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- Reading #7:   "Improving Student Drop-Out Rates Through Student Observations and Peer Contacts"

*Readings #3 and #4 are to be read together.

Article Discussion Protocol

1. Form groups of three.

2. Assign a timekeeper to your group.

3. Determine a presentation order.

4. Each group member shares his or her passage.

5. The first presenter addresses uninterrupted the "Passage Discussion Questions" newsprint for **three minutes.**

6. Group listeners, one at a time, reflect back on what was said by the presenter for **one, uninterrupted minute.** *Reflecting back means exploring the ideas that the presenter has touched upon, **not adding one's own interpretation**. The listener may add thoughts and opinions, but they should be related directly to the points raised by the presenter. A listener might say something like, "From what you have said, I can see that you are concerned about..." or "I agree with you when you say _____ because I too find that..."*

7. The presenter now has uninterrupted time to respond and react to what the listeners said for **two minutes.**

8. Repeat steps 4-7 until everyone has had a chance to present.

9. Once everyone has presented, group members should freely comment on points they found interesting, controversial, etc. and should determine what they will share with the larger group about their discussion **(ten minutes).**

Handout H

Readings for Session Three

This is the list of readings for Session Three of the study circle. Please bring all the readings to Session Three.

<u>Session Three of the Study Circle</u>

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

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*Reading # 3:   "Expanding Access to Adult Literacy with Online Distance Education"

*Reading #4:   "Distance Learning Extends the Reach of ABLE Providers"

Reading #5:   "Building Participation in Workplace Learning Programs"

Reading #6:   "Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?"

Reading #7:   "Improving Student Drop-Out Rates Through Student Observations and Peer Contacts"

*Readings #3 and #4 are to be read together.

Reading #3

Expanding Access to Adult Literacy with Online Distance Education[*]

Eunice N. Askov, Jerome Johnston, Leslie I. Petty, and Shannon J. Young

Askov, E., Johnston, J., Petty, L.I., & Young, S. J. (2003). *Expanding access to adult literacy with online distance education* (NCSALL Occasional Paper). Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

Distance Education

What is distance education? Moore and Shin (2000) define it as "having the defining characteristic that, for all or most of the time, the teaching occurs in a different place from where the learning occurs, so that the normal or principal means of communication is through an artificial medium, either printed or electronic" (p. 215). Although it is frequently thought of as an alternative to classroom-based instruction, mixed or blended models can be found in which learners study much of their time at a distance but come together face-to-face at various times. (See Wonacott, 2002, for a discussion of blended models in adult and career/technical education.)

Distance education began in the second half of the 19th century with the exchange of print materials, assignments, and feedback by mail. Over the course of the 20th century, the development of radio and television made the delivery of additional materials (lectures and demonstrations) by electronic means possible. The 1950s saw the growth of a number of video projects that sought to identify expert science, math, and language teachers who could spread their expertise to students across a region or across the whole country. In 1989, Congress enacted the

Star Schools legislation, intended to deliver quality instruction to largely rural or underserved areas. Among the Star School projects were three courses designed for adult learners, two of which used a studio teacher providing regular classes on topics ranging from job-seeking skills to skill-building needed to qualify for the GED.[1] Over the 20th century, the technological possibilities have changed, although the pedagogical model has not. Most distance courses that use the newer media (e.g., television) are still built on a transmission model in which instructors create material to be consumed by learners, and learners are given exercises and tests that they submit to the teacher to demonstrate they have mastered the material—that they understand it, remember it, and can apply this knowledge in testing situations.

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[*] The preparation of this monograph was underwritten by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. The contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the underwriter, and readers should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

More recent technologies have expanded the number of communication channels available to distant educators. E-mail and computer conferencing began in the early 1970s as part of the government sponsored ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network).[2] Scientific work groups quickly adopted these communicative tools to advance collaborative activity at a distance, but they were not available to educators and off-campus students for another decade. In education these tools could permit learners to exchange and debate ideas. But only in recent years have educators recognized the potential of these tools to support a different model of distance education—a model built on more constructivist principles of learning. In the 1990s, new tools became available to the scientific community: the Internet and the Web. By the mid-1990s, these were made available to the broader public. Educators recognized the potential of these technologies immediately, and a few distance educators began to recommend a new model of education that emphasized the qualitative improvements in learning itself, if learners had ready access to a variety of electronic materials and were supported in examining and discussing these materials with other learners. These educators sought to distinguish this form of distance learning from more traditional forms by using new terms: distributed or flexible learning. (See, for example, Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000 or Rudenstam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002.) In 1995, the LiteracyLink project was funded to create two adult literacy products—WES and GED Connection—both of which had an e-mail and Web component designed to take advantage of the new media. Both were designed for classroom use, but their distance possibilities were recognized soon after they were released to the adult education community. The adaptation of WES to distance education is related in Chapter 3.

ODE for Adult Basic Education Students?

Online education has been growing rapidly in higher education and business, but the question remains whether adult education programs can use technology to reach out to learners separated by space and/or time. Is distance education viable for learners functioning below a high school completion level? Is the technology required for ODE readily available to adult learners? Are there curricula available that meet adult learners' learning goals?

Consider the requirements for online learning. Students must have access to a computer connected to the Internet at home, in a library, or in a community technology center. They must be minimally competent in operating a computer and accessing information on the Internet. Although some adult education programs now use computers in instruction, many use outdated computers that are still not connected to the Internet. The students served are the least likely to have access to computers, the Internet, and the knowledge to use either one. This so-called "digital divide," or the gap between the "haves" and "have nots" of technology, has captured media attention.[3] Those who are educated and have access to technology benefit from economic prosperity and the availability of jobs.

Those who are not educated to their potential tend not to have access to technology and do not hold jobs that form a meaningful career path. Without access to and knowledge of the Internet and online learning, low-literate adults have little chance to successfully bridge the divide. Thus, while using the Web for instruction may help, computer access creates a challenge for implementing online distance education programs for adult learners.

To study at a distance successfully, students need to possess certain characteristics. Whether the education is delivered through print, video, or online means, all distance education programs have certain expectations for students. Successful distance learning students are likely to be self-motivated, be comfortable working independently, and possess strong study and organizational skills. Only a subset of adult basic learners possesses these characteristics. Despite the potential challenges for using ODE with adult learners, many states are exploring ODE as a way to expand access to educational services.

Notes

[1] Some of these definitions are taken from www.webopedia.com

[2] See www.ed.gov/prog_info/StarSchools/

[3] National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999; (www.digitaldividenetwork.org).

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Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational

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Reading #4

Distance Learning Extends the Reach of ABLE Providers

Sara Plantz

Abstract

Distance learning is an attractive delivery option for programs that want to reach new learners and provide additional services for existing learners, and for students who prefer or need to learn outside of the classroom. Pennsylvania has been a leader in experimenting with how to adapt recruitment, orientation, instruction, and assessment for distance learners. While programs do need to make adjustments to serve learners at a distance, there are agencies that have made the transition, and what we have learned from them is paving the way for other agencies to follow suit. Pennsylvania's Distance

Learning Project, an ABLE State Leadership Activity, is available to provide training and technical support to help agencies offer this exciting new opportunity to learners.

How can we reach adults who need our services but cannot or will not come to class?

That was the question that led to the formation of the ABLE-TIU Distance Learning Project in 2000. How can we provide services for adults with childcare needs, transportation hurdles, privacy issues, illness, or other barriers? Six pilot agencies set out to find out how to do just that, using the Workplace Essential Skills curriculum, which allows students to learn workplace math, reading, communication, and employment skills at a distance, using workbooks, video, and the Internet. There are now 21 agencies across Pennsylvania participating in the Distance Learning Project, offering one or more of the following curricula: *Workplace Essential Skills, GED Connection, Madison Heights/Lifelines,* and *TV411.* For descriptions of each of these curricula, go to the Distance Learning Project Web site (www.padistancelearning.org) and click on "Curriculum" on the left side of the page.

Identifying Distance Learners

How do adult learners get started with a distance program? An individual might approach a program and say something to the effect of: "I need my GED, but I cannot come into class. Do you have a distance program?" A second way a learner might enter distance learning is when an intake counselor recognizes that a learner's circumstances and aptitudes might

be ideally suited to distance learning. A third way is when a collaborating partner, such as a CareerLink or prison, refers a potential learner to a literacy provider's distance program. A fourth way is when a classroom teacher uses distance learning to maintain a connection to a learner through a short-term obstacle, such as inclement weather, or a long-term problem, such as a serious injury or a change in work schedule.

To determine whether a learner is well suited to distance learning, a program should assess a variety of factors. Different programs might have different standards, but some possible standards might include a reading level of seventh grade or higher, clearly articulated goals, and previous experience with living or working in a structured environment, whether at home or in the workplace. (One quick self-assessment to determine if you are a good candidate for distance education is available at: www.mnvu.org/mnvu/5102.jsp.)

Orientation

An important step for the learner is orientation. In most agencies, this is done in a classroom setting for up to 12 hours. This allows teachers to see whether students have the requisite technology skills and independent working skills. It also allows a rapport to develop between student and teacher, which will continue after the student begins studying at a distance—from home, a library, or other location with TV/VCR or Internet access. A learner needs to be prepared to take on the challenges of communicating with a teacher at a distance and to be strong in organizational skills, self-motivation, reading, grammar, and spelling. A distance learner who will be using the Internet also needs to be able to use a keyboard, navigate the Web, and use e-mail.

Once learners are deemed ready to learn at a distance, they may access their lessons via the Web at www.pbs.org/literacy, through the mail, or by picking up and dropping off their lessons at drop-off points, such as the local library. Teachers might also offer "drop-in" hours, "call-in" hours, or open lab time, when they are available for supplemental instruction. Even though they might not spend time face-to-face with students, teachers can really get to know their students through phone conversations and e-mail and by viewing their work. Teachers can choose to open a virtual classroom at no cost, where they can view and keep track of student work and communicate with students through a closed e-mail system.

Teachers experience their own learning curve when teaching at a distance. They need to learn to "see" their students in nontraditional ways. Teachers get to know their students through e-mail exchanges, phone calls, and seeing their work. They also need to become familiar with the videos and workbooks associated with the distance learning curricula and be prepared to offer supplemental explanations and practice opportunities when the student needs extra help.

Tracking Progress

Distance teachers need to develop a record-keeping system that allows them to keep a history of student work and communication, so that they can respond to each person's individual personality and needs. For accountability, teachers need to keep track of student work in a "seat time log," an Excel spreadsheet that assigns hours of student work based on completed workbook or Internet assignments and indicates whether the student viewed the instructional video.

The Distance Learning Project offers training for teachers who want to learn to teach at a distance. Training titles include *Planning for Distance in Adult Basic Education and Distance Teaching Strategies,* as well as curriculum training for *GED Connection, Workplace Essential Skills, TV411* and *Madison Heights/LifeLines.* Experienced distance teachers have the option of participating in an online study circle to share their expertise with each other. The Distance Learning Project also recommends taking online courses to get the experience of being a distance learner. In addition to our classes, practitioners may take online classes through ABLE Net (www.lhup.edu/ablenet/prodevop.htm) or ProLiteracy America (www.vluonline.org) They might also consider taking an online class related to a hobby; many online classes are available free or at minimal cost.

There is still much to be learned about how to best recruit, teach, and assess learners at a distance. The Distance Learning Project is working in conjunction with Project IDEAL (www.projectideal.org), a team of researchers at the University of Michigan, and adult basic education agencies in 14 states to answer questions such as "Can distance learners meet the same standards as classroom learners?", "How do we keep learners motivated at a distance so they can accomplish their goals?", and "What types of training do teachers need to prepare them to teach at a distance?"

Pennsylvania is nationally recognized as a leader in delivering adult basic education at a distance because of the efforts of teachers and administrators in participating programs. They have practically "written the book" on how to recruit and teach students at a distance, and collected data so we could find out if adult basic learners could succeed in learning at a distance. We have found that the answer is "yes," there are some learners who can succeed at a distance, and they would not participate in our programs any other way.

Reading #5

Building Participation in Workplace Learning Programs

Debby D'Amico, Diane Lentz, Robert L. Smith, and Marcia L. Taylor

The small staff at the Bernard Kleiman JobLink Learning Center, East Chicago, Indiana, serves a population of 5,700 unionized steel mill workers, 20 to 25 percent of whom take classes each year. This percentage roughly matches that of most workforce education programs, including those which, unlike JobLink, pay workers who attend (Kim & Creighton, 1999). JobLink knew it could be serving more and sought to increase participation among those who had never taken a JobLink class, and those with basic skills needs. Our team decided to undertake some action research to find out how to increase participation.

JobLink, like other Institute for Career Development (ICD) affiliates, is based on a collaboration between labor (United Steelworkers of America, Local 1010) and management (ISPAT Inland Inc., in this case). ICD programs like JobLink present opportunities to workers by using collectively bargained funds to create on-site classes that respond to steelworkers' interests, schedules, and needs to build portable skills.

Prior to conducting the research project, JobLink employed a range of recruitment strategies to draw workers to the program: informational presentations at meetings, marketing give-aways, open houses, flyers posted and mailed home, newsletter and registration booklets sent to homes, articles in local newspapers, and community projects. In addition, JobLink recruits and trains learning advocates, called Friends of JobLink, from among participating workers. These advocates then encourage their peers in the plant to participate in programs. Other recruitment strategies include offering "Bridge" classes (high-interest courses), and classes to spouses of workers who have taken one class in the past year. JobLink also has a Web site and is featured at the orientation for new employees.

The Action Research Process

Action research in adult literacy places value upon people's knowledge, assuming that participants in research can analyze their own situations and design their own solutions (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Rather than claiming a dispassionate stance toward research findings, action research is by definition, practical; the findings of the research will be put into use. Methodologies vary. In this project, three research methodologies were used: focus groups, telephone surveys, and plant-wide surveys.

A workplace learning center, JobLink has a well-defined population and the means to contact potential participants. We consciously influenced the study population by selecting departments with high numbers of workers in low skill jobs, such as Janitorial, Labor, and Sequence Support. By cross-checking enrollment data with lists of employed workers in these departments, JobLink instructor Taylor and coordinator Lentz were able to identify those workers who had never taken a JobLink class. By subtracting new hires, they generated a list of 158 workers. While it is an over-generalization to assume that all of these workers needed basic skills instruction, narrowing the target group seemed a reasonable way to identify perceived barriers experienced by non-participants and to gain the information necessary to strengthen marketing strategies for that population.

We formulated this set of questions to guide our action research:

- What are barriers to participation?

- How can we improve marketing efforts?

- Can focus groups and/or telephone surveys improve outreach?

- What course content will attract non-participants?

- What expectations and goals would non-participants bring?

Contacting about 150 steelworkers from the sample, Lentz and Taylor used a telephone script that was non-threatening, upbeat, and positive. For example, they began by asking, "Have you ever taken a class at JobLink?" When the respondent said no, they said, "You are exactly the kind of person we need to talk with. We'd like you to help us learn how to bring in more members to JobLink." We wanted people, rather than feeling defensive about non-participation, to know that their opinions were valuable.

The research team learned that it takes many calls to convene a successful focus group, especially when no incentives are available. For example, a random sample of names from our pool of 150 was used to make 22 telephone contacts. Of these, only nine workers expressed willingness to participate in a group. Only five actually participated.

Once convened, focus group members were asked these questions:

1. How did you feel about our phone call?

2. How and when did you first hear about JobLink?

3. Have you ever read any of our fliers? Where did you see them?

4. Tell us a couple of good things and a couple of bad things you've heard about JobLink.

5. Were you ever interested in a particular class?

6. What has kept you from taking classes?

7. What would it take for you to take a class with us?

8. Are you making plans for your retirement? What kinds of classes could help you prepare for it?

9. What advice do you have for us regarding how to market our classes?

10. Is there anything we didn't touch on that you'd like to add?

The focus group provided informative group interactions and good information. Many of the people contacted by phone were not going to participate in focus groups, however, so the team decided that the phone calls themselves should also be used for data gathering. Lentz and Taylor used a flow chart approach. They asked respondents in phone interviews questions two, three, four, and six from the focus group protocol (the numbered list above). Those who indicated they would not attend a focus group were then asked questions five and seven through 10. Lentz and Taylor were always open to exploring valuable new topics or directions introduced by workers. Altogether, three focus groups with a combined total of 10 participants and 28 additional phone interviews were conducted from March to August 2001, for a total of 38 steelworkers contacted. Although the information gleaned was rich, we decided to conduct a survey that broadened the scope to all departments.

A Plant-wide Survey

JobLink staff has administered plant-wide surveys every two years since 1990, usually mailing them to all potential participants. Average response rate tends to be about 15 percent with or without incentives. The 2001 survey was tailored for non-participants as informed by other research methods described above. We asked the same questions as those posed in the focus groups and via the telephone. In addition, non-participants were given a list of courses and asked to identify ones they might be interested in taking. To ensure a better response rate, the Friends of JobLink distributed and conducted the survey. We trained the advocates in how to approach non-participants. It was critical that non-participants did not sense that advocates would lecture them for not attending; instead, we presented an opportunity to improve the program with their suggestions. Our response rate was 57 percent (of 170 surveys given to the advocates, 97 were returned).

Overall Findings

The research process itself constituted a form of recruitment. As a result of the calls, workers had more information about the program, and were reminded of its value. Five of the 10 individuals who participated in focus groups and four of the 28 interviewed by phone registered for their first classes after contact. This represents nearly one-quarter of those contacted. JobLink has decided to incorporate calls as a regular part of outreach.

While few respondents had heard negative feedback about JobLink classes, fears about learning still held these workers back from classes. We used the framework proposed by adult education theorist Patricia Cross (1981) to look analytically at the issues raised in both focus groups and telephone conversations with workers. Cross's model (See Figure 1) was designed to show the interactions among the forces leading adult learners towards and away from participation in adult education. The research team mapped the responses of workers in focus groups and phone interviews along the model's dimensions, separating out the responses of participants in JobLink programs from those of non-participants.

Figure 1: **Chain of Response Model**
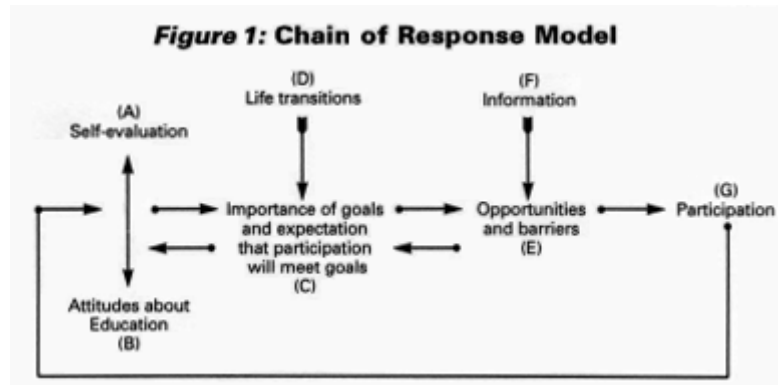
K. Patricia Cross (1981). *Adults as Learners,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (p.124).

Self-Evaluation and Attitudes About Education

Responses about self-evaluation and attitudes toward education fall under points A and B of Cross's model. These responses included the following:

- I just need a broom and a mop…I'm too old for school.

- If it's a question of having to read books or communicate in English, I think that would be really difficult.

- Learning is slow for me…I worry about reading.

- There are so many people that want to come, but are afraid. Lot of people figure that you have to know something before you start.

Sometimes negative feelings about oneself, and perceptions of school-like environments as threatening, occur even within a context of steady unionized work with good pay. Steel mills now require a high school education, a policy that undoubtedly increases the reluctance of workers who did not complete high school to come forward, especially in times when jobs are threatened due to recession and industry downsizing. This is a good example of how a motivating factor, such as the need to acquire new skills before one is laid off, can collide with the stigma of having low skills to prevent workers from taking advantage of these opportunities. At the same time, for steelworkers, having a good job removes what is a critical incentive for many adults who seek education.

Goals and Expectations

In Cross's model, strong goals and the expectation that education will help learners meet these goals (point C) can push adults to participate in education. For steelworkers, doing something interesting and taking control of their own careers are strong motivating goals. Classes that show them how to "do more with less," by shoring up family finances or doing their own repair work, accomplish other kinds of goals. Uneasy economics affect steelworker expectations that the industry can and will continue to provide secure employment, and thus increase the motivation for taking classes. Finally, steelworkers cite making a community contribution as an important goal. This is accomplished through JobLink classes that participate in Habitat for Humanity or assist other community organizations.

The focus group and phone research also provided information about what kinds of classes might attract previously unreached workers into JobLink. The largest set of responses (36 percent) suggested career- or skill-specific classes, such as commercial drivers license preparation. Computer courses were second, accounting for 27 percent of responses. The next most popular response was for pre-technical courses, such as auto mechanics or electricity. Personal development topics, such as stained glass making and financial planning, drew interest from 18 percent, and the smallest group, 12 percent, indicated interest in basic skills, such as writing and algebra. In general, those wanting classes that supported alternative careers were split evenly between newcomers (those in the mill less than five years) and old timers.

The survey results echoed these responses: 68 percent showed interest in home improvement classes, 65 percent in computer courses, and 63 percent were interested in courses for certification such as heating and air conditioning or small engine repair. In contrast, only 33 percent expressed interest in basic skills courses.

The focus group and phone research generated a sense among the interviewers that courses leading to certification and more career-specific approaches might respond more closely to the goals and expectations of both participating and non-participating workers. This would include building sequences or a continuum of courses in particular areas of interest, such as computers. The research indicates that courses perceived as taking people somewhere, because they offer a credential or a tangible career outcome, might create a stronger pull in the area of goals and expectations. JobLink has modified its offerings with this finding in mind.

Life Transitions

Life transitions, D in Cross's model, did not emerge as significant in the focus groups, phone interviews and, surveys.

Opportunities and Barriers

Opportunities and barriers (point E) refer to institutional factors that influence participation in adult education, such as creating programs that serve working adults at convenient times, thereby overcoming barriers of scheduling that conventional hours might present.

In the 2001 survey of JobLink participants, 97.3 percent rated the classes good to excellent. The workers have often favorably noted and now come to expect the convenient location, scheduling that accommodates shift work, and the hands-on approach to learning that JobLink provides. Still, barriers are commonly cited among those who have yet to participate. Focus group participants and phone interviewees complained of too little free time, often due to overtime hours worked; family obligations; health reasons; and fear or procrastination. Ten percent said they had no excuse for not participating, while another seven percent said the classes they wanted were full. No reason was cited by 12 percent, while others said they were too old, lazy, or worried about language issues or skills. Despite flexible scheduling around shifts, 10 percent gave shift work as a reason for not taking classes. Also identified as barriers are poor hearing (a common result of working around heavy machinery), and the length of time it takes to reach goals such as acquiring a GED or college education while working full-time.

Our survey data mirrored the verbal reports' emphasis on lack of time. As Cross points out, the major issue that adults cite, time or lack thereof, really represents a sense that participation in educational activities is not as high a priority as other things. Steelworkers who do participate, for example, see lack of time as a less potent barrier than it was in the past, when people had fewer opportunities for leisure learning. They see working a lot of overtime as "greedy," and say that for them, taking classes is more important than big paychecks (Smith et al., 2001).

Information

As Cross (1981) notes, access to information is a critical component (F). The 2001 non-participant survey indicates a fairly high level of common knowledge about JobLink, as do the focus group and interview data. Survey results show that 79 percent of workers know where JobLink is, while 53 percent understand that classes do not have to be job related. Almost half knew that identical classes are offered twice each day to accommodate shift workers, and 42 percent realized they did not need to take a test to take a class. However, only 25 percent knew about their annual $1,800 tuition assistance benefit and 13 percent about online classes.

Despite an admirable range of past outreach efforts, research among workers added some important nuances to existing recruitment efforts. Out of the first focus group, researchers learned that JobLink fliers were perceived as informational, but needed to include motivational messages as well. Focus group participants expressed fears of "keeping

up" in the class, indicating that workers may need more explicit information about what is required in a class. Those who wanted to upgrade their skills, for example, had considerable trepidation about enrolling. Focus group participants also suggested finding prominent places in the plant for JobLink fliers. Responses showed that course content was very important to workers' decisions to participate.

Conclusions

The focus groups, telephone interviews, and surveys generated two kinds of new knowledge regarding participation in JobLink classes by steelworkers who had previously not taken classes. The first of these was procedural: the process of research itself resulted in higher enrollments among this group. Information delivered through this personal contact appeared to reframe the self-evaluation of individuals regarding their participation in education, such that nearly a quarter (nine of the 38 individuals) of those contacted signed up for classes. The contact seems to provide a context for reconsidering one's relationship to educational opportunity. Hand delivering the survey resulted in an unprecedented return rate, another example of procedural realization from the study.

The second kind of knowledge resulting from the research is greater understanding of our constituents, particularly those steelworkers who have not participated in past offerings. Together, workers and researchers created new understanding about factors that encourage and discourage participation. This will be used to generate changes in course offerings and marketing.

Taken together, these two kinds of knowledge allow us to affect the interconnected factors influencing non-participating workers at several points of Cross's model. The procedural knowledge has an impact on points A (self-evaluation) and B (attitudes toward education). The research strongly suggests that this kind of intervention, in the form of personal phone calls and focus groups, can affect participation.

The knowledge of workers and their goals emerging from the findings is prompting ICD and JobLink staff to re-think the content, sequencing, and outcomes of courses, affecting the model at C (goals and expectations). In addition, work on assessment can strengthen the link between goals and expectations by better structuring a conversation between worker and staff person that helps each design a better fit between programs and needs. The development of new tools, such as online courses, can also ensure a better match between worker goals and participation. Finally, suggestions from workers about what to communicate about programs (point F on the model) have been incorporated.

Where personal contact with non-participants is possible, our work suggests that it is worth the time and effort to make phone calls and set up focus groups. Talking with those whom the program hopes to serve is a good way to convince them that their fears about participating may be

unfounded, to learn from them about the particular barriers they experience, and to create programs that speak clearly to their interests and needs.

Acknowledgement

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About the Authors

Debby D'Amico was research associate and liaison for career development at the Adult Literacy Media Alliance (ALMA) during the time the research was conducted. ALMA is the creator of TV411.

Diane Lentz has been the coordinator of the Bernard Kleiman JobLink Learning Center since its inception in 1990, serving as part of the original team that designed the career development program at ISPAT, Inland, Inc. Before that, she was an instructor and program coordinator at the Hammond Adult Education Program, working with GED and ESOL students.

Robert L. Smith is senior program specialist for the Institute for Career Development in Merrillville, IN. ICD is the national office established to assist all of the steel industry's Career Development Programs.

Marcia L. Taylor has been teaching adult basic education and English for speakers of other languages and assisting with program development and research at JobLink since 1990. Her students now range from literacy level to college prep and beyond. Her particular interest is in developing creative writing skills.

Reading #6

Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?*

Mary Jeannette Kelly

Abstract

This action research project explored the use of cooperative learning* within the classroom as a means of improving retention rates in G.E.D. programs. Would encouraging cooperative learning among adults pursuing a high school diploma increase retention percentages within the G.E.D. program? Student response to cooperative learning obtained by two surveys, staff observations of the class, and a class-by-class journal recording my own class-to-class responses revealed an overall acceptance of cooperative learning by G.E.D. students. Prior attendance records (1992-1996) verified an overall increase of student retention for this G.E.D. session. Still, because of the many variables affecting adult learners, a second study is recommended to reinforce the effectiveness of cooperative learning as a means of bettering G.E.D. student retention.

The Problem:

As a G.E.D. instructor for six years, student retention has been of a major concern. Prior to substantiating retention percentages, I was aware that about half of our original enrollment would drop out of the program before its end. Unable to predict or control outside factors in students' lives (i.e., transportation, family complications, work demands, etc.) I focused instead on classroom environment. Again, based upon my instructor experience, I noted an overall lack of self-esteem in classes that

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often resulted in student discouragement and consequent "dropping out" of the program. However, in a former and particularly successful G.E.D. group, I had noted greater interaction among these students than witnessed in most classes. These students not only problem-solved together without instructor intervention, but built a support system among themselves as well, eliciting encouragement and building self-esteem. This group of students were rarely absent, completed the G.E.D. course, and passed the state exam. Could I artificially produce a similar classroom setting by utilizing cooperative learning? Cooperative learning, as used in this paper, shall be defined as: a non-competitive learning environment in which–two or more students work together to evaluate, understand, and utilize information in shared problem-solving. Certainly such a setting would encourage interaction among students, and student led learning would perhaps present a less threatening environment than the traditional teacher-led instruction wherein the teacher often becomes just one more "authority figure" in the student's life. It seemed that students encouraged in their progress by peers, students raising their self-esteem were more apt to complete the G.E.D. program.

The 14 G.E.D. students participating in this action research project were all Susquehanna–County residents. Sponsored by the Susquehanna County Literacy Council, this 12-week program is held both in the fall and spring. Each session is scheduled for 100 hours of instruction, running for two hours per class, Monday through Thursday. This project elected to study the Spring session which began this year in March and ended shortly after Memorial Day, 1997. While the students ranged in ages from 17 to 61, the average student profile was that of a female 29.8 years of age, who was unemployed and head-of-household. Average high school grade completed was 9.5. As determined by the Pennsylvania Adult Education Locator test, the average verbal score for this group of students was 21.4, while the average math score was 16.8. A perfect score for this test is 50, thus giving our average student a 76.4% grade overall. Three males and eleven females comprised the original enrollment of the Spring 1997 semester of this G.E.D. class.

The Intervention:

Dwindling attendance is often evident early on in G.E.D. classes. Conversations with–other G.E.D. instructors from other programs, as well as feedback from other county G.E.D. programs as communicated to our office, confirm that high retention in these adult programs is a problem. State retention rates from a Pennsylvania Department of Education study (1992-1993) showed a 44% completion rate in the G.E.D. program. Such reflection and statistics demonstrated that we are not as successful in helping as large a number of students obtain their G.E.D. as we'd like. If students invested not only their time, but also attempted personal commitments with other students in the class, then perhaps completion of the 12-week course would be more realistic. It was my hope that with students teaching students and students discovering that they were capable of learning with little teacher intervention, their place would be

secured in the G.E.D. program for its duration. Students might develop a support system through classroom interaction that would also provide an avenue for problem-solving in their personal lives, problems which frequently plague attendance and follow-through within the G.E.D. program. Realizing these goals of increased self-esteem and personal commitment to other students ideally would increase student retention.

Students noted benefits to cooperative learning within the first few weeks of classes. A survey distributed in my fifth class utilizing the group setting generally reflected positive responses. Responses to the question, "Do you like working in groups?" included the following: "It's easier to work in groups...makes class go faster...." "It helps if I don't understand something." "You can learn from other people." Such answers were typical of student feedback. I was satisfied that, while attendance varied among students, all students still attended some classes.

During my first meeting with the students, I explained the concept of cooperative learning and my hope to incorporate it in the classes I instructed. (Of the five subject areas tested for the G.E.D. diploma, I teach Writing Skills and Literature and the Arts. Two additional instructors are responsible for the instruction of History, Science, and Math). Student reaction was generally one of apprehension and doubt. None of the students had been exposed to a classroom setting other than the traditional teacher-as-lecturer method. None of these students knew each other before enrolling in this class.

In determining student group composition, it was my original goal to place students in groups of three to four students with one student in each group whose subject area skills were high. These stronger students were selected according to student scores obtained through pretests in the Writing Skills area. In the original group of 14 students, four students scored better than 80% in the Writing Skills pre-test. Each of these four students were to be the "nucleus" for a student group. What I did not foresee was the problem of student absences. Varying student attendance meant varying student groups. This may, however, have benefited the cooperative learning process. Working with a variety of partners offered new perspectives and new acquaintances. Of the 14 students responding to Survey A, only one felt that changing members within a group adversely affected the learning process.

Generally, I introduced new material to the class as a whole, utilizing text and white board examples. When students and I were satisfied that they understood the basis of the material, they were then asked to separate into groups where they utilized cooperative learning to solve problems compiled from their own work, to complete workbook exercises, and/or to use games that reinforced the night's lesson. Students would ask other questions and check each other's progress. Before moving to the next lesson, I asked students to realistically evaluate their comprehension of the new material. Students would remain in their groups throughout the remainder of the class ÃD.

The baseline used for this project included attendance records for the Spring sessions of 1992 through 1996. Comparing figures from each year's initial enrollment to the number of students still participating six weeks into the program established a percentage of retention. Because of the Action Research Project deadline, data from the last six weeks of this G.E.D. instruction could not be included in this study. The success of cooperative learning as an intervention to increase retention in G.E.D. classes was measured by comparing the average retention percentage computed from the previous five years' Spring attendance records with this year's retention percentage. My goal was to increase this retention percentage by 15%. Intervention success was also measured by responses to student and peer surveys. If student response to cooperative learning was predominantly positive and if retention increased by 15%, then the intervention could be considered successful. To consider the intervention of cooperative learning unconditionally successful would, in this case, be premature. Because data collection was terminated before the last scheduled G.E.D. class, the impressive increase in retention as demonstrated by this Action Research Project would not necessarily reflect a similar retention at the end of May. Too, because cooperative learning was implemented in but 33% of the G.E.D. classes, one might question if cooperative learning had sufficient impact to encourage retention of students, or if this was simply a particularly dedicated and motivated student group.

The Documentation Tools:

Aside from previous attendance records, a class-by-class journal, student surveys, and a peer response gave a record of student reaction to cooperative learning.

The Results of the Intervention:

As previously noted, student response to learning within groups was, for the most part, favorable. Surveys completed during the fifth and eleventh classes (of the twelve class sessions) both revealed that students favored cooperative learning. Of the eight second surveys returned, only one student stated that learning in student groups was not effective in learning new material. Fifty percent of the students responding to the second survey "often" received encouragement from peers, and 50% of this group said that they "sometimes" received encouragement from their peers. (In retrospect, a pertinent question to include in the survey would have been, "Does working with other students help your classroom attendance?")   While students seemed to note benefits of cooperative learning, teacher/peers rated student self-esteem from very low to satisfactory. When asked if students tended to work together, again responses varied. The math instructor stated "no," while the program coordinator said, "Seems like they do, especially math class."

Perceptions of how the students viewed themselves and of how the instructors viewed the students were widely divergent. While all students felt that cooperative learning could "often" or "sometimes" be

utilized in all G.E.D. subject areas, the other two instructors rarely or never employed cooperative learning. Initially, students seemed reluctant to move into a group setting, but by the fifth class I no longer noted this reluctance. By the middle of the 12-week instruction, I noted students problem-solving together without my intervention. Two students with sporadic attendance did not feel that cooperative learning was beneficial in learning classroom material; I attribute this negativism directly to their lack of exposure to cooperative learning.

Reflections on the Intervention

According to the criteria for success, the intervention of cooperative learning was successful as a means of raising retention rates in our G.E.D. Spring classes. The average retention percentage computed from the previous five year's attendance records for the same period of time was 57.3%. This April, the retention of the original enrollment of 14 students is 85.7%. The second survey demonstrated that 87.3% of those students completing said survey felt that cooperative learning was "often" or "sometimes" an effective learning tool. Consequently, cooperative learning as a means of improving retention can be viewed as a successful intervention. Personal observations substantiate the benefits of cooperative learning. While I noted varying degrees of interaction within the student groups, my general evaluation was that students were comfortable with each other and "on track" with assignments. Although this group of students seemed more reserved than students in former G.E.D. classes, I observed an increasingly relaxed class atmosphere. Because of changing group composition, students appeared at ease with each other regardless of group composition. Thus, quantitative data (increased retention) as well as qualitative data (journal, student and peer reflection) indicates that criteria for success was met for this project.

A second phase of this project would address problems and/or questions that arose in the project's first phase. Future intervention might include more student commitment, perhaps in the form of an informal agreement among students to regular attendance when at all possible. Utilizing this group-centered learning in other areas of G.E.D. instruction–might further reinforce student commitment to the program. Furthermore, I feel that an opportunity for student socialization prior to the initial use of student groups might lessen the stress and reluctance that I first sensed among students. This might be achieved through informal, non-competitive games or perhaps a pre-class party. Finally, it would only be logical to follow the class to its completion to reassess retention rates rather than assess halfway through the program. It might prove to be beneficial to interview the students more frequently about their progress and assessments of the intervention.

Successful student retention is key to successful G.E.D. graduates. To retain these students in our G.E.D. programs, motivation is necessary. It appears, based on this study, that cooperative learning might be one means of motivating and consequently retaining a higher percentage of

students in the G.E.D. classroom. Creating more student commitment to the program through more extensive use of cooperative learning, utilizing more student involvement in constructing and assessing a cooperative learning structure, and incorporating a study to include data throughout the program's duration might prove beneficial in a second phase of this project.

Appendix

Student Survey #1

1. Do you like working in groups? Why or why not?
2. Does the instructor give you enough information on the subject before moving you into groups?
3. Does changing partners within a group affect its effectiveness?
4. What suggestions do you have for making learning in a group setting more effective?

Student Survey #2

Please take a few moments to consider then answer these questions about cooperative (group) learning. Please check just box for each statement/question. [Often, Sometimes, Never]

1. Does working in student groups make learning new material easier?

2. Do you ever use collaborative learning in another instructor's class? (Check all that apply).
      History
      Math
      Science

3. Do you think collaborative learning could be successfully used in other sections? (Check all that apply).
      History
      Math
      Science

4. I prefer working in a group setting.

5. I am more comfortable asking another student questions than the instructor.

6. Working with other students gives me confidence about my knowledge of the subject.

7. Working with other students shows me different ways of approaching and solving problems.

8. Other students encourage me in my classwork.

9. Issues NOT relating to class are discussed in student groups.

10. I receive encouragement/support in issues outside of the classroom environment.

11. If I miss a class, I can depend on someone in my group to give me the work that I missed.

12. Working with other students has helped me to know more people in our class than I would have without the group settings.

13. Have you ever used this type of learning before this class?

14. Have you tried this type of learning elsewhere?

15. Do you feel differently about cooperative learning now than you did when we first began working in groups? Explain.

Please add any additional comments—negative or positive—at the bottom of the page. Thank you for all of your help.

Peer Survey–

April 22, 1997

To My Colleagues: Could you P- L- E- A- S- E take a moment and respond to this survey fro my PAARN project?(Merci beaucoup)

1. Do you ever pair or group students to work together in class?
2. Do students tend to work together even if you have not specifically requested they do so?
3. Do students seek each other's opinions and/or explanations in your class? Before consulting you for instruction?
4. Does there seem to be a unity among students? If so, does this camaraderie seem more obvious with this group than with former groups?
5. How would you rate the overall self-esteem of this group?

G.E.D. Retention Rates

Spring 1992	March 1	12 students
	April 30	8
Spring 1993	March 1	13
	April 30	8
Spring 1994	March 7	20
	April 30	13
Spring 1995	March 1	23
	April 30	10
Spring 1996	March 4	14
	April 30	7
Spring 1997	March 3	14
	April 22	12

From Early March Registration

1992	66.7%
1993	61.5%
1994	65.0%
1995	43.5%
1996	50.0%

Average 1992–1996 = 57.3%

| 1997 | 85.7% |

Reading #7

Improving Student Drop-out Rates Through Student Observations and Peer Contacts*

Lisa Heffern

Heffern, L. (2003). *Improving student drop-out rates through student observations and peer contacts* (A 2002–03 PAARN Monograph). North East, PA: Pennsylvania Action Research Network.

Abstract

The Mercer County Career Center conducted an action research project to determine if participation in a student observation opportunity and peer contact would ease the stress and anxiety of returning to school and would result in longer retention in our program. We compared this year's students who participated in the research project to last year's students who didn't get a chance to observe or have peer contact. Other measures of success include positive feed back from focus group meetings, surveys, and documented researcher's personal journal. Classes were held at the Mercer County CareerLink on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays for three months and each class was two and a half hours long. A total of 88 learners participated in the study. The intervention was successful, producing a 19.4 increase in attendance.

The Problem

Student retention is a common problem in adult education situations. Students leave programs before the completion of 15 hours for various reasons. The student observation plan focuses on students who come into the program with identified fears and anxieties about returning to school through a question screening process. This plan gives students the opportunity to observe how the class is presented. Students are also given

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a buddy, a peer who has been in the class for at least 20 hours, and this gives the student another source of information about how the class works.

The student observation retention plan focuses on making the classroom a safe environment for anxious students to learn and make mistakes without feeling embarrassed. The plan centers on giving identified anxious students the opportunity to observe how the class is presented. The anxious students are also given a mentor, to help them feel included in our open entry open exit classroom, and to give the student an opportunity to ask questions he/she may not feel comfortable asking the instructor.

Successful programs often propose that retention is related to how well students are integrated socially and academically into a program. Academic integration is defined as how well a student feels that he or she fits into a program. Research also indicates the importance of program commitment to this process. Program commitment is concerned with the feelings of attachment or belonging a student establishes with the program.

Sanders (1998) emphasized the importance of a total system of integrated behaviors and structured sets of reciprocal relationships that exist among staff and students, which ultimately enhance the survival rate and/or persistence of a non-traditional student, including career decisions making, program commitment, and goal commitment.

I had surveyed several adult education students who stated that they felt anxious about returning to an educational program. They reported various reasons for their anxiety such as past negative educational experiences where someone embarrassed them or said something unkind. The students all said they would like to observe classes before beginning the program. The students stated that they would probably attend more classes if they felt our classroom was a safe environment to learn and make mistakes. Therefore, the researcher offered a student observation and peer contract plan.

I assumed that adults were not participating in adult education because they felt anxious about returning to an educational environment where they may be put on the spot or embarrassed due to their lack of skills or knowledge. This assumption turned out to be true when the attendance records of last year's students were compared to the attendance records of this year's anxious students.

The Intervention

All students were interviewed using a questionnaire to identify anxious students. Once the student was identified as anxious they were given an opportunity to observe class before they started. Students were also given a peer contact so they would feel part of the group immediately and they

would have someone to ask questions of, if they didn't feel comfortable asking the instructor.

The student observation and peer contact plan was implemented on September 3, 2002 and by September 15, 2002 my classes were full. Classes were offered on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. They were divided into a morning group and an afternoon group. Students met with the researcher/instructor each week in an informal classroom setting at the Mercer County CareerLink. Instruction was based on reading, language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics. A total of 88 students participated in the study. The class configuration consisted of 16 students in the morning session and 16 students in the afternoon session. The individual students changed as established students met their goals, left the program, and new students joined.

Informed consent was asked of the students when they enrolled in the class. All the students consented since their intent was to improve their skills or gain the skills needed to pass the GED. The need for this observation and peer contact plan was identified when many students acknowledged their anxieties about returning to class. Retention would greatly increase their chances of achieving their education and career goals. Students expressed many different reasons for their anxieties, but those who expressed negative educational experiences said they liked the idea of the observation period and the peer contact.

I determined that an increase of 20 percent would be considered a measure of success. It was also hoped that all the students who participated would have an increase in TABE test scores. High enrollment numbers would also be considered important. Focus groups would also be held in an effort to elicit feed back from students as to their impressions of the observation and peer contact plan and its impact on their ability to attend class and succeed in their educational and career goals. 50 % of the students who reached one of their goals would be considered a success.

Documentation Tools

The effects of the intervention were measured with the following tools:

1. Attendance Records – I compared last year's attendance records to this year's attendance records.

2. Focus groups – Focus groups centered on the impact of the observation and peer contact on attendance. What the students liked about the plan and what improvements we could make on the observation and peer contact plan.

3. Enrollment numbers – Sixteen students in the morning and evening class (32 total), which was the maximum capacity the classroom, could accommodate.

4. Teacher's/ Researcher's Journal – The researcher maintained a journal and made notes throughout and after each day.

Results of the Intervention

I hypothesized that anxious students who have had a negative educational experience would not complete 30 hours or more of study in an adult education setting. About 50% of the students I enrolled had medium to high ability levels. Many of the students reported that they were attending classes in order to improve their job prospects and go on to a trade school or college. Some of the students stated they wanted to get their GED to set an example for their own children.

All the students were interviewed individually on their first day of class. The observation and peer contact plan was explained to the students before the enrollment process. All of the students—except two—agreed to participate in the plan. I also explained that the program is open-ended, which means they can start when they chooses and finish when they choose. Because our program is individualized no two students are working on the same lesson at the same time. All students studied the five major subject areas of mathematics, language arts, reading, science and social studies. In addition all students participated in the Workplace Essential Skills Employment skills training.

My classroom is located in a CareerLink site, and this added to our success. There were numerous resources available to us such as job, college and training applications. Students were also informed of required testing for employment and post secondary institutions in order for students to see how obtaining their GED impacts their future career success. Students were aided in writing a resume, registering their information on the PA CareerLink website, and searching for jobs on the websites. Students were encouraged to look at the posted job listings that listed educational requirements and wages for each available job.

Each student was given a folder to keep his or her materials organized. I prepared all the materials so they could be placed in the binder. Organization was stressed as it was observed that those who struggle the most with all subjects were extremely disorganized and had difficulty locating previously mastered material when needed to assist with learning a new topic. As students became more organized, their connections between topics grew stronger, and they mastered concepts quickly.

My classroom setting was very informal. Our program is open-entry/open-exit and individualized thus, eliminating competition between students, and reducing anxiety. The peer contact opened the door for peer tutoring. I observed on several occasions an *old* student showing a new student how to complete a task if I was in the middle of helping another student.

The following results were obtained as a result of the data collection. All success criteria were achieved.

1. Attendance—Last year I had 10 individuals complete 30 hours of study. This year I had 31 individuals complete 30 hours of study.

2. Focus Groups—Focus groups were held every 14 weeks.

3. Teacher's/Researcher's Journal – Participation in class was a very positive experience.

Excerpts for the journal can be found in the "Reflections" section of this monograph.

The only problems that arose were finding seating for all the students who wanted to join the class. I had to split my class into two groups, a morning and afternoon session. I had several students gain employment and their work schedules conflicted with class. For those who could only attend one or two days a week, we worked around their schedule and for those whom it was impossible for them to attend, I referred them to classes in the area that fit their circumstances.

Reflections of the Intervention

Although all success criteria were not met or exceeded, this intervention was successful. We saw a 19.4 increase in attendance. The true impact of the intervention is best derived from the focus groups' responses. Following are several quotes recorded during the focus groups.

> "I really liked the chance to observe in class because I got the chance to see how the class was run. I also liked being assigned a buddy to show me the ropes and this helped me feel like I was part of the group."

> "I always hated school because my family moved around a lot and I was always the new kid. I always felt like the outsider and I never felt like I was part of the class. It's had to break into a click that is already established. I really liked the student contact because that helped me feel like I fit in the class."

> "I hated school growing up but I don't mind coming to this class because everyone is made to feel welcome and the student buddy helped me break into the already made group.

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