

Learners' Engagement in Adult Literacy Education

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Key Findings

Students participating in classes that use individualized group instruction (IGI) show a high level of engagement. The high level of engagement exists for three reasons: motivation, the encouragement given to students by teachers, and the voluntary nature of participation in adult literacy education.

The engagement falls into three categories: learners engaging with materials, learners engaging with teachers, and learners engaging with other learners. Each engagement pattern has a shaping factor. For learners engaging with materials, the shaping factor is the routines and procedures of IGI. For learners engaging with teachers, the shaping factor is the teachers' interpretation of his or her role and related behavior; and for learners engaging with other learners, the shaping factor is the social norms of the classroom.

Key Implications

IGI is a commonly used method of instruction in adult basic education. This study has revealed factors that shape engagement. Engagement, a precondition to learning, can generally be assessed through simple observation. It follows that learners' level of engagement can function as a day-to-day marker of instructional success. If the results of the assessment prove negative, malfunctions of the instructional system, teachers' role behaviors, and/or classroom norms may be places to search for solutions.

This Research Brief highlights findings from a qualitative study of the contextual factors that shape engagement in adult literacy education. Engagement is mental effort focused on learning and is a precondition to learning progress. Some researchers focus on engagement as a cognitive, or mental, process closely related to such things as motivation and self-efficacy. They seek to understand how the engagement process works and how it is related to learning. Others examine how learning context shapes engagement—how the educational environment affects how and whether learners engage. This study focused on the second tradition, how learning context shapes engagement, for a very practical reason: to a great extent adult educators control the educational context. Thus if they understand how the educational context shapes engagement, they can influence engagement in positive ways.

The research was conducted by the NCSALL research team at Rutgers University, New Jersey, in partnership with the New Brunswick Public Schools Adult Learning Center, NCSALL's partner in the National Labsite for Adult Literacy Education. The research team studied six classes: three basic level classes, a GED class, and two

adult high school reading and writing classes. All but one used individualized group instruction (IGI), characterized by students assigned to classes in which they work individually on materials assigned to them by the teacher.

Data were gathered via video, ethnographic observation, and interviews. Each class was observed from five to seven times. Qualitative methods were used for analysis.

The study found that the students showed a high level of engagement supported by the learners' motivation, the encouragement given to students by teachers, and the voluntary nature of participation in adult literacy education. The engagement falls into three categories: learners engaging with materials, learners engaging with teachers, and learners engaging with other learners. Each engagement pattern has a shaping factor. For learners engaging with materials, the shaping factor is the routines and procedures of IGI; for learners engaging with teachers, the shaping factor is the teachers' interpretation of his or her role and related behavior; and for learners engaging with other learners, the shaping factor is the social norms of the classroom.

Findings

Learners Engaging with Materials

In IGI, materials are the objects of engagement; they direct engagement, and success in progressing through them is the product of engagement. The instructional system—IGI—shapes engagement by supporting and maintaining it through skill diagnosis, the assignment of appropriate materials, correcting, assigning new materials, and helping to remove blockages.

To a great extent, the materials' directions determine what learners engage in. The exercises embodied in the materials carry the content of instruction and learners' success in correctly completing the exercises was the most visible marker of learning progress for both the teachers and the learners. Even when the learners were engaging with the teacher or with other learners, the engagement was around the materials.

Learners Engaging with Teachers

In the IGI context, teaching is primarily one-on-one. One-on-one teaching has two primary components, helping and supporting.

Helping

There are several steps to helping: initiation of the helping session, diagnosis, correcting, checking for understanding, assigning new materials, and closure. How a helping session was initiated varied with each teacher.

If learners need help and cannot get it, productive engagement stalls and frustration can set in. In deciding how to provide help, teachers in the study were faced with a dilemma. Either they could spend a little time with each learner and reach more people, or they could spend more time with each learner and reach fewer learners. The only guide to making the choice was experience. Deciding how much time to allocate to learners was compounded by two factors. First, attendance varied considerably. Some days, six learners were in class, on other days there might be fifteen. When the class was crowded it was more difficult for teachers to ration their time. Second, learners in the basic-level classes needed help more often and the problems they needed help with were more complex.

Support

Teachers in the study did less teaching and more supporting learners' individual efforts. The most common way they supported learners was via praise. All the teachers praised learners liberally to build self-confidence and maintain motivation to engage. Praise was of two types, genuine and dismissive. Genuine praise came "from the heart" and usually elicited acknowledging body language from the learner, such as a smile. Dismissive praise was routine and generally came at the end of a helping session. It had two messages: praise, and a signal that the session was over. Teachers varied in their proportions of genuine praise to dismissive praise.

Facilitation

In contrast to traditional teaching, IGI teachers rarely conveyed content. The materials did that. Thus the

primary teaching role was that of facilitation, although how teachers facilitated varied somewhat. Teachers' roles as facilitators affected engagement in several ways. In assigning materials, teachers directed what learners would engage in. Obviously the appropriateness of the materials was an important factor in what learners learned and how quickly they progressed. In helping, teachers helped stalled learners to re-engage, and in providing support to learners, teachers built and maintained the motivation that is so important to engagement.

Learners Engaging with Learners

The extent to which learners engaged with other learners varied among and within the classes studied. Learners' engagement with other learners was influenced by classroom norms, informal rules of behavior that governed the purpose and process of interaction. In most cases these norms were established by teachers.

The most important norm for engagement was the norm of "sticking to business" and it was pervasive in every class. Sticking to business was the common understanding that learner-to-learner engagement was to focus squarely on the business of the class. Discussion of out-of-class events and off-task socializing was very rare. The great majority of learner-to-learner interactions were helping relationships. Learners helped each other in clarifying the directions of materials, in doing math problems, in defining the meaning and pronunciation of words, and with many other class-related tasks. Thus learner-to-learner interactions were not a form of disengagement from learning. Rather, they were a shift in engagement from one learning resource, materials, to another resource—a helping learner. Moreover, when learners engaged each other in helping relations, teachers were freed to spend more time with other learners.

Recommendations

Research and Related Professional Development

Other research being conducted by the NCSALL Labsite at Rutgers indicates that IGI is a common instructional system in adult literacy education. Most programs that adopt IGI do so for very pragmatic reasons. High

attrition reduces enrollment over time, waiting students are assigned to classes to fill empty seats, and continuous enrollment results. IGI compensates for continuous enrollment in ways that whole-group instruction cannot. Thus it is likely that IGI will be used as long as high attrition is a contextual reality of adult literacy education. Is IGI effective in comparison to other forms of instruction? If IGI is a reality of adult literacy, how can it be improved? These questions need to be addressed through systematic research.

IGI is dependent upon materials. Research on the effectiveness of materials is much needed. Professional development, based initially on professional wisdom and eventually on research, is needed to guide teachers in how to choose effective materials that are appropriate to learners' skill levels.

In this study, motivation, and hence, engagement, was enhanced by teachers through praise and encouragement, typically during one-on-one helping sessions. Yet overuse of praise and encouragement can reduce its reward value and even seem condescending to adult learners. When and how to provide praise and encouragement is a very important aspect of instruction in adult literacy education, especially in IGI. It should be a topic for further research and professional development.

In the IGI classes we studied, the teachers served more as facilitators than as conveyors of content, a role that many teachers may be ill-prepared to perform by virtue of prior training and experience. This is true for IGI systems that use paper materials as well as those that use computer software. There are several aspects of facilitation in IGI that are fundamental to IGI and therefore should receive special attention as topics of research and professional development:

- *Teachers need to know how to diagnose when learners are "stuck" and need help. Although monitoring engagement is one useful marker, it is possible for learners to be unproductively engaged; that is, working hard but not learning up to their ability. Diagnosing unproductive engagement is one of the critical skills IGI teachers need to learn.*
- *Materials management is a critical function in IGI that teachers must learn. Teachers need to assign materials*

appropriate to learners' needs and skill levels. They also need to correct work and assign new work quickly. Both appropriate assignments and efficient processing help prevent disengagement.

- How much time to spend helping each learner is a critical issue in IGI. If teachers spend too little time, learners do not receive sufficient help. Conversely, if teachers spend too much time, too few learners receive help.

Teachers also need to know how to establish norms that promote engagement and how to identify norms that disrupt engagement.

Professional Development

As we have noted, little research sheds light on the above issues for practice. Lacking research, we believe that reflective professional development in which teachers share professional wisdom and solve IGI-related problems through collective reflection and action is the most promising approach. We suggest the following:

- *Paired observation: Teachers observe each other's classes and then meet to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses they observed.*
- *Participatory Action Research (PAR): Teachers meet to identify instructional problems and then are given released time from teaching to investigate solutions.*
- *Materials search: Publishers of materials generally set up exhibits at national and state professional association meetings. Teachers are assigned to explore in depth the products of one or two publishers and then meet to share and reflect on their assessments.*

What Next?

Qualitative research typically raises as many questions as it answers and this report is no exception. Many of these questions pertain to the cognitive, or mental, aspects of engagement. These aspects were difficult to study with qualitative research. Unanswered questions include:

- *Is cognitive engagement a unitary concept or can it, as the research suggests, be divided into component parts?*

- *What is the relationship between cognitive engagement and learning outcomes, such as teachers' assessment of learners' progress, tested learning gain, and persistence?*
- *What is the relationship between engagement and learners' self-esteem?*
- *What is the relationship between engagement and background variables such as learners' skill level, age, gender, and first language?*

All of these questions need to be addressed to enable adult educators to maximize the engagement of learners in IGI settings.

What is NCSALL?

A federally funded research and development center focused solely on adult learning, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) is a partnership of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, World Education, Rutgers University, Portland State University in Oregon, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville. NCSALL is funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, Award Number R309B960002, as administered by the Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement), U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. NCSALL's efforts are dedicated to improving practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma.

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