an informant and bridge between cultures may be necessary (Jezewki & Sotnick, 2001). In this way, Moll's "funds of knowledge" can be transmitted (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) so that learners' expertise and knowledge can be shared and valued.

Cultural brokers can also aid in transmitting information about learners' priorities, the second principle in the ICF, but teachers are responsible for their own cultural competence (Nieto, 2010). Students from collectivist or oral cultures prefer their own familiar ways of learning and communicating, which is through oral transmission rather than literacy, and to work together, rather than independently. Instructors' willingness to accommodate these learner preferences and priorities must be balanced with the goal to transition students to academic ways of learning. In this way instructors are moving toward a *mutually adaptive* approach to learning.

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[1] Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education and LESLLA students encounter similar obstacles in educational settings, but the terms are not interchangeable. Unlike LESLLA learners, SLIFE may have developed literacy or oral skills, but struggle because they're new to the U.S. (Marshall & DeCapua, 2011, 2013).

The third principle of the ICF involves cultural scaffolding. This means that teachers need to make connections between what students are familiar with in their informal ways of learning and the world, and the ways of Western-style education and literacy. The most effective way to do this is by combining unfamiliar information with material and concepts familiar to students. For instance, using photographs of vegetables being harvested in students' home countries as well as photographs from harvests in the United States provides the basis for an exercise in compare and contrast. Students are encouraged to share their experiences and knowledge from their own cultures as well as their experience in their new country. The teacher can draw a chart using information from the students that shows what months vegetables are harvested in students' countries and in the U.S. This forms an introduction to academic ways of thinking and organizing data and it can be used as the part of a lesson unit that could involve critical thinking about farmers' rights, Community Supported Agriculture, or world hunger.

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®)

The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®) is an approach to learning and teaching that addresses the needs of struggling language learners by understanding and responding to students' cultural backgrounds. The differences between the learning paradigms of Western-style education and that of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) from collectivist cultures create cognitive dissonance for millions of immigrants in ESL classrooms (Auerbach 1996; Bigelow, 2010; Hofstede 2001; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). In collectivist cultures, learning is typically orally based, immediately relevant, conducted in informal contexts, shared among participants, and concerned with pragmatic tasks (Triandis, 1995; Watson, 2010). By contrast, in individualist countries such as the U.S., learners are expected to be ready to engage in academic thinking and decontextualized tasks; they are being trained for future rewards (such as careers); and they will compete with each other in a print-based, formal classroom (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Triandis, 1995). MALP® bridges the gap between low-literate collectivist learners and traditional instruction in U.S. classrooms, by (1) accepting students' conditions for learning in order to overcome cultural dissonance; (2) combining individualist and collectivist processes for learning, (i.e., individual accountability and oral transmission, respectively), and (3) focusing on new activities for learning using familiar language and content, to transition to academic tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). The Teacher Planning Checklist (see Appendix) is a useful tool for mapping out lesson plans to ensure they meet the model's criteria and it can also be used at the conclusion of lessons for teachers to see how well their intentions were implemented.

As a graduate student I decided to be trained by Helaine Marshall as a MALP® instructor because I believed that through the MALP® framework I would be able to incorporate and practice ideas about learning and teaching that were important to me, notably John Dewey, Bonny Norton, Sonia Nieto, Jill Watson, Frank Smith, and L.S. Vygotsky. Shortly after I earned my master's degree, I was invited by administrators of the community center where I had volunteered to return and replace their morning ESL program with instruction based on my *English for Work* model.

Implementation site

The setting for implementation was a local community-based organization (CBO) located thirty-five miles northeast of New York City, called Neighbors Link of Northern Westchester (the Center). Neighbors Link currently has a staff of 14 and 300 volunteers providing ESL instruction and support services to 2,400 immigrants primarily from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru. The CBO serves as a work center connecting hundreds of day-laborers with homeowners who offer jobs in landscaping, gardening, construction, plumbing, painting, housecleaning, demolition, and yard cleanup. It offers employment training and parenting services. Volunteers and teachers from the local community college supply ESL instruction and tutoring mornings, evenings, and weekends. Babysitting services are sometimes provided for ESL students. A recreation room with pool tables and a small café where non-alcoholic drinks and snacks are sold for profit provides income to the Center. ESL instruction is conducted in a large room also used for meetings, celebrations, and community gatherings. The Center is open from 7 a.m. to midnight, offering ESL activities

from three to five hours a day. Neighbors Link recently celebrated its fifteenth anniversary and continues to use the strategies "Educate, Empower, and Employ" to successfully integrate new and long-term immigrant families into the community.

Figure 1: *Neighbors Link learners collaborating in classroom with real tools, picture dictionaries, books about tools, and looseleaf binders for class handouts and notes.*

Classroom

The community center is located at the edge of town in an industrial area. Upon entering the community center, one is immediately in a large space that encompasses a job site and an ESL classroom. It is necessary to walk through the classroom in order to access all other rooms in the Center, including the recreation room and café, the administrative offices, and the family learning room. The learners are familiar with the Center and with each other. When classes are not in session, the room is used for board games and watching television. Three-hour morning classes were held three times a week for twelve weeks. The class is open entry/open exit. Ten to eighteen students signed in to each session, although there was always a dozen or so men who sat on the periphery of the class, sometimes watching, sometimes plugged into their cellphones. Nearly all of the participants were day laborers (landscapers, painters, construction workers, carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers and demolition workers) from Guatemala, Honduras, Columbia, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, and El Salvador. They ranged in age from 35-70 and the typical length of time of U.S. residency was six to seventeen years. Most learners had three to eight years of formal education in their home countries, but little instruction in the U.S. Only three had attended classes regularly at the Center, and their literacy levels were the best in the class.

MALP® Classroom Preparation

Many of us teach in spaces that depart from conventional classrooms, as noted above. Warehouse spaces, supply closets, and even office conference rooms, may be all that some programs can supply. It is most important for teachers of LESLLA learners and SLIFE students to establish physical spaces conducive to a positive learning environment. While establishing separate spaces or "learner centers" where materials and

reading chairs can define and enhance learning experiences may not be possible, there are other ways to "create fertile spaces" for learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015), conducive to the MALP® approach. Students should be seated to maximize their ability to work together, rather than facing a board at the front of the class. Ideally, there is no "front" of the class, but rather tables where students work and the teacher circulates. Until the students create their own posters to display on the walls, flags from their home countries could be displayed, or posters with positive sayings or pictures. Picture dictionaries, supplies such as pencils, paper, erasers, and pencil sharpeners, should be accessible to students in order to facilitate independence and less reliance on the teacher.

Recognizing and respecting students' first languages and encouraging learners to use their native languages is another element that furthers the relationships students create with each other and contributes to the overall interconnectedness in the classroom.

MALP® and the Scroll-based Curriculum

The MALP® approach, as discussed above, is an approach that addresses struggling LESLLA learners' cognitive dissonance, values students' funds of knowledge, experiences, ways of learning and ways of being in the world and incorporates those parts of students' lives into the learning process. At the same time, teachers transition students to Western-style education, including ways of thinking and learning, in order for them to be successful learners beyond the ESL classroom.

Because it is an overall approach to teaching and learning, MALP® can find its way into many different classroom settings and can be implemented using a wide range of techniques. The one I have developed over a two-year period is the scroll-based curriculum. Rather than use a commercial textbook that assumes a level of literacy skills beyond those of many students, the scroll-based curriculum is custom-designed for every classroom, it is economical, and it is functional. Using scrolls, teachers are immediately introducing academic graphic organizers and ways of thinking, beginning the process of developing decontextualized tasks for students, and co-constructing a curriculum, processes and goals often absent from conventional textbooks. Starting with rolls of butcher paper, painter's tape and markers, MALP® instruction is consistent with the model's principles as well as a practical measure. Much of the language that will be written on these "scrolls" will be dictated from students (as teachers accept their preferred learning method as oral transmission) and will become the texts that form the basis for learning activities. Typed up and distributed to students, the texts form the basis of lesson plans. The students "own" the language in these texts; they learn how to file the papers in looseleaf binders; and they take them home to study and share. Teachers can use the texts, input on computer, to create a variety of learning materials, such as worksheets, booklets, reports, and portfolios.

A teacher might begin the first class by drawing a chart on butcher paper taped to a white board or wall with headings such as: Name, Home Country, Languages, Work at Home, Work in U.S., Family, Dream, creating a row for each student. The teacher models the task by filling in her own data, and by doing so shares material that is immediately relevant and that also begins to develop interconnectedness. Teacher and learners ask each other questions about the information that goes up on the scroll. This first scroll can be used to teach academic language like title, headings, column, and row, to teach compare and contrast, or to begin instruction in analyzing data. Below is an example, not from the first day, but later on in the course, when learners were able to describe job tasks. It is rich with literacy task possibilities and speaking and listening activities. Eventually, it can be used to form sentence frames.

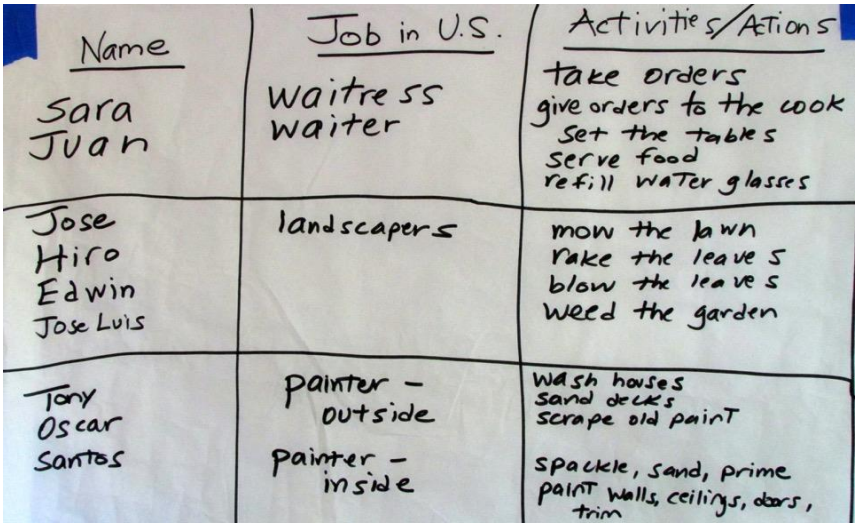

Figure 2: *Workers scroll.*

Pocket Guide for Work

Jobs/Occupations	Activities/Actions	Tools and Things	Materials and Stuff
landscaper	mow the lawn rake the leaves blow the leaves weed the garden	lawn mower rake leaf blower trowel shovel buckets bag wheelbarrow	gas rags oil mulch fertilizer water
painter outside/ exterior painter inside/interior	wash houses sand decks scrape old paint paint walls, ceilings, trim, doors sand and spackle	power washer scraper brushes rollers buckets gloves	paint spackle varnish primer paint thinner protective glasses

Figure 3: *Typed version of student scroll used by learners to study outside of the classroom.*

For the first two months of classes, learners were eager to learn the names of tools and the jobs they were used for. They drew pictures on one side of a large piece of construction paper and wrote the word on the other side. We played Bingo games with the cards. Students practiced matching the name on the card to the real tool on the table. The next step was to make sentences using the newly learned vocabulary. Students dictated instructions they heard from employers: "Prime those walls." "Bring the paint here." Finally, students began to dictate questions and answers necessary for job negotiations: "Can you paint for ten dollars an hour?" "No, I can't. I'm experienced. I work for fourteen dollars an hour." With the questions and answers written on construction paper, the students organized in logical sequence the sentence strips that contained the language they would hear and use in their lives as day laborers. Teams played against each other to see who would be first to organize their questions and answers correctly.

Other materials, especially realia, are appropriate in conjunction with scrolls. Local maps, news articles, shopping brochures, train and bus schedules, for instance, can be incorporated into meaningful literacy tasks that are immediately relevant to students' lives.

Implementation: Coming to the U.S.A

Implementing MALP means designing projects, often as they emerge from students' interests and experiences. Normally adult education centers on freestanding lessons. MALP goes a different route. Here there is a description of each of the elements of MALP and how this project exemplifies the approach.

(1) Help learners overcome cultural dissonance by establishing interconnectedness and creating immediate relevance (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

Every class begins with a scroll and some form of chart or question. For this project, I drew a map of the United States and Central America. I asked learners to name the Central American countries and wrote them on the board. Then I shared some information about my own family's immigration to the United States. On a second scroll, I drew a map of the United States and Europe and named the countries my family came from and I drew lines to the states they landed in. I wrote the following questions on the board: What's your name? Where are you from? How old are you? What year did you come? How did you come? One fairly literate student asked me in Spanish: "By land, by sea, or by air?" I wrote that on the board. Then he began to talk about Columbus coming to the U.S. and to South America and killing indigenous people. Others joined the conversation in English and Spanish. Another student said that his own Guatemalan government waged war against indigenous people in the mountains. The students got very excited, comparing the similarities of the genocide that was committed by the Spanish in their own countries and in the U.S. This is exactly what a teacher dreams of: students spontaneously sharing their funds of knowledge and their own experiences.

(2) Utilize shared responsibility and oral transmission as students' familiar learning processes (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

As students turned to the questions on the board and gave me answers, I wrote them on the board. As they began to tell me how they came, I drew symbols for plane, bus, and walking. When all the students had participated and the map was full of their data, I explained that this was the beginning of a project about journeys to the U.S. and everyone had a choice about their level of participation. I asked them to think about whether they would like to draw a picture or tell a story about their immigration to the United States.

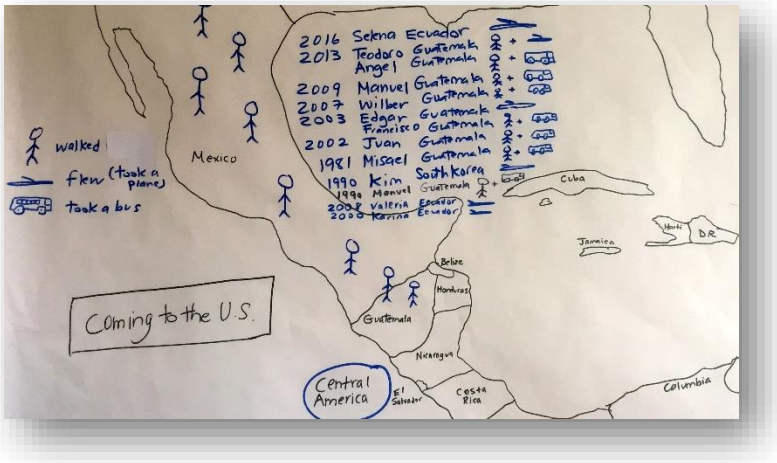

Figure 4: Coming to the U.S. scroll-map with data from students dictated to teacher depicting when and how learners made their way from their home countries to the U.S.

(3) Engage learners at all levels of literacy with projects that will form the foundation for acquiring academic tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

In the next class, I presented typed sentence frames culled from the information on the scroll-map. We used it for choral practice, individual and pair readings. Again I asked students to think about whether they wanted to share their stories. I handed out charts with headings and blank spaces where learners practiced writing in the data from the text we had read. They paired up and asked each other the same questions I'd asked and wrote answers. Then I asked them to fill in a blank chart on the scroll in front of class. Below are one group's answers.

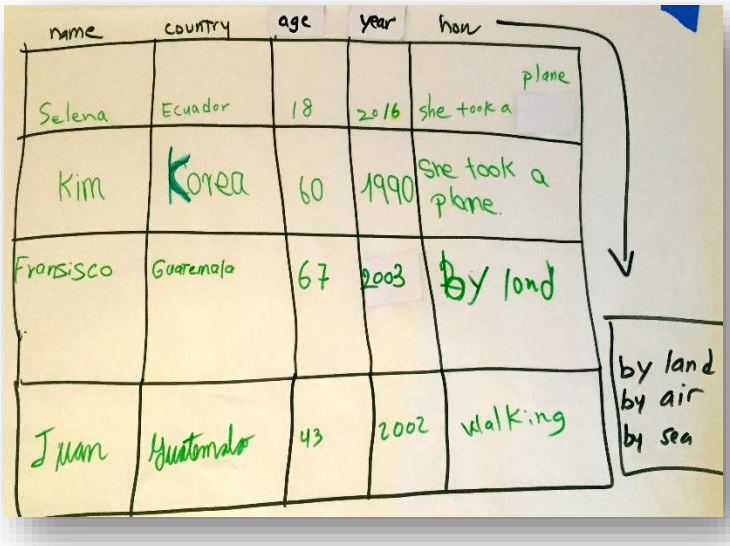

Figure 5: The results of a student survey that students created using the Coming to the U.S. scroll-map as well as a written questionnaire that students administered in class.

The next phase involved scaffolding a paragraph for students to share something about leaving their home countries. I wrote on the board some sentence frames and provided print copies for students to fill in and read to each other.

Why did you leave? I left _____ because _____.

I expected _____.

Life in the United States is _____.

Finally, for students who were able and willing, I asked them to write a paragraph about coming to the United States. Only four out of twelve students had the literacy skills at this time to perform this task. One student explained that his experience was so difficult he did not want to remember it. In the future, I hope that more learners will be able and willing to share their narratives. Eventually, the culminating project would be to make a booklet of drawings, narratives, and handouts, and to publish the booklet so that it could be used as a text for current and future students at the Center.

Coming to the U.S.A. is a MALP® project that could be adapted for use in many classroom environments. During the course of this project, LESLLA learners and SLIFE students developed a meaningful context for literacy (Auerbach, 1996; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003); co-created their own curriculum working with their teacher; developed a sense of learning community; reduced cultural dissonance; and acquired literacy, oral, and academic skills useful in their lives and in transitioning to other educational contexts. This project could be used as is or adapted for use in many learning environments and the materials used in it could easily be made available to other instructors. I invite other like-minded MALP® practitioners to consider a collaboration.

Conclusion

The MALP® approach to teaching LESLLA learners and SLIFE is innovative and effective. It is based on the principle that learners' values, expectations and priorities are different than those in Western-style education, and as a result, students experience a cultural dissonance that interferes with learning, and it addresses this conflict by respecting learners' and teachers' educational paradigms. It replaces timeworn and unsuccessful methods of teaching that fail to recognize the value of adult low-literate learners' experiences, knowledge, expectations, and priorities. Instead, it requires first that teachers understand the differences between the educational paradigms of students' home countries and the model presented in Western-style education. Then, it outlines a process of mutual adaptation, which begins with teachers creating an interconnectedness in the classroom that is different from what they are accustomed to and making learning immediately relevant to students. MALP® engages struggling students by allowing collaboration and oral interaction as well as incorporating individual responsibility in the classroom. And finally, MALP® focuses on decontextualized tasks that require academic ways of thinking in order to transition students to successful learning beyond the ESL classroom.

Because MALP® is an approach to learning and teaching that is highly adaptable in adult education environments, it has been used successfully in community center programs as well as college Intensive English Programs. It is compatible with project-based learning, the Language Experience Approach, Competency-Based-Education, and the communicative approach. Educators and administrators responsible for incorporating LESLLA learners and SLIFE into their ESL programs would be well-advised to consider this approach.

MALP® Websites:

http://malpeducation.com http://malp.pbworks.com

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Appendix

MALP® Teacher Planning Checklist
A. Accept Conditions for Learning
A1. I am making this lesson/project immediately relevant to my students.
A2. I am helping students develop and maintain interconnectedness.
B. Combine Processes for Learning
B1. I am incorporating both shared responsibility and individual accountability.
B2. I am scaffolding the written word through oral interaction.
C. Focus on New Activities for Learning
C1. I am focusing on tasks requiring academic ways of thinking.
C2. I am making these tasks accessible with familiar language and content.