



Lessons Learned From the Communicative Justice and Data Literacy Study Circle December 2022 - May 2023

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From December 2022 to May 2023, 12 adult education teachers, based in different regions of the U.S., came together on Zoom for our inaugural Communicative Justice and Data Literacy Study Circle. Most of them taught foundational skills classes, including English classes, that serve immigrant communities. At the completion of the Study Circle, we invited the teachers to meet one on one with the facilitator, María José Bastias, to debrief the experience. What follows is a synopsis of what we learned from these exit conversations. We have organized our synopsis around a core set of questions we used to explore the teachers' Study Circle experiences.

Through the Communicative Justice Initiative, we seek to re-frame data literacy as more than just a set of technical skills. We focus instead on learners' real-world motivations and purpose for interacting with data. How do you now think about contextualizing data literacy instruction in your learners' everyday lives?

For the teachers in this study circle, the need to contextualize data literacy instruction in learners' interactions with data in everyday life sparked conversations about *social justice* and learners' right to *speak data*. The teachers discussed the importance of asking: Who gets to tell the stories that gain the most power? Using the frame of justice, speaking data can be used in support of growing this communicative ability; to use and communicate data in ways that serve the common good. It was noted that building habits of mind for speaking data takes time and can be most impactful when the process is built into on-going instruction, or with a cohort of students over time. One teacher commented, "building this learning – of the language of data, of who, how, why it's collected, and used - requires intentional effort and ongoing attention."

Teachers also brought up the issue that some students come into classes with mixed emotions and negative experiences around learning new skills. Because of this, it's important to create curriculum and materials for learning which support engagement with new ways of thinking and learning. Teachers called attention to the importance of finding ways to assess the data literacy needs of students before the course begins. Teachers felt that their students are more likely to persist in learning when working with data and advocacy work if these data-driven tasks are connected to their own lives. Teachers identified various topics that could be used to contextualize the exploration of data literacy and communicative justice, including affordable housing, financial statistics, access to higher education, legal services, court representation, and voting rights.

Contextualizing learning around data literacy prompted teachers to look for useful conceptualizations of data literacy to use in adult classrooms. There may be frameworks and definitions used in other arenas, like K-12 education or data science, but teachers acknowledge that there didn't seem to be a clear definition championed in adult education. The need to be more explicit about what we mean by data literacy was clear. As one teacher observed, "if we're not on the same page, it's never going to happen [in our classrooms]".

Do you think your participation in the CJI Study Circle gave you new ideas for how to teach content/concepts related to data literacy?

One novel direction for teachers was seeing the great value of bringing data visualizations into the classroom, including the idea of inviting learners to visualize data for themselves. Teachers also enjoyed looking at the work of [Michelle Rial](#), an artist who uses everyday objects to create data visualizations. Teachers enjoyed exploring creative ways to visualize data that weren't tied to traditional bar charts and graphs in Excel.

One participant commented that the Study Circle discussions about data visualizations were 'aha' moments for them. Regarding the use of visuals to tell data stories, one teacher responded: "Like problem-posing codes, they can lend themselves to all sorts of stories, to reveal all sorts of information. Requires careful facilitation, requires the willingness to let data stories emerge – to both guide people in considering the data, digging deeper and yet refrain from inserting a particular or singular analysis." Another teacher commented that, "the use of visuals to tell data stories is critical. I'm a big believer in visuals, that's how half of our brain operates and gets information."

Teachers were able to see the power of data visualizations in fostering data storytelling in the classroom. Data storytelling activities support learner advocacy and leadership efforts, and shifts attention away from the teacher's own curiosities for looking at data. Teachers expressed interest in working on data literacy to reinforce their commitment to a student-centered approach in their classes. In this regard, teachers called attention to prioritizing learners' stories in the classroom and even including Communicative Justice Initiative (CJI) and data literacy in placement/diagnostic and exit assessments, particularly with classes that have open enrollment. Some of the questions that could be asked are: Where have you used data in your life that maybe you didn't use it before? Or where have you used it and you didn't understand you didn't really think about it?

There needs to be on-going opportunities to differentiate the data literacy curriculum based on learners' emerging needs and goals.

Based on your experience as an adult educator, in what kinds of contexts do you think the focus on Communicative Justice would have the most impact?

Some teachers said they envision integrating data literacy and Communicative Justice principles in many areas including: curriculum/program planning, professional development, and program evaluation. Teachers stressed that it was important to role model and demonstrate to teachers and administrators what working towards communicative justice looks like.

Teachers called attention to bringing data to other education-related conversations, such as program evaluation as well as professional development so that teachers are confident integrating data literacy and supporting communicative justice ideals. Teachers noted that a Communicative Justice focus could be integrated into a range of classes -- ESL, ABE, and GED classes, as well as for other communities, including seniors, people with disabilities, and people enrolled in correctional education programs.

The Study Circle provided teachers to reflect on the links between data and social justice outcomes: for example, decisions are often made without presenting data clearly or in an engaging way to these individuals about their health and their lives. A focus on Communicative Justice could provide a path to patient empowerment, so critical to helping individuals who are, as one teacher put it, "cut off from sharing and collecting information". The teachers noted, here again, that the curriculum would need to be tailored to the needs and abilities of specific populations. One teacher recognized that the skills involved in speaking data require building habits of mind, and this kind of work takes time. One teacher envisioned that the Communicative Justice framework helps her think about a set of routines that could be cultivated across a whole school, a way of infusing data use into the whole community.

How do you start the conversation about data literacy or communicative justice with your students? What are the on-ramps you like to use?

Teachers shared that it is important to know what issues are relevant to the learners' everyday lives. Helping learners explore data together, with a lot of scaffolding, is important first step. Some participants thought that it is best to start with a topic that will be interesting to the community (based on what is known about context), go through the process once together and once they have experienced the process together, they can repeat the process choosing their own topics of interest.

Teachers felt that topics related to health equity, most notably data related to COVID pandemic, provided good starting points. Teachers again expressed the need to prioritize learners' stories which enables them to tap into the diversity of their learners' experiences. One participant commented that they felt inspired to pay more attention to learners' stories and interests after being part of the Study Circle. And another teacher expressed that contextualized materials can engage learners' by representing who they are. Adult learners are pragmatic and what you teach should be applicable to their lives.

Teachers called attention to the need to think carefully about how to integrate data literacy so that it doesn't alienate or intimidate students. Some questioned how they could jumpstart the conversation about data in their classroom, without intimidating students. One teacher brought up food as one topic that all learners can relate to. Food is tangible and necessary, this provides a safe space as a way to introduce statistics. Students are often proud of food that relates to their own culture. A teacher described introducing data literacy skills by asking students to collect information from their utility bills and use that for comparison and analysis. They described this idea as a way of 'backing into the data'.

How can we measure the impact of this?

Teachers shared the idea of asking both pre- and post- questions of their students when doing lessons that involve communicative justice and data literacy. Some questions that might be asked of learners are: Where have you used data in your life that maybe you didn't use it before? Or where have you used it and you didn't understand or you didn't really think about it? Teachers brought up the issue of not wanting to intimidate students by asking at the beginning how they use data for decision making. Some noted that it might be possible and valuable to conduct monthly surveys of students (in class) related to their learning and experience with this curriculum.

Other issues that came up in discussion?

Some teachers called attention to the importance of students' consent in what they share. Consent must be asked in multiple languages and should be written in simple language. One teacher highlighted that they want students to “feel protected and protective of their own stories, and how and where they'll share them.”

Teachers noted the importance of Communicative Justice by connecting research with their practice to address gaps and working towards eliminating inequity and empowering others. One teacher commented, “You can read research papers but **seeing what it actually looks like** in the classroom was great.” Teachers expressed their desire to focus on Communicative Justice and teach students to ask questions while looking at data such as: Who asked the questions, why these questions? How was data gathered? Who gets to tell the stories that gain the most power? One teacher put it succinctly, “The work of education is to challenge assumptions...”. Some teachers called attention to the distrust of data that exists in some communities: this can be a barrier to learning. This is an opportunity to collaborate with other educators to make data and math less intimidating, fun, and engaging.

For more information

If you are interested in participating in a future CJI Study Circle, or organizing one for your adult education program, please contact us: communicativejusticeinitiative@gmail.com