Lessons from Adult Literacy Research for Health Literacy Research

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Literacy Skills

- **NAAL Intermediate & Proficient** -- (56% of US Adults)
  - Sufficient reading skills
    - Sufficient education and reading practice

- **NAAL Basic** – (28% of US Adults)
  - Low fluency, vocabulary, and domain knowledge
    - Undereducated and lack of reading practice

- **NAAL Below Basic** – (16% of US Adults)
  - Low fluency, vocabulary, and domain knowledge as well as weak print skills
    - Weak English language skills, cognitive barriers, or learning disabilities
Changes in Literacy Skills

- On average, adults with Basic skills and some with Below Basic skills improve their literacy skills after leaving school.

- The mean annual rate of improvement begins to decline after age 30 and mean skill level declines after 45.

- Improvement appears to be related to new literacy demands in early adulthood and decline to lack of demands.
Compensatory Strategies

- Adults at the Basic and Below Basic levels develop strategies to compensate for their lack of skills
  - They may avoid tasks that require literacy
  - They may perform those tasks perfunctorily
  - They may enlist the help of others
Adult Development

- Adults make sense of the world through a cognitive lens, and that lens develops in specific ways across the lifespan.
  - **Instrumental**, knowledge is certain and the sources are authorities.
  - **Socializing**, open to some knowledge being uncertain and sources are peers and family along with authorities.
  - **Self-authoring**, see knowledge as uncertain and construct it by drawing from all sources but employing their own criteria for judging those sources.
Practice and Research

- 2.5 million NAAL Basic and Below Basic adults attend adult education classes each year. Health is one of the primary content areas that interest them.
- Adult literacy and adult development researchers have a lot to offer health literacy researchers.
Resources

www.NCSALL.net

www.LSAL.pdx.edu

www.NAEPDC.org