

Literacy and the Path to Citizenship in a Nation Divided

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Abstract

Civic literacy, although often overlooked or taken for granted by born United States citizens, is integral to the financial success and personal safety of immigrants who come here seeking a better life. Before receiving legal permanent status and a “green card,” an applicant must successfully complete an interview and pass a written test demonstrating not only a loyalty to the U.S. Constitution, but also a basic knowledge of how federal and state governments are structured, along with some understanding of early U.S. history. The process for naturalization in the U.S. is lengthy and intricate and can be thwarted by mistakes and misunderstandings that often occur when an applicant struggles with speaking, reading, and writing English. Fortunately, there are benevolent organizations like the Adult Literacy League who support English learning for people seeking naturalization. In this paper, I will share my experience helping one determined woman realize her dream of becoming a United States citizen in politically fraught Florida in 2017.

“Beware: / Ignorance / Protects itself / Ignorance / Promotes suspicion. / Suspicion / Engenders fear. / Fear quails, / Irrational and blind, / Or fear looms, / Defiant and closed. / Blind, closed, / Suspicious, afraid, / Ignorance / Protects itself, / And protected, / Ignorance grows.”

— Octavia E. Butler

If there is one word that could define the national discourse since 2015, that word would be fear: fear of the direction the United States is taking politically; fear of the loss of our democratic principles; and for many, fear of the Other.

Octavia Butler's poem sums up the problem we are all encountering in some form or another—right or wrong—that anti-intellectualism can have a detrimental effect on our wellbeing. Of course, attitudes toward these perceived perils are as vast and varied as the inhabitants of the U.S. itself. Fear can isolate people, as the poem suggests, but there are many who have no other choice but to meet the uncertainties head-on; those who are motivated to act not only to improve their circumstances but to survive. This is the story of one woman who went bravely forth and used procedural, digital, and civic literacy to become a naturalized citizen of the United States.

While this is not an essay about politics, it is important to acknowledge the U.S. political climate that brought “Dasia” (a pseudonym for the sake of her privacy) and I together in the first place. On the morning after the U.S. presidential election of 2016, I was—like millions of United States citizens—burnt out from all the divide-and-conquer tactics from politicians and their supporters, and the resulting estrangement from friends and family who'd grown all too comfortable hurling insults like snowflake, Marxist, fascist, and worst of all, libtard. I was sick of being trolled online and alarmed by the hateful rhetoric aimed at immigrants of color and food insecure people receiving help through social welfare programs, so I deleted myself from social media that day. Because writing is a form of therapy for me, I began to journal my thoughts. The first thing I wrote was, “DON'T ARGUE POLITICS WITH PEOPLE WHO DON'T READ BOOKS.” Then, I wrote it on a slip of cardstock and put it on my fridge where it haunted me until I realized I could use that declaration to make a positive change not only for myself, but for somebody else. “Each one teach one,” I told myself, “I can teach someone to read.” That's what I had in mind when I emailed the Adult Literacy League. In my online application to be a volunteer I wrote something like, “Literacy is power. Literacy can protect us from harm.” Within a month I'd been trained as an English tutor by the A.L.L. and was assigned a student, Dasia.

“Accumulating Literacy” scholar Deborah Brandt writes that with the modern-day spread of literacy:

Documentary practices have penetrated banks, courts, hospitals, schools, social service agencies, and other public and private organizations. As a result, the capacity of citizens to protect and exercise their civil rights and claim to their fair share of public resources depends critically on the skills of reading and writing (Brandt 652).

It was clear that Dasia was encountering all of these challenges in her quest to become a U.S. citizen, but thankfully she had a good foundation for becoming a success story.

Upon our first meeting, I was impressed to find that Dasia, whose native language is Arabic, could already speak some English, and she had the basic ability to write in English, as well. As a girl in Lebanon, English was part of Dasia's schooling, but in the Lebanese culture of her youth, she told me, "Only the really smart girls went to college," and those who didn't go to college got married. Although she is obviously intelligent, Dasia didn't go to college. Her husband was chosen for her by her family when she was a teenager, but the marital security was not enough to keep Dasia from a life of exile. She endured decades of war and political upheaval that forced her and her family to migrate from Middle Eastern country to Middle Eastern country before Dasia finally earned a visa to come to the United States. What she needed from me as her tutor was help in improving her English skills and studying for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Naturalization Test. The USCIS website says, "Naturalization is the process by which United States citizenship is granted to a lawful permanent resident after meeting the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)." To become a United States citizen every applicant must pass this test. Anyone who has taken it can attest, the naturalization test is no joke. Here is a link with a sample test. I'd encourage anyone to try it and see for themselves. (It's more fun to print the test and use a cover sheet to hide the answers.)

I thought I was well-informed in U.S. Civics because it was a favorite subject in my grade school years, but I soon realized I had unlearned important concepts about the U.S. Constitution and basic governance. As I studied with Dasia, I was (re)learning, too. Lucky for us both, the A.L.L. has a wealth of resources to help people learn English and U.S. Civics by reading and writing, like the Cambridge University Press' *Ventures 2 Workbook* which is a printed resource supplemented by online content. The English grammar and vocabulary lessons helped Dasia form a stronger foundation upon which she could expand her civic literacy. Civic literacy is defined by the Florida Department of Education website as:

- An understanding of the basic principles of American democracy and how they are applied in our republican form of government.
- An understanding of the U.S. Constitution.
- Knowledge of the founding documents and how they have shaped the nature and functions of our institutions of self-governance.
- An understanding of landmark Supreme Court cases and their impact on law and society.

We'd meet at the A.L.L. or at a nearby coffee shop if all the study areas at the A.L.L. were full. When Dasia and I were in public together, people would notice Dasia's hijab and cast a stink-eye in our direction. Sometimes I'd glower back, but mostly we just found a quiet place and kept our eyes on the books. My job as tutor was easy because Dasia already had print literacy,

defined as “the practice of reading and writing alphabetic text on paper” (Byrd 452), to support her growth; what we were both practicing was a procedural literacy: “the ability to reconfigure basic concepts and rules to understand and solve problems [...]” (Bogust 32). We were figuring things out together, and improving our digital literacy, which according to the National Council of Teachers of English is the ability to “participate effectively and critically in a networked world.” Without digital literacy, Dasia would not have been able to achieve her goal because becoming a U.S. citizen is dependent in large part on the applicant’s ability to fill out forms and make appointments via the internet. Eventually, after I polished the rust off my own civic literacy, I returned to social media with some trepidation, but my skills were now sharpened so that when the errant extremist trolled me for speaking truth to power, I could confidently retort, “You couldn’t pass the U.S. citizenship test if your life depended on it.” I’d share the link to the USCIS, as well. I knew anything I said online in support of a legal path to citizenship was performative and unlikely to change any minds in the broader social media argument, but it seemed there simply wasn’t enough counter-rhetoric to drown out the ever-increasing fear-based propaganda against outsiders, the all caps shouts of “BUILD THE WALL!”

In early 2017, soon after Dasia and I began working together, the newly elected president issued a 90-day ban on people from majority Muslim countries entering the United States. It was apparent that the Trump administration’s ban was escalating anti-immigration rhetoric nationwide, online, and on national network news. This was difficult to discuss with Dasia and the last thing I wanted to do was make her worry more about things neither of us had the agency to control. Plus, it is complicated for people who speak different languages to discuss politics. Nevertheless, Dasia’s English conversation skills were improving and she was diligent in her effort to speak fluently and avoid deportation.

To our chagrin, Dasia’s first shot at the naturalization test was thwarted because she failed to properly answer one question in the pre-interview. When next we met Dasia told me, “The lady she was mean. She never smile. She ask me if I was prostitute. What does this mean?” Well, that was an uncomfortable conversation (and the answer was “no”). It certainly wasn’t one of the questions covered by the U.S. civics flash cards we’d been using, so I started searching online for content on what a person might be asked in the naturalization interview. I printed out a series of questions and from that point on I’d play the role of disgruntled interviewer. I’d try to get tricky when I quizzed Dasia, and I’d send her random text messages to prepare her to answer questions verbally and in writing. Another six months of dedicated learning passed and, finally, she did it. Dasia passed the U.S. naturalization interview and test and earned her legal permanent resident status. She was now a citizen of the United States of America and clear to seek a green card. Needless to say, we were both extremely proud of her accomplishment. Dasia was now equipped with a civic literacy that rivaled most of the political talking heads on television.

Literacy and writing-studies scholar Kate Vieira’s “research reveals the

entanglement of literacy with the movement of people—with their upward or downward social mobility and with their physical mobility across transnational borders or through hostile city streets” (30). Dasia, as a Muslim, Arabic-speaking woman living in the U.S., was no stranger to hostility. She had to move, time and again, to struggle into a place of relative safety for herself and her family. While I will always sing the praises of the A.L.L., I could never credit myself with Dasia’s achievement; we only spent an hour or two a week together, if that, over the course of a year. Dasia spent countless hours preparing for the test, and thousands of dollars on an immigration attorney who guided her through the toughest parts of the naturalization process. By watching Dasia conquer her fears despite the educational opportunities she’d been denied in a life of exile, I could no longer pretend that as a born-American I wasn’t squandering my own shot at an education. So, I quit all but two of my dead-end part time gigs, secured myself a Pell grant, and re-enrolled in college after twenty years away. Dasia taught me in our translingual conversations that it’s never too late to learn new things, to become an informed, engaged, civically literate United States—and global—citizen.

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Convergence Rhetoric



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