

Confidence and Identity in Basic Skills Learning

In basic skills, as in other educational contexts, knowledge and skills are essential goals. Yet the most powerful forms of learning are not only about what we know and what we can do, but who we are. Indeed, the process of "formation" (to borrow a term from Carnegie's studies of professional education) is both a result of and a condition for deep learning.

In the case of reading, for instance, students must learn not only how to make sense of a text, but to think of themselves as readers -- no insignificant transformation for learners who may not have had easy access to books while growing up, and for whom reading may feel like a chore, a risk, an exercise in the unfamiliar. In writing, too, students must not only learn the mechanics and routines of producing readable texts; they must come to see language as a tool and resource through which they can express themselves in the world, make things happen, and connect with others.

The role of confidence and identity is also well known in mathematics, as illustrated by the long line of work on math anxiety, and on the effect of gender stereotypes on mathematical learning in girls and women.

More generally, basic skills students often do not think of themselves as "college material." They bring powerful life experiences to their educational work, but they may need help seeing those experiences as assets to academic learning. And while all students need encouragement, inspiration, and motivation, these qualities are especially important for students who have not succeeded in the past, or who have been away from formal education for a number of years.

In short, faculty who teach in basic skills contexts play an essential role not only in teaching their discipline but in moving students towards greater confidence and a stronger academic self-image.