



Voices from the Field: Instructor and program reflections on integrating *SPOTLIGHT* and writing into the adult education classroom

Date recorded: April 13, 2022

This podcast recording was unscripted; therefore, the transcript may not reflect conventions associated with written text.

Welcome, this is voices from the field podcast by the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center that aims to connect you with voices from the field of adult education and literacy. This podcast theme is around writing instruction. And particularly we're highlighting *SPOTLIGHT*, the first issue of our new publication of work by adult education and literacy learners from across the state. We're joined by some of the educators whose learners have submitted work to our inaugural issue of podcast. We're joined by some educators whose learners have submitted work to our inaugural issue of *SPOTLIGHT*. And we're really pleased to have them here with us today to talk about learner voice and also about how we include writing instruction in our programs. And that includes both classroom instruction and tutoring different formats. I'm Hilary Major from the Resource Center. I'm the instructional standards specialist. And I also have a background in writing instruction. So I really helped programs focusing on standards based instruction, and helping prepare learners for no rigorous life goals.

And I'm Elizabeth Severson-Irby, the literacy specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

I'm Sara Geres. I'm the program director at Blue Ridge Literacy (BRL) in Roanoke, Virginia.

I'm Ninon Hentz. I'm a part-time ESL instructor at Blue Ridge Literacy in Roanoke, Virginia.

I'm Kim West, I am a part-time early development learner instructor at the high school equivalency (HSE) or GED® program at the Fairfax County adult high school.

My name is Tristan Mason, and I'm the Assistant Administrator of Fairfax County adult high school and I'm also the program manager for the HSE program for Fairfax SIS (Student Information System).

Host: Great, thank you all for joining us. We're going to start off our conversation today with a little bit talking about writing instruction and how that's happening in the classroom or with tutors. So our first question is, how do you teach writing and or help your learners develop writing skills? And how do you kind of integrate writing into your instruction, so I'll open it up to whomever would like to speak.

Kim West: I'll start. This is Kim West. I start the lessons with my learners who are officially called Early Development learners, which means most of them in my class, and I have about 12 students, range in education level completed, from about first grade to about sixth grade. With a few exceptions over that mark that go into the high school levels. 100% of them have not had English as their primary language, and 100% of them are from another country initially, where they were born. So the first thing that I do is I give an overview of the purpose of what it is we're doing, then I provide them with an outline of steps that they should accomplish so that they'll know where their lesson is heading. And then personally, I build confidence along the way. I encourage them about what prior experience they've probably had in their current lives that is transferable to this experience to make them believe that they can so that they can attempt the assignment. So that's how I start.

Ninon Hentz: This is Ninon, and I have taught the ESL classes at both the very beginner level, low beginner to intermediate and then a low beginner to high beginner and advanced. So it's very, very different for me to move from one level to the other. And with my advanced learners, we did a lot of work with relevant topics. We talked about famous people from their country and what and then we did a little bit with the research scaffolding process and got some lovely entries from that I learned so much from those people I'd never heard of before. And then with my beginner and low beginners, it's a little bit more challenging. So I work a little bit with the building blocks of sounds of letters, consonant blends words, then words into sentences then sentences into longer concepts. For example, this week we were working on simple subject verbs, complement object, and built on everything else we had been doing. So that has been kind of interesting to see them sort of make that connection to how the building blocks of language work because like Kim's students, many of them had not had not had any English language instruction, or even instruction in their own language prior to this.

Host: Great, thank you. And I really appreciate the focus, both of you all mentioned about connecting to prior experiences making the topics relevant. And as readers of *SPOTLIGHT* will see, these are very learner driven topics, which was such, so great to see. And it gives them a lot more encouragement to write on that topic. And it gives them more motivation. And that really kind of shines through in the entries that we received. And Ninon, you touched a little bit on challenges. And so we kind of, that was our next question about challenges you face when incorporating writing into your instruction. And I know, working with learners with various levels of experience and writing and in English language specifically, I'm sure a lot of challenges arise. So what are some of those challenges you all face?

Ninon Hentz: Well, for me, it was the advanced learners, it was more they were worried about being right, having their grammar perfect having their tenses, perfect punctuation, so I had to like let give them permission to not be that that was okay, that that was an editing issue, not a writing issue. And then with my more beginning learners, it's it's surprised me, because especially if they were pre literate, they were so worried about even forming the right words, and finding, finding a topic that they could write about that they felt comfortable without them feeling like they didn't know what they were talking about. And so that was, you had to find that little piece. And a lot of times, you know, the

immigrant story has worked with that. But it's also just, we do a lot of, I do a lot of pre teaching, which we talk about the words, we talked about the topic, and then maybe the next lesson, we segue into the writing aspect. So that has helped me a lot. And that's just been a fairly recent discovery on my part.

Kim West: For me, Kim, and listening to Ninon, and I'm so excited, I want to give you a fist bump from over here, because we're doing similar things. And my challenge, my top challenge was I too, like me not have a clear division of, of academic experience with my students. But I found that those who are at the higher level of learning according to their CASAS scores, don't always, I guess, give the output in class as if they are, others believe they're at a higher level of capability than they can really demonstrate. So I found that I have to set expectations. I'm a marketing person, I came from corporate marketing, MBA, training and all of that. So I recognize that. So even though I had two groups, I couldn't call them lower and higher. I call them group one and group two. So as I am teaching group one, I do guided instruction, I have a participatory kind of event that happens first, they work with partners, and then I set them alone, and I give them direct instruction to work on a certain part of the assignment alone, then I am able to go around and see what they can do without the help of their buddy, who is translating from their home language so that they can understand.

Then I've noticed that the higher learners in group two are listening, what I'm teaching group one, because in reality, they need those building blocks as well. But they need to feel as though they don't. So I am massaging egos. As I'm teaching, to let each group be open to the learning that is happening no matter what side of the room it's coming from. So I've had students from the higher group come to me after class quietly and say, Can I have those handouts that you gave to the other group? Absolutely. So I started having enough copies so that anybody can take anything that they want. So setting expectations was a big thing.

The other challenge that I found was very simple. It was consistent five day a week attendance that I don't have, it was consistent coming at the beginning of class that I don't have. So I set the expectation and the precedent early that I understand and I'm flexible if you can't make it. However, the show will not stop, you will have to catch up. Because I'm teaching from the beginning, you can grab a handout and your buddy can tell you what we did. But we're starting when we start and with what we start with, so the more people started coming more days. So that's, that's been successful.

The other challenge, the other challenge was with outside of participation or attendance was participation. There will be of course, the few students who would speak up prominently and very proud of the answers that they thought were right. But there were many who were very, very quiet, who would not participate who didn't have the confidence. So I tried to set the environment in the classroom that no answer is wrong. And no matter what you say, I encouraged the answer. Even if it's way wrong, I find something right about what they've said to encourage them to speak up the next time. Now I have some of the most timid students who will go, that's the verb. Almost. That's what we talked about yesterday, they're totally wrong, but it gives them the confidence to keep trying. So those are the challenges: the setting expectations, the consistent attendance and the outspoken participation.

Ninon Hentz: I've had some of the same things happen with the more advanced learners. Now my situation is a little different. My advanced learners, I was teaching on Zoom for a semester. So that was a whole different set of no challenges. But in some of our other classes, we have some higher level learners. And I've noticed in the last couple of weeks, they've been sort of easing into my morning, warm up classes, and they want the same handouts, and they want to work on the grammar. And they're really like, Oh, I get this now. Okay. And so yeah, they're with the lower level learners, but they're still absorbing and participating and kind of helping each other out. So that's been interesting to see. I've really enjoyed that a lot. Yeah. And attendance, Lord have mercy.

Host: Yeah, I'm hearing you both speak about spiraling instruction, and really kind of making sure that we're dipping back to make sure that we're capturing those skills and presenting those skills, again, that all learners need no matter at what level they're coming in, or what proficiency they're working at that, really, we need to continue to go back to those skills over and over again. And I really did like the point that Ninon you made about the difference between editing and writing, and that there's a time and place for editing. But a lot of times we just want to get that writing out and to like Kim was saying about building that confidence, right? We want them to write and build that confidence. So I really appreciated all of those answers. Which some of what y'all were saying, again, kind of leads into what our next question is, which is about describing some ways that you value and include and honor or highlight student voice during writing instruction or writing assignments. And I know that a lot of the voice and *SPOTLIGHT* in the stories that came out in *SPOTLIGHT* kind of do this. And so how did you make sure that that's kind of what you were doing within writing instruction in your classrooms.

Kim West: The first thing that I believe that I try to bring into my classroom every day, no matter if I'm teaching writing, or reading comprehension skills, or basic grammar, pronunciation is to, I set an intention around knowing them as people. I know their names, I know how to pronounce them correctly. I know I had them teach me the difference in culture, I didn't understand the three names that you often have in Hispanic culture or Spanish speaking culture. So we talked about it openly, learn their children's names, asked about what they do, where they work. What are some of the things that they face in their day, in their homes, to make them feel that this was their classroom and then set an intention around giving them agency over the classroom. So it was simple things like when a holiday was coming, when Thanksgiving was coming to teach about that, give them a chance to speak about it, and then said, Let's have a party. So I had to instigate that the first time but after that they felt mastery over being able to manage their affairs. So they bring in coffee every day they bring it and power bars every day they bring in, and I'm very spoiled.

Now I know the difference between a pupusa. And something else, like, you know, they cook, but they bring in the food for the parties. And they feel that this is their place that they can do that. And it's a learning environment that's enhanced because of that. So I, I honor them that way by showing that I as your instructor, I'm interested in you as a person, I am in his in his in his genuine. And then I built that into the writing project. So as Ninon was saying, she taught I had to teach the alphabet, I was assuming they understood what all the letters were, and how they sounded how you pronounce them. So I started there, then with vowels, consonants, long sound, short sound of vowels, and then build from there parts of speech and then build simple sentences, greater sentences to the goal of having them express something about their own lives for a simple sentences in exercises, so when I didn't know the

SPOTLIGHT project was coming, but when it did, it was perfect. And they had enough confidence most of them to try, and I guided them through it, but they had been learning some of the basic building blocks to writing a paragraph / essay beforehand.

Ninon Hentz: We do some of the same things at BRL. On Fridays, we have an integration class where we take everything they've done all week from both the morning and the afternoon instructors, and kind of try to pull it together for them. And one of the things we've started to focus on is more ethnic type foods. And I started with rice. And we, I just bring a hot plate in and we started cooking, we talked about recipes and measurements, and they have to help me walk me through, you know, first, second, third, and do all of the ordinal words. And then I made soup one day, it was cold, it was a miserable day. And I said well, we have a garden outside and we had kale we needed to harvest. So we did that brought it in and built that then all of a sudden one of my Afghan learners decided she was going to make bolani and we had a boani festival the Friday before Ramadan started. And I mean, we had food everywhere. And those kinds of things have just been so much fun. And like yeah, we do the holidays we had we took them to see Papa Noel, Santa Claus. And, you know, even though it's the different cultures, they know a lot of those different touchstones from Western culture. And so today we did easter egg coloring, I was saying earlier that this is the one of the only months in a very long time, or only years that all three of the major holy weeks or months fall on the same timeframe. And so we've spent a little bit of time each week talking about those different traditions and those different cultural practices. And they've really enjoyed that and shared a lot with me. So letting them have their voice in that, and then transferring that into some of the language learning that we've been doing. And then hopefully, as we have especially some extra time, once our regular classes are over, you know, translating that into more advanced writing, even with my lower level learners, which I'm really excited to see them do.

Host: Thank you. And I really do want to highlight what Kim said and I will phrase what Kim said about getting to know the learners as people. And Ninon also touched on that about that how important that is not only for engagement, but also for making them feel that this learning space is their space. And that you know, we're doing this all kind of together in this community. So that was really, really nice answers. Thank you both. And so our last question geared specifically towards instruction is how do you balance helping writers build fluency or creativity or voice with also strengthening accuracy and command of conventions or mechanics and structure? So how are you kind of toggling between those two things? And I think as Ninon was saying earlier before between the editing and the writing, how do you kind of balance those?

Kim West: Well, this is Kim and one thing that I do is that I realized that when I have them read aloud, which many were reluctant to do, I would just continue to spoon feed them encouragement so that they would do it, I made a decision not to focus on pronunciation, enunciation in the beginning. I felt that it would feel too critical for them just, if I were trying to learn Mandarin Chinese, and I'm reading it and I don't pronounce my sounds properly, I wouldn't want to be stopped every word to be corrected for fluency. So I let them read and build their confidence, then I started to build in stop points, where I would say, great, you got the meaning. But here's how we pronounce that. That's called a blend, /sh/ instead of /ch/, and I will take a micro moment to write that on the board that was directly related to what they were reading at the moment. Then I will look at my lesson plan and say, When did I plan to

do blends, okay. And then I would make a note and tell them in two weeks, we're going to come back to this in detail, you're going to learn about that, so it wouldn't be forgotten. So my approach is learn fluency, learn pronunciation as you go, in real time with literature that I'm having them read either informational text, how to teach a five year old how to use a cell phone, or Brer Rabbit, we may be reading or something about George Washington or what have you. So I do that.

And I celebrate their current abilities. I just praise and praise and praise, especially for example, if they're trying to pronounce a word that is more than one syllable, and they are taking their time to sound it out. Whatever, even if it's garbled. If it comes out, I praise that effort, so that they continue to do that process of sounding out words. And then again, the micro exercises today, what happened, one of the students did not understand misinformation, or deregulation or whatever the word is. So we talked about prefixes. So as I said, At the break, we're gonna go into this a little bit more. I had some flexibility, because of the number of students that were there was lower. So immediately in real time, it came up organically, found an exercise that related, went and copied it, came back. We completed that exercise within today's lesson so that they could feel that this was handled right when I needed it, right when I asked it. I can't do that every time. But about every other week, I make sure that I do a micro exercise that way that addresses pronunciation and fluency.

Ninon Hentz: Yeah, I find that those micro I like that term. This is Ninon and Kim that Kimberli used the micro. Because even today, when we were building on words, we had been studying the blends, words, and then building them into sentences and then using the grammar at putting the grammar into it. One of my learners said well, okay, so we've got the subject, we've got the verb, we've got the object, what is 'the.' And because each one of the sentence, they were simple sentences began with the word 'the.' And I said, you know, so we did a short little lesson on 'a,' 'an,' and 'the,' and how they are articles and how they're used as small words, to introduce other words. And so that was fun. And then I had another learner who's fairly new from Congo, who asked about, I think it was, the color blue dresses was the was the phrase, and he wanted to know what Blue was and that I said, Well, it's a color. He said, No, no, no, what is its job. And so he's been listening to me about words have different jobs, depending on where they are in a sentence. So that was kind of fun. And we did a little short micro lesson on adjectives.

But I also use templates if it's a longer assignment. And I try to like give them sort of the bigger concept as they can fill in words and phrases. And I've had some really lovely results from that around Valentine's Day. We did just an introduction. It was early in the semester, and one of my brand new Afghan learners, wrote something about his wife and there was a why question. And there's because she is the love of my life. And it was like the sweetest thing ever, and I just loved it. I've also done some dictation with them, so that they are practicing listening short, simple dictation type sentences. I haven't done as much with it lately. And I want to kind of bring that back now that we've sort of built more sentences than we had in the past. So I really like that process. And that's a process that I used to use when I taught some elementary school kids in the phonics program. And that dictation helps them not only learn syntax, but it helps them learn pronunciation, so that was kind of cool. I'm gonna do a little bit more with that.

Sara Geres: So Sara, I'd like to chime in here. So I think one key in is balancing fluency and accuracy in developing a piece of writing is knowing that it is a process and keep reminding your learners of that as you're going, it's not something that learners will complete start and complete within one class period. It's something that can go on for weeks. I am a big proponent of having learners maintain portfolios. That way, you're able to maybe make a beginning of the semester piece of writing that can be reflected on mid semester, at the end of this semester.

And I wanted to add one idea for coaxing information and eliciting information from our, our more silent learners in the classroom, for whatever reason, if that's their lack of confidence, or they just don't simply have the language to produce. There's one strategy that I have been using called experience story. And the essence of this strategy is you are presenting a topic, for example, last weekend, or the last vacation I took, or a special holiday. And the students will think of a personal topic. So it's already very personalized. And they tell you the story, you write it down exactly as they are saying it. So they are not pressured for producing writing in the moment, but they are producing their creativity in their words, and their language. At that point, you can go back to the writing that you produced, and which you have written exactly as the learner has spoken. And then you're able to look at some editing over time as you go through. So that's something else to add in there.

Host: Thank you all. And I think Sara, your example at the end with the experience stories kind of sums up some of what I've been hearing throughout this, this whole conversation about instruction about really, not everything has to be correct and done perfectly all the time, that it's really about getting it out there. And just then coming back and taking bits and pieces of pieces of it and not necessarily the whole thing at one time to edit it to make this perfect piece. But maybe we are just working on verbs or adjectives or we're working on spelling today or things like that. And so it really is this cyclical process. And this process that helps build confidence and encourages learners to kind of stick with it, get their thoughts out there. So we're going to move on to some of the more programmatic aspects. And I'll turn it over to Hillary.

Host: We're just going to zoom out a little bit and start with a general question of what supports did you provide at the program level that supported *SPOTLIGHT* and that support student writing.

Trista Mason: I'm happy to start with that one. I was very excited to receive the email about *SPOTLIGHT*, I love getting emails from VALRC. And the first thing I thought of was our school has a focus this year on disciplinary literacy, that is school wide for all the different pathways. And we adapted that for the HSE pathway. And we also are about 85% English language learners that are enrolled in our program for ABE and for ASE. And so with that, we wanted to make sure that we were hitting all four domains listening, speaking, reading and writing. And so when this kind of came through, it really matched up with what we were already doing in our classrooms. And it really spoke to me from my days, as a classroom teacher, I taught in a traditional high school. And one of the things that I used to do at the beginning of the school year is I would hand out sticky notes or have them on the tables. And I would let the students write down something that they wanted me to know about them, that they may not feel comfortable sharing, you know, in person or face to face. And it always struck me every single year that I did this exercise, the responses that I got, and some would be silly, like I like snacks or, you

know, I wish it wasn't here or whatever it was, you know, teenage angst, but typically, I really got some information that I wouldn't have gotten and a better understanding of my students.

And so that student voice really spoke to me in that email because I think that oftentimes our learners are displaced learners. They either haven't, they've had interrupted education or they haven't had success in a traditional learning environment. Or, you know, they're just coming back after, you know, maybe having attempted more than once to go down this pathway. So having that opportunity to amplify that student voice I think is really powerful, because then they become a part of the process. And when I interviewed for my position four years ago, one of the things that I said was that I wanted to build cohorts and communities of learners. And that is something that has always been at the forefront of how I've been designing the program, as I've been designing it the past four years. And this was just a perfect fit of, you know, really kind of cementing that community of learners.

And as we'll talk about, I'm sure in a little bit, Kim took it to the next step. And we did presentations. And that gave students an even bigger amplification of their student voice because it was shared with not only each other in your classrooms, but with the other classes, we had administrators that came and visited, we recorded them so they could have that recording for themselves to take home and share with their families, their families were invited if they wanted to. But it really gave an extra sense of honor and pomp and circumstance to it that all this work that they had been embedding into our classroom every day, all the hard work that they put in, we kind of had this celebration at the end. So that I think really, and that was not my day, I cannot take credit for I can take the reins with that. And in terms of support as a program manager, I just made sure the path was clear for our made sure she had everything that she needed to make it work. And in you know, just let her do what she does best, which was run with it.

Kim West: I just want to add something there, Hillary you and ask the question to you know, Trista, the program director, you know, what did they do to support what she did to support was when I came to her, I went to my coworker first, we have a wonderful, collaborative working team over there that's in the HSE program. And I said, Guys, let's have a celebration. They need to feel special about this. They need to know. Yeah, yeah. And so my coworker goes to Trista and does the same thing. Let's have a celebration and Trista says, okay, so that was the support. It may, I feel that as an educator, I have the freedom and the backing, to explore and to do these ideas and run with it. So that to me, that trickles down that excitement, enthusiasm, trickles to my students who now everybody wants to do this thing. Everybody wants to be in it. There were students who weren't even interested in it. They wanted to be in at the end and ask permission. And of course, we said yes. So the, what she has done for me, as an instructor is provided that cheerleading, you know, rah, rah pep squad, let's go for it. And let's figure it out together. And that was invaluable for the students. I think.

Sara Geres: Sara here, it's a little tough to follow up Kim's enthusiasm. But at Blue Ridge Literacy, for 25 years now, we have been producing a booklet each year called *Writing from the Heart*, which includes stories from our learners. And since we've had this annual publication, our learner population was familiar with this idea of writing stories to be produced in a piece. And historically, that's always been such a point of pride and seeing the actual written piece in a published book. This year, we're able to broaden that statewide, which is even better, and alliance with a lot that admin is doing in

CBLOs, speaking with other organizations across the state. I think that's wonderful. And Blue Ridge Literacy has always been a social hub, a community base for our learners to come. So to be able to have another avenue for their voice to be shared statewide, is incredible.

Host: That's awesome. I love the enthusiasm and the real focus on community building. And it's so exciting to when you think about writing and writing with a purpose of having real authentic audiences and being able to showcase that through a regional publication through a new statewide publication, through celebration and presentations. In the locality, whether goes beyond the classroom, it goes out to families, it goes to other learners and the word really trickles out. So really that theme of community, working with an audience connecting to those earlier responses of when you know your students then it makes it easier to bring their stories in. And they're really, you're highlighting them. But the community has also been built by their work. And the administrative support that's so essential to making that happen.

And the other theme that came up in interest is response was that idea of writing in the disciplines. And that can be I know, a challenge in adulthood, where you have so many different topics to cover. But I really love how you highlighted how writing can bring those topics together. And you can really work on those skills in any area, including really the areas that are most relevant and most meaningful to individual learners. So this got touched on a little bit. And I know, Kim had mentioned earlier how she kind of started the year without knowing that *SPOTLIGHT* was going to come, did you make any curriculum changes or shifts to integrate more writing opportunities, or to to make *SPOTLIGHT* happen?

Trista Mason: Well, one of the things that we, my teachers, love is that we don't give grades. So you get to actually teach for the pure beauty of teaching and for people to learn, which is wonderful. So we do have sort of a curriculum that we follow, that's obviously based on the CCRS standards. But then we really, it's very individual to your classroom. So it depends on the learners that you have, the levels that they're at, all of those good things. So we definitely had to shift a little bit. But I, we, like I said, with Kim, I said, I'd like us to do this, if we can. Can we make it work? And our resource teacher very quickly adapted our schedules because they do a lot of sharing of students, and really kind of looked at it from a programming point of view, not just for Kim's class, and it did spill over into our ABE class decided to participate as well, because that positive peer pressure that we've been talking about, which is always good to see positive peer pressure, but we really didn't have to shift too much because we had that literacy focus, obviously. And that is one of the predominant things that we're trying to build, especially with Kim's class level is to really get those foundational skills as much as possible. So it actually the timing was perfect, because she had built some of that foundation for us. And we were able to just slide it into the curriculum, but they were very flexible and very open minded for you know, they could have said no, not this year, you know, maybe next year or I'll pass it to my students thanks for sending it to me, they really kind of dug their teeth and and really got into it. And that is what ultimately I think led to the success for us.

Sara Geres: Sara here, so we run our ESL classes in trimesters throughout the year. So each semester is 15 weeks long. We do follow a curriculum. But fortunately, like many other CBLOs and smaller

literacy organizations, we do have the flexibility to adapt curriculum, bring in interdisciplinary subjects. Most recently, we have been trying to integrate more health literacy and digital literacy into our classes. So there is space and flexibility for different projects, both hands on and creative projects. So *SPOTLIGHT* was able to just go right into our classes, logistics, the main way that we communicate is through email.

One of the best things that we have found through the pandemic in communicating with our learners and keeping a strong community of learners outside of class time is maintaining connection through WhatsApp groups. So WhatsApp is a free messaging tool. It sounds silly, but it is something that all of our learners, most of our learners, are familiar with. It's a great way for someone that doesn't have a SIM card to be able to communicate and I found that really the the time in the classroom is much stronger because we have a better community together. So fortunately, this year *SPOTLIGHT* just seamlessly was able to be integrated into classes.

Host: Really appreciate that. I hear that common theme of making connections and having flexibility, even while keeping a focus on on foundational skills and being able to really respond to opportunities and do it in a way that's meaningful for learners. This is kind of a big picture question for everybody. Was there anything that surprised you either about the teaching process about the program process, or the learner work that was created this year?

Kim West: This is Kim, I was floored by the learner content of my students, I let them know, the beginning of *SPOTLIGHT*, as you all very nicely gave in your instructions, that they could narrate the story to someone in the family, that some of them spoken to Google Translate, and then were able to get their ideas out. Others of them wrote the best that they could. And then I held one on one editing sessions with them to coax their story out of them. And I had many, many points of checking to say, is this what you meant? Is this your idea? Is this how you felt to get there, this isn't my story, it's yours. But some of the stories they told, knocked me off my feet, people who have gone through amazing things to get through this country that I didn't... Ah, I don't know, if I could have done it, literally held at gunpoint, literally thrown in jail. And I'm told that you're going to be there for a year, literally 13 years old and left home by yourself and then at the border by yourself at the mercy of whomever would show you grace and kindness on on this incredible journey. And so that was a wonderful experience for me. As an educator, they share their content, but I learned and I grew so I appreciated that about the *SPOTLIGHT* project.

Ninon Hentz: This is Ninon. I think one of the things that surprised, it continues to surprise me, piggybacking on what Kimberli said, I'm always in awe of what our learners have accomplished just living on a day to day basis, much less than coming in and having to learn this new language, you know, it's writing backwards, you're doing everything weird. So, for me, just content, and I like, like Trista, I came out of public school, high school teaching. So that was an interesting shift for me. But my learner's anxiety towards producing work is what really surprised me. And you really have to coax them and give them permission to be wrong and to put it down and to to we do a lot with the whiteboard and then my co teacher who does the afternoon classes, she does a really fabulous job with word, help me here Sara, with what am I...webs word webs. And, you know, talking to them one on one about their personal story, she her curriculum is a little bit less structured than mine. So she can take it in a little

different direction. And she's done a really good job, coaxing them out of that reluctance to speak. And so when we collaborate, she shares that with me, and it's been fascinating to then take what she has done, and transfer it into some of the things that I am doing.

She was talking about goals and dreams. And then we did a lot with goal setting. And we looked up, you know, local schools here. We have two learners in particular who I really want to see them move on to more high, you know, more education, and especially Community College, one of them now wants to be a teacher. And it's really interesting to see that progression from the first day she came into class, wouldn't talk at all. And now we can't get her to stop talking. So that's really fascinating to see. But their anxiety about putting things down on paper is what really kind of surprised me.

Host: Thanks, and I hope if you were listening to this podcast, and you haven't yet read *SPOTLIGHT*, that you will get on the website and read it because it is powerful. And I think Kim and Ninon both spoke to that. I think something I noticed was just the power of students who are overcoming that anxiety who are overcoming those challenges as a writer, as someone who has maybe had setbacks in education to produce something that they are able to share and able to be proud of, and then just the power of some of the stories and experiences that are conveyed in these articles. especially from many of our immigrant learners, is just really something special. And I think it's really I really appreciate all of you around the state. And especially your two programs have been real cheerleaders for helping to highlight these stories and bring them out and continue to share them the way you've been sharing them locally. And, you know, I think the more people who hear and see these stories, you can't come away and not be affected.

So we have kind of reached the end of our set questions, feel free to pop off if there's Is there anything else we should share? If you have some additional thoughts or comments, hopefully, we can capture those.

Kim West: One of the things that has been important to me, this is Kim, through this teaching in this environment and working with the *SPOTLIGHT* project is I found that when I show a level of transparency, commonality and relatability, to my students, it tends to open them up. Today with a micro extension of a lesson we gave, I talked about, because one student was wanting to drop out, I started a new project, Trista knows, I want. And now I'm doing a debate team before the end of the year. So we started that. So a couple of students were like, I'm not going to do it. And they were trying to sneak out of class. So I grabbed them back. I said, Try it today, we'll talk at the end. And then if you feel that you cannot, fine, you're free to go. So by the end, of course, they're staying.

But one of the stories that I told, I tell stories, was when I was a freshman in college, and I was with a roommate who was in a very sort of academian and was a braggart. And I felt like I couldn't compete. And yeah, I was in the baby math class. And she was in the superior math class. And I just felt horrible. I said, But I pushed through, because nobody kicked me out of Michigan State University. They didn't say Kim Holmes (West) you can't be here. I said, so until somebody tells you you're not good enough, or you can't be here or this isn't right for you, you stay, you stick it out. So as a result of those kinds of stories, Friday's in our classroom, somehow have morphed into what I call salons, kind of like the Josephine Baker era in France, where they will get together and talk about issues of the day. And a lot

of the women, women, it's sort of like an empowering time, they want to talk about what's happening in their lives, with their children with their homes, they want to bounce ideas off of each other practical things, but they feel the freedom to be able to do it. It has nothing to do with the curriculum. But that is something that is kind of developed organically, and I believe that my willingness to say, Guys, I've just been privileged with an education, you know, I happen to get this opportunity, and I want to be here teaching this to you, gave them the freedom to relax and enjoy the learning process.

Host: That's awesome. I love that salon idea and how, even if something isn't covered in the curriculum, it's building that confidence. And, you know, it's all language skills, you can't have writing without speaking and listening and reading, being a part of it. And, you know, I really just appreciate the way things are being built together. And the way that this really, that you are all supporting your learners. And they are kind of highlighting their experiences and the ways they are really powering their communities in our communities.

Ninon Hentz: I think one of the cool things that happened with our learners this year was early on. I can't remember if it was like, November, maybe we were doing a lot of work with rhyming words. I have one learner in particular that just needs a lot of sight word repetition. And so we were putting rhyming words 'at,' 'cat,' 'fat' and so I had this Oh, I think I'll read them the *Cat in the Hat* this week. So I pulled in my granddaughter's copy of *Cat in the Hat*. And we read it and then we're getting on to Christmas. So I decided I was going to get each of them, because they all have children or grandchildren, a copy of the *Cat in the Hat* because they really liked the story. It was fun. So I gave them each a copy of it. And one of our learners came back to us every day Mommy, mommy read me *Cat in the Hat*.

That was like so cool, because now they're reading to their child. So they're getting that extra connection. And to me that I mean, that's just like, I really felt cool about that. That was that, man, just made my day. She goes, Oh, mommy *Cat in the Hat*. It was really cool.

Host: I could probably ask, you know, five or six more questions, but I think we don't want to have a two hour long podcast. So I think we will probably go ahead and wrap things up. I just want to say we really appreciate you being here and sharing, you know, having your learner's contribute, the work you do within your programs to share learners' work and the highlight learner stories. And then to kind of be our state cheerleaders for *SPOTLIGHT*.