Oxford Adult ESL Conversations Podcast, Episode Five

Announcer

In this episode Jayme is joined by Lori Howard, an ESL consultant, teacher-trainer, author, and Program Specialist Coordinator for Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, also known as CASAS. Listen in as Lori discusses Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE), which enables learners to acquire skills for English literacy as well as skills that help them be effective workers, parents and community members. Let’s join them now.

Jayme Adelson-Goldstein
Lori, I’m so delighted that you were able to join me for an Oxford Adult ESL conversation.

Lori Howard
Well, I’m glad to be here, Jayme.

Jayme
And I’m really looking forward to this topic of EL Civics integration, because it is a topic that confuses me somewhat. I’m just wondering how long have you been involved with EL Civics?

Lori
I started in EL Civics about 17 years ago, pretty much soon after the program started.

Jayme
So this is probably a good time for me to ask you for a definition?

Lori
Integrated EL Civics enables learners to acquire English language and literacy skills and also gain skills to be effective parents, workers, and community members, and that includes to be good citizens.

Jayme
And where are you getting that information from Lori, so that I can recall it?

Lori
It’s from the grant itself.

Jayme
Okay, so that brings us to the grant. So I know that before WIOA, there was WIA?

Lori
Right.

Jayme
And so WIA was the Workforce Investment Act.

Lori
Right.
Jayme
What's WIOA?

Lori
WIOA is the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Jayme
Such nice words. So in the course of looking between WIOA and from WIA to WIOA, what changes have you seen?

Lori
Well the difference really between the two grants—and the newer grant was authorized in 2014—the WIOA grant is exactly the same in terms of English language and literacy skills and being effective parents, workers, and community members, but it adds an emphasis on workforce training. So the grant actually says that integrated English language literacy and civics education may include workforce training.

Jayme
Okay, so let me just ask this question, which is of course the one that’s always on my mind—where does citizenship training and where do US History and US Government fit into the curriculum for integrated EL Civics?

Lori
It’s part of the curriculum, but it’s a choice for students. Not everybody is ready to become a citizen, so they can learn English and learn how to be good community members and parents and workers, and then when they’re ready, then they could take citizenship preparation, which would teach them the US government and history that you’re talking about and prepare them to take the US CIS interview and written test.

Jayme
So by the same token, when people may not be ready to be citizens, what if they’re not ready to be workers? Or what if they already have a job? This integrated training might be a concern for teachers who are looking at their class and saying ‘I have other things I need to focus on.’

Lori
Right. The grant takes it into consideration. In the final regulations they actually referred to that and talked about that: that certainly students need the English language and literacy education, and then whatever else they need in terms of preparation, then they could take that so it’s not required that workforce training be a part of it if they already are gainfully employed. If they already have their citizenship then they can just come to integrated EL Civics classes to improve their English to get a better job, or prepare for secondary education. So there are a lot of options for students and the Federal government seems to not want to restrict by saying that students must participate in citizenship or must participate in workforce training.

Jayme
Okay, I think I’m getting a better picture now. Thank you.

Lori
Sure.
Jayme
I know we’re primarily talking about California because that’s your background. But I’m thinking that what we’re going to be talking about in terms of civics objectives and projects would be applicable to other states as well, is that right?

Lori
Yes, California has a little bit of a different system than other states. We planned our system to include performance-based assessment because it’s sort of a pay-for-performance system, so teachers would teach the civics education and then students would be assessed in a performance-based way. So they would do a simulation, for example, of talking to a doctor or filling out an application for a job, using the internet safely—all of those kinds of objectives—and then they would be assessed on that. We have a set of 52 civic objectives and hundreds of assessment plans that agencies in California work with. They are on our yellow Civics website that you can find at casas.org and anyone is able to look at them and gain whatever they can from them—not only our civic objectives and additional assessment plans, but also all of our resources on the EL civics website.

Jayme
That sounds like a wonderful set of resources for anybody. So, let’s get to where the rubber meets the road and talk about what this looks like in the classroom because I know you have some experience with amazing projects that have been done. I know that I heard you talking about the health objective with being able to talk to a doctor. That’s curriculum that we’ve been handling for years and years so we have textbooks that have a million doctor patient conversations: So the teacher teaches the symptoms, and the students pair up, and they practice the conversation in the book, and maybe they do a role play. What changes with the integrated EL Civics performance-based approach?

Lori
Right, so what we do in California is we do that same instruction that you’re talking about, perhaps focusing it a little bit more heavily on the actual interaction and roleplaying that, and practicing that rather than just relating to the book and repeating, we actually want to encourage them to use their language. And so the performance-based assessment allows the teacher to see whether in a simulation type situation the student could actually talk to a doctor. That’s curriculum that we’ve been handling for years and years so we have textbooks that have a million doctor patient conversations: So the teacher teaches the symptoms, and the students pair up, and they practice the conversation in the book, and maybe they do a role play. What changes with the integrated EL Civics performance-based approach?

Lori
Right, so what we do in California is we do that same instruction that you’re talking about, perhaps focusing it a little bit more heavily on the actual interaction and roleplaying that, and practicing that rather than just relating to the book and repeating, we actually want to encourage them to use their language. And so the performance-based assessment allows the teacher to see whether in a simulation type situation the student could actually talk to a doctor. So one of the examples I like to use is from San Diego Community College District. The teacher teaches, for example, ten illnesses and their symptoms. But then on assessment day, someone, sometimes even in a white coat, who is doing the assessment, it could be the teacher, calls the student to come up. The student sees four index cards face down on the table. They pick one, and it has an illness. And so the person portraying the doctor says “What’s the matter?,” and the student looks at his card and says, “Oh, I have the flu.” And then the doctor says “What are your symptoms?” and the student goes through the different symptoms. So the student has learned ten different illnesses and the symptoms associated with those, they know all of those, and the teacher taught those, but they’re only asked to be assessed on one item. It makes it a little bit more realistic because we never know what illness we’re going to get.

Jayme
Right, and so if we’d just practiced “I have the flu” and we in fact have broken our foot...
Lori
Exactly. So we’re trying to simulate the outside world and get students to actually not read from a piece of paper the dialog, but to actually participate in an almost real life conversation, hoping that in real life they will be able to do it.

Jayme
That’s great. And that’s such a simple concept. That’s not a lot of prep at all. So are their rubrics and checklists on the casas.org site for this type of assessment?

Lori
Yes we have all of our civic objectives and additional assessment plans all there. They include the tasks that the student needs to do and the rubric and rating scales that go along with it. And just let me say that they are open to adjustment by each agency. What’s online is a plan, but then the actual agency decides what questions are asked and what the exact content is. So it’s not an inflexible system; it’s actually very flexible. Agencies can meet the needs of their particular students by changing the questions or changing the content of the task itself.

Jayme
I think that’s terrific because it’s constructivist. It gives the teachers agency. It makes it really needs-based versus something that comes down from on high that may or may not relate to a particular program.

Lori
And in fact our whole system is based on a community needs assessment. That’s one of the requirements in California, to do a community needs assessment each year in which the majority of students in a school are assessed on what they want to study, what would meet their needs.

Jayme
That’s really sounding exciting to me. Could you maybe talk a little bit about some of the other projects that you’ve seen as a result of the Civics objectives?

Lori
Sure, some of the agencies have really done some creative things with these objectives. One agency, Vista Adult School, did a talking with the police unit. They had a year-long program of instruction, as it turned out, which included a number of community meetings with the police. It turned out that there had been three police related shootings in the community that year, and so there was a lot of tension in the community. And I think that’s why they decided to do this. And, as it turned out, after the instruction and the community meetings, they ended up having one of the students submit an application to become a volunteer translator for the San Diego Sherriff’s Department.

Jayme
Wow.

Lori
Several students scheduled appointments to report crimes, which they hadn’t reported up until then. The school seemed to report that it was because of this instruction that they felt comfortable doing that. And then other students referred family members to the Sherriff’s Department for reporting other things, etc. It was really effective in the community, and students felt much more
connected to and confident in the community where they live and work. That was really the goal of the instruction, and it seemed to really help.

**Jayme**
That’s fantastic. And certainly, I think you said that was something that happened a while ago, but it’s certainly something that has a lot of impact today.

**Lori**
Sure.

**Jayme**
What about the Channel Islands project?

**Lori**
That was really interesting too. I think it grew out of one of our environmental civic objectives. The students lived in Ventura County, so it was Ventura Adult and Community Education. They participated in the Channel Islands restoration. The Channel Islands are right off Ventura, and most people can’t go to them. I think the students got excited that if they participated in this program, they might be able to go. It was great. I’d really like to go on it.

**Jayme**
Me, too.

**Lori**
The students planned this four day trip to Santa Cruz Island. They assisted in the Channel Islands restoration program. I think two different classes got together (I don’t think everybody went), but they got together to plan all aspects of the trip: the travel, the lodging, the clothing, and equipment. I think they had to bring food as well to cook. So they assigned jobs to everyone. It was really a team effort by the students. The teacher was there to help, but it was totally run by the students which gave them so much experience and leadership skills, etc. They researched on the internet and they made sure everything was ready. And then when they came back they gave presentations to other classes about it, and they even got interviewed by a local newspaper. So they had lots of great experiences surrounding this environmental unit.

**Jayme**
And I think that it really points out the connection to project-based learning and performance-based assessment that they go together very well. And I’m seeing, as I’m sure you are as well, all the connections to College and Career Readiness?

**Lori**
Totally. When students are researching on the internet, when they’re working with being trained for workplace skills, they are using complex texts and academic vocabulary. They’re encountering things that don’t come out of a textbook necessarily. It certainly relates to the College and Career Readiness Standards ideas of offering complex texts and academic vocabulary, and having students read authentic materials. And they need to do that in order to do this kind of research on the environmental project.

**Jayme**
Is there something that you know of, a project that you know of that is maybe a little less grandiose? Because, I love the Channel Islands, but I’m just envisioning someone who’s landlocked.
Lori
Sure, that was really a special project that had to do with the environment that the students were in. One of the very early projects that first I wasn’t so sure of actually, but came to love, was an intercultural communication project done by Anderson Adult School in northern California. They had a lot of Latina women in the class who didn’t have a lot of good English skills. They started talking about exchanging ideas and exchanging recipes for salsa, and they ended up writing down all of these recipes for salsa and making a cookbook with the help of the teacher and some community members who did community work and photography for it. They made this beautiful cookbook, and that led, interestingly, to not only planning to sell the book, but to offering tastings at the local community farmers’ market. They encountered the public there. They had to learn the English that helped them encounter the public. They ended up teaching some classes in how to make salsa, so they became the teacher rather than the student, and it really changed their stature in the community that now they were teaching the other community members about how to make salsa. It also led to other opportunities for them to arrange transportation, collect money, do all of those leadership type skills. And it really empowered them in their communities. It was really a great project.

Jayme
That sounds wonderful. Is there any place to see photos? I’m hoping you’re going to say casas.org.

Lori
Yes, at casas.org. Actually these were all projects that were rewarded the Making a Difference Award. We unfortunately don’t give that award anymore, but it allowed us to gather these great projects from around the state and award the agencies of course, but also put these great ideas online. So if you look up the making a difference award on the EL Civics website you’ll see, I think about 10 years of awarded programs that might be inspiring to people teaching integrated EL Civics around the country.

Jayme
That’s really an exciting opportunity for us because so much of the time, we don’t have time. So if we can find resources and be launched into something like this... the thing that really appeals to me about the salsa, or anything that would be intercultural in that way, is that we are starting from the students as the resource. That, I think, would be very useful specifically at beginning levels. I, of course, would love to do the Channel Islands. I’m still there.

Lori
Well you can understand how empowering it would be for the students to learn the English, or how important it would be for the student to learn the English needed to teach the class, to teach someone how to make salsa, to offer tastings, to sell their book, all of the language needed to do those things. And they would be very invested in doing it because they’re invested in the project. It’s just such a great way to meet the needs of the students in terms of the language they need to communicate.

Jayme
And I’ve actually heard of YouTube videos of learners teaching skills that they have to others. So this salsa, now we could add the digital literacy element to it, and they could be recorded, even on smart phones, doing some of this, which would be amazing.
Lori
Well certainly digital literacy has come so far and it’s really an important aspect of teaching our students as well and sharing this information.

Jayme
And speaking of sharing, we’ve come towards the end of our conversation, but I’m wondering if there’s one thing you could have the listeners take away from what we’ve been talking about with integrated EL Civics, what would that be?

Lori
Well I think just that it’s really important to meet the needs of our students. And when we do that, our instruction becomes very meaningful, and students want to come to class, they want to learn, and they want to do more in their lives.

Jayme
So it’s the opposite of a vicious cycle; it’s a glorious cycle?

Lori
Totally.

Jayme
Well, that’s a great takeaway. And thank you so much Lori. It’s been a pleasure having an Oxford Adult ESL Conversation with you.

Lori
Thanks Jayme. Thanks for allowing me to participate in it.

Announcer
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