

# Lessons from Adult Literacy Research for Health Literacy Research

John Comings, Ed.D.  
Education Development Center

Former Director  
National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

# 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](http://www.NCSALL.net)

[www.LSAL.pdx.edu](http://www.LSAL.pdx.edu)

[www.NAEPDC.org](http://www.NAEPDC.org)