

# STEPS FOR FACILITATING SESSION TWO

**Objectives:** By the end of this session, participants will be able to...

- Explain three perspectives on adult student persistence, motivation, and retention.
- Differentiate the five pathways for program participation that are determined by personal and environmental factors.
- Recommend program strategies for increasing adult student persistence.
- Analyze their own program's retention data to determine current retention rates and intensity of instruction.
- List practical ideas that they might try in their own programs to support student persistence.

**Time:** 3½ hours

## Preparation:



**NEWSPRINTS** (Prepare ahead of time: Underlined in the steps)

- \_\_\_ Session Two Objectives
- \_\_\_ Session Two Agenda
- \_\_\_ Discussion Questions: Strategies
- \_\_\_ Strategies for Improving Student Persistence
- \_\_\_ Discussion Questions: Five Pathways
- \_\_\_ Five Pathways for Program Participation
- \_\_\_ Ways Programs Might Support Students



**HANDOUT** (Photocopy ahead of time: *Italicized* in the steps)

- \_\_\_ Key Concepts Related to Adult Student Persistence



**READINGS BY TOPIC ASSIGNED FOR SESSION THREE** (Photocopy a few copies of each ahead of time: **Bolded** in the steps)

*Goals*

- \_\_\_ Building the Desire, Building the Ability
- \_\_\_ ODWIN: A Program Rooted in History
- \_\_\_ Look Before You Leap: Helping Prospective Learners Make Informed Educational Choices
- \_\_\_ The Effects of Continuing Goal-Setting on Persistence in a Math Classroom

*Sponsors*

- \_\_\_ Sponsors and Sponsorship
- \_\_\_ Reflections on the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project
- \_\_\_ The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups
- \_\_\_ Powerful Motivation: The Long-time Tutor is Motivated by Helping Learners

*Instruction*

- \_\_\_ Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting to the Needs of All Learners
- \_\_\_ A Conversation with FOB...The Best of Both Worlds: Using Individualized and Group Instruction
- \_\_\_ The Community High School of Vermont: An Uncommon High School in an Uncommon Setting
- \_\_\_ Separate Yet Happy

*Counseling and Referrals*

- \_\_\_ Beyond the Scope of the Teachers: Deciding to Employ a Social Worker

- \_\_\_ Who Helps the Helpers? Supporting Counselors in Adult Basic Education
- \_\_\_ A Mind/Body/Learning Approach to Counseling: Helping Students Handle Stress
- \_\_\_ Retention and the GED

***Instructional Modes***

- \_\_\_ Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills
- \_\_\_ Solving Problems with Computer-Assisted Instruction at the East Texas Literacy Council
- \_\_\_ Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?
- \_\_\_ Getting into Groups

***Student Involvement***

- \_\_\_ Power, Literacy, and Motivation
- \_\_\_ Build Motivation by Building Learner Motivation
- \_\_\_ Staying in a Literacy Program
- \_\_\_ Peer Tutors/Mentors: Effect on Motivation and Persistence in GED Classroom

**MATERIALS**

- \_\_\_ three signs – Agree, Disagree, Not Sure
- \_\_\_ blank newsprint sheets
- \_\_\_ newsprint easel
- \_\_\_ markers, pens, tape

## Steps:

### 1. WELCOME, SESSION TWO OBJECTIVES, AND AGENDA (10 MINUTES)

#### Note to Facilitator

Before the session starts, post around the room three signs in large letters as follows:

- on one wall: AGREE
- on the opposite wall: DISAGREE
- on the back wall: NOT SURE

- **Welcome participants** back to the study circle. If the group is more than a few people and a significant amount of time has passed since the last meeting, you may want to ask participants to re-introduce themselves.
- **Ask participants to refer to the handout *Sample Ground Rules*** from Session One and briefly review the ground rules. Remind participants that it is your job, as facilitator, to remind them of these ground rules if you see them being broken.
- **Post the newsprint Session Two Objectives**. Go over the objectives briefly with the group.

#### Session Two Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain three perspectives on adult student persistence, motivation, and retention.
- Differentiate the five pathways for program participation that are determined by personal and environmental factors.
- Recommend program strategies for increasing adult student persistence.
- Analyze your own program's retention data to determine current retention rates and intensity of instruction.
- List practical ideas that you might try in your own programs to support student persistence

- **Post the newsprint Session Two Agenda**. Describe each activity briefly. Ask participants if they have any questions about the agenda.

**Session Two Agenda**

- Welcome, Session Two Objectives, and Agenda (Doing)
- Strategies for Improving Student Persistence
- Increasing Persistence: Discussing Strategies from the Research
- Reading Discussion—Five Pathways
- A Closer Look at the Five Pathways
- Evaluation of Session Two and Assignment for Session Three

**2. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT PERSISTENCE (30 MINUTES)**

- **Explain that this first activity is designed** to allow participants to talk about their own experience in relation to this topic before discussing the theories and concepts contained in the readings.
- **Post the newspaper Discussion Questions: Strategies.** Use these questions to facilitate a discussion of participants' experiences with student persistence.

**Discussion Questions: Strategies**

- Tell us about one strategy your program has implemented, or has considered implementing, in order to increase students' persistence.
- What impact did implementing this strategy have on student motivation and persistence (or what impact do you think it would have)? Why do you think it had/would have this impact?

**Note to Facilitator**  
 Student motivation and persistence may have different meanings for the Study Circle participants.  
 The group may wish to develop a definition for each these terms.



- **Post the newspaper Strategies for Improving Student Persistence.** Summarize participants' responses on this newspaper and save for Session 3.

Examples of techniques could include goal setting, peer tutoring, and monitoring of progress on wall charts.

**Strategies for Improving Student Persistence**

### 3. INCREASING PERSISTENCE: DISCUSSING STRATEGIES FROM THE RESEARCH (50 MINUTES)

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-  **Distribute the handout** *Key Concepts Related to Adult Student Persistence*. Divide participants into two groups. Tell groups they are to review the key concepts summarized on the handout and discuss their reactions to these concepts. Tell them they will have 15 minutes for this discussion.
- **Reconvene the large group and ask each group to report back** a brief summary of their reactions.
-  **Explain that the next activity is also based on the handout** *Key Concepts Related to Adult Student Persistence*.
- **Use the “live Likert scale” format** for a discussion of strategies for increasing adult student persistence that were presented in the research. Refer participants to the three signs in large letters that you put up during the break: on one wall, AGREE, on the opposite wall, DISAGREE, and on the back wall, NOT SURE.
- **Ask everyone to stand up**, moving desks or chairs if necessary so that people can move easily around the room. Explain that this next activity is purely for promoting discussion and there are no right or wrong answers. You will read a statement aloud twice. They will listen to the statement and then move to the sign that corresponds to how they feel about the statement: AGREE, DISAGREE, or NOT SURE. Emphasize that the statements have deliberately been written ambiguously in order to generate discussion.
- **After everyone is standing near a sign, ask one or two people** near the AGREE sign to explain why they agree

#### Note to Facilitator

If participants would like to read more about the research for the Statements 1 and 3, refer them to:

- Reder, S. and Strawn, C. “The k-12 school experiences of high school dropouts,” *Focus on Basics*, Vol.4, Issue D, April 2001.
- Sticht, T. McDonald, B. and Erickson, P. (1998). *Passports to Paradise: The Struggle to Teach and to Learn on the Margins of Adult Education*. El Cajon, CA: The Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc. ED418238 available a ERIC at: <http://eric.ed.gov>

with the statement. Tell participants that, if they change their mind after listening to the explanations, they may move to stand near another sign reflecting their new opinion. Continue around the room to the NOT SURE and DISAGREE signs, asking one or two people standing near each sign why they are standing there. Feel free to let participants dialogue with each other from different sides of the room; in other words, they are not trying to convince you but each other.

- **Draw the discussion of a statement to a close** after approximately 10 minutes and read another statement. Continue until all three statements have been discussed or until 40 minutes have passed, whichever comes first. If the discussion around one statement is particularly rich, you may want to let it go on and skip one of the other statements. Similarly, if there is little discussion about a statement, just move on to the next.
- The three statements for discussion with the “live Likert Scale” activity are:

Statement 1

*Since there is no difference in K-12 school experience between those who enroll in adult education and those who don't, teachers should focus on other barriers to persistence, not on past negative school experiences.*

Statement 2

*Teachers and program staff should not worry too much about the persistence of students who have “stopped-out” or are considering “stopping out” because of forces that hinder them outside of the program.*

Statement 3

*The best way programs can improve persistence is to reduce turbulence by using closed enrollment.*

**Another idea**

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If the discussion is slow, consider asking the following questions:

Statement 1

- What is the prevailing notion about the K-12 experiences of adult basic education students who have dropped out of high school?
- How did the initial findings of NCSALL's Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) contradict this prevailing notion?
- How do the experiences of high school drop outs who participate in adult basic education programs compare to those who choose not to enroll in ABE classes?

Statement 2

- What accomplishments do students who “stop out” see in themselves?
- How could ABE programs assist students who need to “stop out?”


Statement 3

- What factors contribute to turbulent classrooms? What are some benefits of a stable classroom?
- What is the relationship of the classroom educational focus and student persistence?

**BREAK (15 minutes)**

**4. READING DISCUSSION—FIVE PATHWAYS**

(45 MINUTES)

-  **Explain that in this next activity participants will reflect** on the reading for today's meeting.
- [Note to facilitator: The article, **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students**, describes persistence and reviews the research and practice literature about ways to support it. It also draws on the research on adult student persistence that the authors completed with a team from MDRC and NCSALL. The article concludes by suggesting that a quality program must have a persistence support component and describing a set of persistence interventions that have research evident to support the contention that they would have an impact.
- In the article, **Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out**, the author suggests that students and teachers may have different perceptions of what it means when adult students leave programs. When interviewing students who have left ABE programs, Belzer found that those students who left planned to return and none expressed a sense of personal failure when leaving. The study revealed that various obstacles and supports create different outcomes for individuals and, while there is no single answer to the issue of retention, peer contact outside of class and the use of self-study materials may encourage lifelong learning.
- The research brief, ***“One Day I Will Make It:” A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs***, summarizes the final report from the LILAA persistence study, which offers lessons on the challenge of addressing factors that undermine persistence. Documentation of students' participation and achievement allowed for an examination of persistence levels and patterns, and of achievement trends. This implementation research suggests why improving student persistence is so difficult and reveals the kinds of supports that adult students need in order to persist.]
- **Post the newspaper Discussion Questions: Five Pathways.**



- **Ask participants to form small groups** of three to four people to explore the following questions. Ask the group to also note questions that arise during their discussion that they would like to discuss with the whole group.


**Discussion Questions: Five Pathways**

- What did you see as the key points of these articles?
- Which of the findings or practices did you find surprising or intriguing? Why?
- In phase 2 of the Persistence Study, five pathways for program participation were identified. In reflecting on the students in your programs, does this finding resonate? Why or why not?
- As part of your homework, you looked at your program's data on retention. What percentage of your students do you think fall into each pathway?
- In reviewing your data, what did you note about the duration and intensity of participation? What has your program tried to improve duration and intensity? What were the results?
- The second phase of the Persistence Study also pointed out challenges that the programs had in developing social service capacity. Do you see similar challenges for your organization? Why or why not?
- Even when programs improved services, the months of engagement did not increase, but the hours of participation did. What might be the implications for your programs?
- What else might you like to ask the researchers?

- **After 25 minutes, reconvene the whole group. Each group reports back** to the whole group about any observations, questions, or issues that arose from the reading or small group discussion. After each group presents, there should be time allotted for questions and comments from other groups. (This should be encouraged by the facilitator.)


**5. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FIVE PATHWAYS**

(45 MINUTES)

-  **Point out that in the reading, Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students, the authors identify five pathways for program participation that are determined by the students' personal and environmental factors and ways that programs might support students on each pathway.**
- **Post the newsprint Five Pathways for Program Participation.**

**Five Pathways for Program Participation**

- Long-term students
- Mandatory students
- Short-term students
- Try-out students
- Intermittent students

-  **Divide participants into five small groups (or do as a whole group if your group is small) and assign one pathway to each group. Ask each group to review the description of their assigned pathway on pages 39–43 of the reading.**
- **Post the newsprint Ways Programs Might Support Students and allow fifteen minutes for the groups to discuss the questions and record their ideas on newsprint. [Note to facilitator: Save the newsprints for Session 3.]**

**Ways Programs Might Support Students**

- What is your opinion of the suggested supports for students in this pathway?
- What other ways might be used to support students in this pathway?
- What might your program or staff need to implement each of the ways to support students in this pathway?
- How do you think adding supports might affect the average number of contact hours for your program?
- What are the implications for program structure, professional development, funding, and/or policy?

- **After fifteen minutes, reconvene the whole group.** Give each group a few minutes to report back a summary of their discussion. Then facilitate a 10-minute discussion, continuing to use the newsprint as a guide for the whole group.

**6. EVALUATION OF SESSION TWO AND ASSIGNMENT FOR SESSION THREE**

(15 MINUTES)

- **Using the newsprint Session Two Agenda, ask participants** for a thumbs up, down, or level to show their reaction to the activities. Quickly total the responses on the newsprint: +, -, or N (neutral).

Ask for suggestions for improvements.

- **Explain to participants that for the final readings they will identify a topic** on which they would like to focus. Working in small groups, participants use the articles on that topic as the basis for a discussion on what tools practitioners and programs might use to support student persistence in relation to entrance into services, participation in program services, and reengagement in learning.

**Another Idea**

Use the “Useful/How to Improve” technique from Day One to get quick feedback from the participants about what was useful and what could be improved about this session.


Either take notes yourself on a piece of paper or write their comments on newsprint for documentation.

**Note to Facilitator**


Choose the three or four topics that are most relevant to the participants in the study circle, rather than offering all of the topics as options. Make sure that there are at least three participants assigned to each topic.


-  **Distribute Readings Assigned for Session Three:**

*Goals*

Reading : Building the Desire, Building the Ability


Reading : ODWIN: A Program Rooted in History


Reading : Look Before You Leap: Helping Prospective Learners Make Informed Educational Choices


Reading : The Effects of Continuing Goal-Setting on Persistence in a Math Classroom

*Sponsors*


Reading : Sponsors and Sponsorship


Reading : Reflections on the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project


Reading : The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups

Reading : Powerful Motivation: The Long-time Tutor is Motivated by Helping Learners

*Instruction*


Reading : Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting to the Needs of All Learners


Reading : A Conversation with FOB...The Best of Both Worlds: Using Individualized and Group Instruction


Reading : The Community High School of Vermont: An Uncommon High School in an Uncommon Setting

Reading : Separate Yet Happy

***Counseling and Referrals***


Reading : Beyond the Scope of the Teachers:  
Deciding to Employ a Social Worker


Reading : Who Helps the Helpers? Supporting  
Counselors in Adult Basic Education

Reading : A Mind/Body/Learning Approach to  
Counseling: Helping Students  
Handle Stress

Reading : Retention and the GED

***Instructional Modes***

Reading : Program Participation and Self-  
Directed Learning to Improve  
Basic Skills

Reading : Solving Problems with Computer-  
Assisted Instruction at the East  
Texas Literacy Council


Reading : Will Cooperative Learning Affect  
GED Retention?


Reading : Getting into Groups


***Student Involvement***

Reading : Power, Literacy, and Motivation

Reading : Build Motivation by Building  
Learner Motivation

Reading : Staying in a Literacy Program

Reading : Peer Tutors/Mentors: Effect on  
Motivation and Persistence in  
GED Classroom

-  **Refer participants to the *Participants' To-Do Form* in the Pre-Meeting Packet.** To the best of your ability, make sure that participants are clear about what they are required to do before the next meeting.
- **Repeat the date, time, and place for the next meeting.** If applicable, explain the process you will use for canceling and rescheduling the next meeting in the event of bad weather. Be sure that you have everyone's home and/or work telephone numbers so that you can reach them in case of cancellation.

| <b>Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session Two</b>  |  |
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| <b>1. Welcome, Session Two Objectives, and Agenda</b>  | <i>10 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post newsprints; review.</li> </ul>   |  |
| <b>2. Strategies for Improving Student Persistence</b>   | <i>30 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole group discussion using newsprint questions.</li> <li>• List strategies on newsprint <u>Strategies for Improving Student Persistence</u>.</li> </ul>   |  |
| <b>3. Increasing Persistence: Discussing Strategies from the Research</b>  | <i>50 mins., SMALLGROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form two groups to discuss reactions to key concepts on handout (15 minutes in groups).</li> <li>• Reconvene group; representative from each group summarizes reactions.</li> <li>• Post signs; participants stand near sign that corresponds to how they feel about statement; stand-up discussion of three statements.</li> </ul> |  |
| <b>15–Minute Break</b>   |  |
| <b>4. Reading Discussion—Five Pathways</b>   | <i>45 mins., SMALLGROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form small groups; post newsprint for groups to discuss (25 minutes in groups).</li> <li>• Reconvene group; representative from each group shares observations, questions, and issues; questions and comments from other groups.</li> </ul>   |  |

## Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session Two

### 5. A Closer Look at the Five Pathways

*45 mins., SMALL GROUPS then  
WHOLE GROUP*

- Form five small groups and assign each group one pathway from newsprint Five Pathways for Program Participation.
- Small groups discuss questions on newsprint Ways Programs Might Support Students.
- Reconvene group; representative from each group reports on discussion.
- Whole group discussion continuing to use questions as a guide.

### 5. Evaluation of Session Two and Assignment for Session Three

*15 mins., WHOLE GROUP*


- Post newsprint Session Two Agenda; ask for thumbs up, thumbs down, or thumbs level about each activity; ask for ideas for improvement.
- Hand out readings assigned for Session Three.
- Remind participants of the next session's date, time, and location.



## Materials to Hand Out in Session Two

### CONTENTS

#### Handouts for Session Two

Handout : *Key Concepts Related to Adult Student Persistence*


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#### Readings Assigned for Session Three

##### **Goals**

Reading : Building the Desire, Building the Ability


Reading : ODWIN: A Program Rooted in History


Reading : Look Before You Leap: Helping Prospective Learners Make Informed Educational Choices


Reading : The Effects of Continuing Goal-Setting on Persistence in a Math Classroom

##### **Sponsors**


Reading : Sponsors and Sponsorship


Reading : Reflections on the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project


Reading : The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups

Reading : Powerful Motivation: The Long-time Tutor is Motivated by Helping Learners

##### **Instruction**

Reading : Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting to the Needs of All Learners


Reading : A Conversation with FOB...The Best of Both Worlds: Using Individualized and Group Instruction


Reading : The Community High School of Vermont: An Uncommon High School in an Uncommon Setting

Reading : Separate Yet Happy

### *Counseling and Referrals*

Reading : Beyond the Scope of the Teachers: Deciding to Employ a Social Worker


Reading : Who Helps the Helpers? Supporting Counselors in Adult Basic Education

Reading : A Mind/Body/Learning Approach to Counseling: Helping Students Handle Stress

Reading : Retention and the GED

### *Instructional Modes*

Reading : Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills

Reading : Solving Problems with Computer-Assisted Instruction at the East Texas Literacy Council


Reading : Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?


Reading : Getting into Groups

### *Student Involvement*

Reading : Power, Literacy, and Motivation

Reading : Build Motivation by Building Learner Motivation

Reading : Staying in a Literacy Program

Reading : Peer Tutors/Mentors: Effect on Motivation  
and Persistence in GED Classroom



## Key Concepts Related to Adult Student Persistence

### THE K–12 EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Reder, S, and Strawn, C. (2001). The k-12 experiences of high school dropouts. *Focus on Basics*, 4(D), pp.13-15.

Reder and Strawn challenge the prevailing notion (held by Beder, 1991, Quigley, 1990, and others) that students in adult basic education classes have had negative experiences in K-12 schools. Initial findings from their Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) suggest that “It is not true, as many might believe, that most individuals who drop out of high school have had negative school experiences. A larger percentage (40%) report positive (either “somewhat positive” or “very positive”) experiences than report negative ones.”

### STOP OUTS, NOT DROPOUTS

Belzer, A. (1998). Stopping out, not dropping out. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), pp.16-17.

Belzer states:

“We were surprised to find that the students who left the program did not seem to consider themselves ‘drop outs’. No one would go so far as to say that she had quit the program. Each of those who left planned to return in the future...Although they did not necessarily know when they would be able to return, they all believed it would be possible and desirable to do so. Of perhaps even greater importance to me was that no one expressed a sense of personal failure because of leaving the program. Rather, each simply felt that it was no longer possible for them to continue at that time. They attributed this to factors beyond their control—a job, health problems, financial problems, legal problems, or other personal and family problems that would have to solve themselves.”

“If one agrees with the study, participants’ [adult learners’] perceptions that departure from a program should not necessarily be viewed as a failure, but rather as a temporary hiatus, the question then arises: what implications does this have for programs?”

### **TURBULENCE AND FOCUS**

Sticht, Thomas, McDonald B., and Erickson, P. (1998). Getting to class and completing a semester is tough. In *Passports to paradise: The struggle to teach and to learn on the margins of adult education* (pp. 30-40). El Cajon, CA: The Applied Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Inc.

Sticht et al. (1998) found that high turbulence (the total number of students coming into and dropping out of a class during the cycle) may make it harder for students to stay in the program. His team also looked at “focus,” which is the “extent to which a given class focuses on the same main reason the students have for being in the class” (e.g., a student wants to get a better job, the class focuses on job-related concepts, etc.). They found that persistence rates (completing the class cycle) may increase “in classes where the focus of students and classrooms are more closely aligned.”

## Building the Desire, Building the Ability

Dann-Messier, B. & Kampits, E. (2004, February). Building the desire, building the ability. *Focus on Basics*, 6(D), 22–25

*Community-based programs play a role in introducing learners to college and in helping them persist*

*Dorcas Place is a 22-year-old adult and family learning center in Providence, RI, which assists low-income adults to realize their full potential through literacy, employment, advocacy, and community involvement. Four years ago, we surveyed students to determine their long-term aspirations. Only half of the more than 100 students enrolled at that time indicated that they intended to continue their study after they passed the tests of General Educational Development (GED). This mirrored the student profile in Rhode Island, where 43 percent indicated GED as their terminal goal (OVAE, 2003). In fact, Dorcas Place students' aspirations were better than those in the United States overall. The US Department of Education's OVAE 2003 report to Congress (using year 2001 figures) states that only 25 percent of adult students enrolled in adult education have transition to postsecondary education or training as their goal.*

While a larger percentage of Dorcas Place students aspired to postsecondary education than did students in other states, as a staff, we believed that 50 percent was too low. Research shows that increasing the educational attainment level of adults leads to reductions in family poverty rates, higher wages, stronger labor force attachment, and greater personal and civic responsibility (Dann-Messier, 2000). Thus, the task of raising the aspirations of students and their families became a top priority for Dorcas Place. We got funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to establish a multifaceted College Preparatory Program (CPP) that would instill higher education aspirations and ensure a smooth transition to and persistence in college.

### DRAWING ON BEST PRACTICES

We launched the pilot College Preparatory Program in 2001, basing the design on the successful practices of the 35-year-old federal TRIO program. Funded under Title IV of the Higher Education act, “these programs focus on access to college, retention, and graduation for low-income students as part of a strategy to strengthen the nation’s economy and society.” In 1997, researcher Lana Muraskin conducted a study of one of the TRIO programs, Student Support Services. She identified these

elements as best practices: assistance with college admissions and course selection, social preparation for college, counseling, ongoing academic skills development, peer support, and a constant assurance to students that they can succeed (Muraskin, 1997). Those elements form the essential framework of the Dorcas Place program.

Low-income, first-generation adult learners confront many challenges that have to be overcome or managed before they can enroll in adult education and college. CPP's design includes attention to overcoming these barriers. They may include situational, dispositional, and institutional factors that affect and are often beyond the control of adult learners (Wonacott, 2001). Situational factors include job, health, financial, and legal issues and family or personal problems. Dispositional factors include expectations, self-esteem, level of family support, and past educational experiences. Institutional factors including the educational bureaucracy itself, program fees, scheduling, and procedures that serve a traditionally younger and more dependent student population can either help or hinder participation (see, for example, Belzer, 1998; Hubble, 2000; Quigley, 1998).

Over time the pilot program evolved. Today, it consists of five major components: intensive career, educational, and academic counseling; a semester-long bridge program between adult basic education and college; articulation agreements between Dorcas Place and the colleges our students attend; advocacy with key policy leaders; and continual evaluation and assessment. These components are described in the following sections.

### **CAREER, EDUCATIONAL, AND ACADEMIC COUNSELING**

In the initial year of the program, staff focused on personal issues that inhibited students' persistence in adult education. This focus has been expanded to include raising learners' goals to include postsecondary study, and advising them on selecting colleges and remaining on an appropriate path to meet their postsecondary goals. Our multilingual, multiracial staff members also model lifelong learning by staying current in their field. Throughout each semester, current and former CPP students speak to all the classes, urging students to consider college and apply for admissions into the bridge course and assisting them in persisting once they have enrolled.

Brookfield describes adult students as feeling like imposters on campus (1999). To build interest in college, we take students on college tours. At first, trips were limited to students concluding their GED requirements. To motivate lower-level students to persist in education,



we opened these trips to all students. This past summer, Dorcas Place offered an intensive college orientation program to students at any literacy or language level taught at the center. Teachers previewed the trips in class, answered questions, and oriented students to the institutions they were going to visit. Students—typically 40 to 60 each visit—visited up to seven college campuses and participated in cultural events throughout Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The college counselor conducted follow-up discussions with interested students on a regular basis. We will keep expanding our college tours and cultural events as funding permits. Students who had never stepped onto a college campus before now speak more confidently about going to college. They are more comfortable having walked around campus, eaten in the dining hall, and talked with undergraduates. Site visits let students know that they do indeed belong on campus.

In advocating for college, we also stress the long-term financial benefits of an undergraduate education. Research by Carnevale and Fry (2001) and others illustrates the benefits of postsecondary education both to individuals and the nation. They identify knowledge as crucial in determining “individual economic opportunity and our overall economic competitiveness” (p. 5). Dorcas Place staff integrate this information into the adult basic education and College Preparatory Program curricula. They use data from a newsletter entitled *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* ([www.postsecondary.org](http://www.postsecondary.org)), produced by T. Mortensen, which documents the positive correlation between educational attainment and earnings.

Mortensen’s graphs and figures reveal the lack of economic improvement for certain groups in the United States over the past 30 years: “Those with the most education have prospered, experiencing substantial real gains in their incomes and living standards. Others with the least education have experienced stagnation in their incomes and relative loss of income, which has shifted to better-educated workers. In many cases, those with least education have experienced substantial real income losses, and concomitant losses in living standards both compared to better educated workers and compared to living costs” (p. 1). Students analyze similar research data in math classes, grappling with information that illustrates that “the dividing line between those who are succeeding and those who are struggling to survive is increasingly educational attainment” (p. 1).

Along with feeling uneasy on college campuses and failing to realize that education, although costly in the short term, is a route out of poverty, our students also look with fear at increases in college tuition

and fees twice the rate of inflation or more over the past three years nationwide. The college counselor reviews with them the types and availability of financial aid and assists them in completing the necessary documents for admissions and financial support.

Persistence in our classes and then in college remains a significant challenge to Dorcas Place CPP students. A social worker and other Dorcas Place case managers provide support services for personal issues such as childcare and housing referrals. Working as student advocates, our staff collaborate closely with the Community College of RI (CCRI). The CCRI community is both very committed and sensitive to the various needs of their students since adults are now a growing majority on campus. Students have access to support on an as-needed basis; staff members reach out to those who do not directly initiate contact. When students drop out, it has been primarily due to personal issues, such as a change in family health, housing, or childcare arrangements.

### **BRIDGE COMPONENT**

Tinto (2003a) stresses that “students persist when they find themselves in settings that hold high expectations for their learning, are provided academic and social support and are actively involved in learning” (p. 5). We were also influenced by Tinto’s belief that “successful education, not retention, is the secret of successful retention programs,” (p. 5) and determined that we needed to maintain the close personal bonds we had with students in their transition. Our experience has also been that students need intensive academic skill enhancement to make the transition to college smoothly. Adapting the TRIO model of social support, we designed a semester-long bridge component in which CPP students attend class on college campus twice a week. Requiring students to enroll in college as a cohort enables students to participate in their own small learning community and support each other as they progress through the course. Tuition, books, and supplies are funded by Dorcas Place.

Two days a week, the bridge component students return to Dorcas Place’s Learning Resource Center (LRC), a drop in academic center that serves students preparing to enter college and those already enrolled. There they receive academic assistance, including supplemental instruction, participate in study groups, tutoring, and other academic support. Used computers donated to the agency are available for students to keep.

## ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

Our students need the support not just of Dorcas Place but also of the colleges they attend. Recent research on college completion rates confirms this (Thomas et al., 2003), as does Tinto's framework for effective retention programs, which features "commitment towards students which directs their activities... [and] requires the collaborative effort of all members of the institution, faculty, staff, and administrators alike" (2003b, p.118). We try to assure that via articulation agreements.

Dorcas Place's articulation agreement's chief characteristic is that it requires assurance from the college that an appropriate academic and student support system component specific to the adult learner will be available on campus. The agreement also ensures that the college will encourage students to continue their education beyond an associate's degree or certificate program. While we assume that we will have to provide some advice to students interested in transferring to other colleges for additional education, the articulation agreement commits the college to this work as well. Most Dorcas Place students find community college to be appropriate for their first college experience. We are expanding our articulation agreements to other colleges and universities as students complete their associate's degrees and visit other institutions.

## ADVOCACY WITH POLICY LEADERS

More than 67 percent of Dorcas Place students receive public assistance. Current welfare legislation restricts TANF recipients from attending college beyond 12 months (as a vocational education countable activity) unless states implement policies that are less restrictive. As a result of concerted advocacy by Dorcas Place and others, underscoring the long-term economic value of investing in the college education of welfare recipients, Rhode Island allows eligible welfare recipients to attend college for 24 college months. In addition to this specific advocacy, as president of Dorcas Place, the author meets with higher education leaders on a regular basis, often through joint membership on regional task forces and boards. We also invite higher education leaders to attend CPP celebrations each year.

Advocacy is valuable in other arenas as well. Cognizant of national data on the scarcity of adult males attending college, Dorcas Place advocated with community and governmental agencies that serve men, leading to an increase in their enrollment at Dorcas Place. Last year, males represented 50 percent of bridge enrollment.

## EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Evaluation continues throughout the semester, with staff in regular contact with students, faculty, and the academic dean. A more formal evaluation takes place with all the partners at the end of the semester, reviewing what worked or did not. These evaluation sessions have led to program revision and transformation, as components are eliminated or broadened. For example, the first two bridge components included Dorcas Place faculty who sat in on the course as part of their academic duties. They don't do this anymore since we have a good rapport with the college professor and are familiar with the course content. Instead, the college counselor and peer advisor stay on campus on the days that bridge program students attend class.

Progress toward learners' goals is monitored quarterly. Curriculum improvements are continual; modifications are based on bridge staff and students' feedback. For example, student feedback highlighted the need for assistance in becoming better writers since students discovered the importance of such proficiency in college work. We now concentrate more fully on developing students' writing abilities.

## LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Today, as a direct result of our College Preparatory Program, more than 90 percent of our more than 400 students declare their interest in continuing their study beyond the GED and indicate that they will encourage their children to pursue higher education as well. Upon completion of the bridge component, out of an estimated eight to 10 students, perhaps six or seven will be enrolled in college in the next semester.

A new and complementary focus is the inclusion of children with their parents in our college awareness activities, as part of our Family Literacy initiative. Families will be invited on college tours and cultural events to develop aspirations for college study and recognize its lifelong benefits. We were recently awarded a national TRIO dissemination grant through the Council for Opportunity in Education to scale up and replicate our five-element model regionally. This will allow us to add another bridge component, to be offered in the evening. Working adults will attend college class one night a week on campus and return to Dorcas Place at least two evenings a week for academic skill development and supplementary services. Both of those new initiatives will be linked to a system of evaluation that ensures that they meet community needs in demonstrable ways.

The Dorcas Place Adult & Family Learning Center model builds on the premise that we as an agency and our students must focus on high aspirations, apply resources to this in both academic and student support areas, and demonstrate mutual commitment. We have identified partners and created collaborations with higher education institutions and policymakers, at the state, regional, and national levels. We engage in continuous evaluation and assessment. This full circle can resonate effectively with the higher education community, policy makers interested in promoting an able and educated work force, and the goals of the adult learning agency and its students in promoting educational opportunities for life-long learning for success.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*Brenda Dann-Messier* has been President of Dorcas Place for more than four years. Before that, she worked at the LAB@ Brown University, was the United States Secretary of Education's Regional Representative based in Boston, and directed two TRIO programs, the Rhode Island Educational Opportunity Center and the Educational Talent Search Program of the Community College of Rhode Island.

*Eva I. Kampits* has been an educator and consultant for more than 35 years. Director of the Office of School/College Relations since 1994 for New England Association of Schools & Colleges (NEASC), she has led initiatives promoting partnerships, developing evaluation and assessment models, and contributing to research and analysis of public policy issues with national and international partners as well as legislatures. Her current activities range from supporting access and equity for disadvantaged students of any age to consulting with the People's Republic of China.

## ODWIN: A Program Rooted in History

Tacelli, M. (2004) ODWIN: A program rooted in history. *Focus on Basics*, 6(D), 14–17

*In the early 1960s, President Kennedy inspired the nation with a sense of concern for the well-being of our fellow world-citizens and a sense that each of us could indeed make a significant difference. President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and people were beginning to respond to Martin Luther King's invitation to join him in the pursuit of a shinningly hopeful dream. The dream was strikingly elusive in Boston. Children in some of the city's neighborhood schools were being short-changed in terms of the education and career counseling they received. Many minority youngsters were being counseled away from college preparation and into domestic and shop courses.*

Nurse-educator Mary Malone was concerned about the dearth of minority students at the professional level in health care. She mobilized more than 100 volunteers to provide accurate information and guidance about careers in nursing and the allied health fields to Boston youngsters wishing to pursue professional careers. The volunteers also offered tutoring and mentoring to the students, throughout high school and college. The ODWIN (Opening Doors Wider In Nursing) Learning Center was born. By 1966, the parents of these students and other adults asked for similar help. In response, ODWIN opened its own doors wider to the population that would eventually become the program's sole focus: adults with great potential, but inadequate education, who aspired to a professional-level career requiring college credentials. ODWIN also broadened its focus beyond the health field to any professional career.

Today, ODWIN's mission is to prepare adults for success in college so that they can enter and succeed in professional careers. We began before there were adult basic education (ABE), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), and General Educational Development (GED) programs. We have since incorporated aspects of all these services into our program design, making it difficult to categorize us. ODWIN today is a multifaceted, all-purpose college preparatory program for adults.

### PROGRAM DESIGN

Malone applied the approach to patient care she used as a nurse to education. Our diagnostic and prescriptive method focuses on each individual's with specific strengths, weaknesses, needs, goals, and

methods of learning. We made many mistakes in those early days because what we called the ODWIN 100, our group of founding volunteers, were already providing service before they recognized the need for this type of detailed planning. Our work with those first students made the need evident. We learned that, based on a student's career goal, we needed to answer the following questions:

- What academic skills are needed for him or her to succeed in a college program leading to that goal?
- Which of these skills does this person currently have and to what level?
- Which of these skills does the person seem to lack or to be very weak in?

The answers allowed us to design an approach that would enable the student to develop and strengthen the necessary skills in a timely and effective way.

### **RESEARCHING COURSE CONTENT**

To answer the academic skills question required researching the courses that our students would be taking in college, examining textbooks, students' class notes, and tests to determine the skills necessary to handle the material well. For example, which specific math skills would a person need who wanted to become a pharmacist? a dentist? a nurse? an accountant?

Teachers from each major subject area—math, reading, English, and science—assessed the college material from their own specialty's perspective, and then shared information across disciplines. For example, the reading teachers examined some excerpts selected by a math or science teacher to determine the reading skills needed to master the material. The math group did likewise to science samples.

Although most of our early students were interested in health-related fields, which helped narrow the scope of the project, this research took time. Once completed, it provided us with a comprehensive list of skills in each area, and a subset of each that we deemed essential to success in preparation for each specific career. We also had a base on which to build information on career goals outside the health fields. Continued contact with students once they have moved on to college enables us to update that base as needed.



## ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The teachers in each area then designed assessment tools to test students' mastery level of the skills identified above. Many of the basic skills have universal applicability and are included across the board, with career-specific items added as appropriate. For example, a person aspiring to a career in accounting needs the same basic math skills (whole numbers, ratio fractions, decimals, and percentages) as the person pursuing a nursing career. But the future nurse needs a solid understanding of measurement, as well, using both the metric and apothecary systems, and must be able to convert between the two systems.

With the exception of our newly developed computer diagnostic, we use paper and pencil tests with room for figuring in math. They are not timed, and we urge people not to agonize over them because they are neither graded nor ranked, but are strictly for planning purposes. A grade provides one assessment of a student's skills: 15 correct out of 25 items, for example, indicates that the person seems to possess 60 percent of the skills tested. But which ones? And, more to the point for planning, which specific skills does the 40 percent indicate that the person seems not to possess? We must prescribe a remedy to enable the student to succeed at that last 40 percent. Consequently, each of the original pre-tests, as well as the many subsequent revisions, had to be designed to provide skill-specific information.

The three core—or foundation—areas consist of reading/study skills; basic math and communication skills, which include grammar and writing, and are tested on paper; and speaking and listening, which, when appropriate, are tested in interviews. The advanced courses include algebra, chemistry, composition, and biology. The teachers created post-tests that are similar to the pre-tests for each area; they use them for comparison when students complete components of their plans.

## AN ODWIN STUDENT'S JOURNEY

After attending an information session, a potential student first takes the series of diagnostic tests in the core academic areas of reading/study skills, basic math, and communication skills. If any of those tests indicate sufficient strength in the skills tested, a more advanced test is given to identify the level, if any, at which the student should begin work in that skill area. For example, if the basic math test indicates no weaknesses, the person would then take the algebra pre-test.

As the teachers correct the diagnostic tests, they prepare a profile of the person's strengths and weaknesses in each subject along with

recommendations. These form the framework of the person's individualized student educational plan: a program of study designed with the student within the framework of the diagnostic test results as they apply to the student's career goal. The teachers also include estimates of the time the student is likely to need at ODWIN to acquire and strengthen the specific skills required for success in a desired college curriculum. For example, the student might need work in one or more of the foundation courses, one or more of the advanced courses, or a combination. Then a staff member meets with the student to discuss the rationale for the recommendations and to help him or her develop an action plan to implement them within the context of her daily responsibilities and time constraints.

### THE FOUNDATION COURSES

ODWIN is not strictly a basic education program, but most students who enroll need some work at the foundation level. Not everyone needs the same skills, however, and students are frequently self-conscious, insecure, and reluctant to ask questions when they first start classes. Consequently, we decided early on to combine individualized instruction with a group setting for each of the three foundation courses.

A basic math class, for example, which meets twice a week for two hours each time, may have up to but not more than eight students, each of whom has a study plan based on the skills he or she needs. The teacher, a staff member with a math background, works with each student individually on one aspect of a specific skill, leaving that student to practice the skill while the teacher moves on to another student. Because the concepts are presented in small increments, students can grasp the general idea sufficiently to solidify their understanding through practice, with the teacher returning periodically to make sure the student is on track and to respond to any questions. This approach is extremely demanding on the teacher, but enables the student to make remarkable progress in a short time. On the worst of days, several students could be ready to begin a new topic at the same time. After the first week or so students are working independently and at their own speed. Lacking the need to keep up with other students or to wait for others to keep up with them, our students are free to move at a comfortable and productive pace. The privacy of working with the teacher one-on-one makes it easier to ask questions. The student develops a real understanding of the concepts covered, experiences success early and frequently, and gains greater self-confidence as well as solid academic advancement.

The basic English and reading/study skills classes operate similarly, staffed by experienced teachers. Depending on the class composition, these language arts classes are sometimes limited to seven students. While we do not include computer skills in the foundation category, we do conduct computer classes using the individualized approach.

When ODWIN started, no market had as yet developed for basic skills material for adults. Rather than use materials devised for young readers, we had to develop most of our own teaching materials. As a result, our file cabinets, crammed with original teaching materials designed by ODWIN staff and revised periodically to keep them current and applicable, are our most valued possessions. Supplemented by various workbooks and an English manual, *Writer's Choice*, published by Glencoe, these are our texts for the foundation courses. Not only does this provide material targeting the adult learner, but it also provides the flexibility necessary for individualized instruction. Each student constructs a book tailor-made to his or her needs, building it unit by unit. Each unit addresses one concept, initially presented by the teacher in a one-to-one instructional session.

## THE ADVANCED COURSES

Regardless of how effective the individualized foundation courses are, students must be prepared to handle more impersonal college courses. For this reason, algebra, biology, chemistry, composition, humanities, notetaking, pharmacological math, and thinking/ reasoning are more conventionally structured group classes. Using various presentation styles including demonstration, modified lecture with student/ teacher interaction, discovery exercises, and student presentations, the instructor controls the pace at which material must be mastered to introduce the student to the independent approach to learning required in college. Students also learn how to use a syllabus and a textbook to full advantage, the need for planning to meet deadlines, and the value of keeping track of one's average rather than focusing on isolated grades.

Because our primary goal is to provide the student with strong skills and an adequate knowledge base, classes are still relatively small (no more than 18 students) so that a teacher can quickly recognize any student who might need extra help outside of class. For both levels of biology, chemistry, and composition, we use high school texts. The other advanced courses use a combination of original, staff-designed material, and various publications.

The staff provides educational counseling throughout students' participation. When students begin the final phases of their educational plans, we work with them in selecting and applying to college: advising, demonstrating how to collect information, suggesting various resources, proofreading applications, and critiquing essays. Students themselves must do the leg-work, however: try the dry run to see if the commute to a specific college is manageable, use the suggested resources to research possible scholarships.

### **CONTINUED CONTACT**

ODWIN's mission has always been to help people reach a professional level of employment. Therefore, we cannot stop at helping students get into college: we must help them get out of college successfully by maintaining contact with them. Once the student graduates from college, we provide preparation for special licensing exams. We urge our students to call for help if they feel overwhelmed or confused about anything at college. If we don't hear from students within their first month, a staff member calls to establish contact and to arrange dates and times to keep in touch. If a student has difficulty in a course, we arrange tutoring sessions with either a staff member or one of our volunteers, who are ODWIN graduates. We also tap our graduates to act as mentors for students beginning college.

This contact enables us to use the students' experiences to critique the program's effectiveness. For example, our notetaking course was developed to address difficulties students reported having in college lectures. The thinking/reasoning course likewise grew out of some students' difficulty in visualizing during college lectures and in following complex directions. We had been trying to teach these skills within biology or algebra classes, but recognized that this inevitably led to sacrificing the notetaking or thinking skill to the course content. Now the biology, composition, or algebra teacher can refer to the students' experiences in notetaking and thinking/reasoning to show students how to apply those skills to specific content.

The increase in numbers of non-native English speakers seeking services has created special challenges. We routinely refer those at the beginning levels to free programs available. Therefore, the students enrolling at ODWIN can often use English on a functional level for their day-to-day lives. With college degrees and professional careers as goals, non-native English speakers need to make a quantum leap to a high level of fluency, not only with general English grammar, composition, and reading/study skills, but also with the specialized vocabularies of

mathematics and the sciences. The individualized approach makes it possible to incorporate non-native English speakers into the foundation courses. We have added a conversation club as a means for students to improve their oral and aural fluency.

Students spend an average of two and one-half years at ODWIN before moving on to college. Before adopting the approach outlined here, we had tried several different short-term approaches. The summer program proved to be effective only for those students who were already strong academically. The postgraduate year for recent high school graduates was more effective, but, since each participant brought a different level of need and unique mode of learning, the group approach fell short of the desired outcome. Tutoring college students when they experienced difficulty in a particular course proved to be a band-aid, taking the place of identifying and addressing the root of the difficulty. The difficulties that participants in these three programs experienced in college led us to espouse the individualized diagnostic/ prescriptive approach that has enabled hundreds of people to change their lives dramatically.

## **IMPACT**

Of the more than 6,000 students who have enrolled in ODWIN classes, approximately 65 percent have completed their educational plans and entered college. Based on the data we have been able to collect, about 90 percent of this group have graduated from college and entered the profession to which they aspired. The thrill of teaching these students is matched only by that of seeing them receive their college degrees, cheered on by their children, many of whom packed their father's and mother's lunches during those college years.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Mary Tacelli* began as a volunteer math teacher for ODWIN in 1968, after completing work for a Master's Degree in Mathematics from the University of Notre Dame. She joined the staff as math coordinator in 1970 and, having worked closely over the years with ODWIN's founder, Mary Malone, was asked to become ODWIN's Executive Director in 1988.



## Look Before You Leap: Helping Prospective Learners Make Informed Educational Choices

Giese, M. (2000) Look before your leap: Helping prospective learners make informed educational choices. *Focus on Basics*, 4(A), 11–14

*I work in a high school completion program in Fairfax County, VA, a densely populated county adjacent to Washington, D.C. Our program offers three different options for adults interested in finishing their secondary education. One option is our adult high school, where learners can finish the courses required for a diploma or can choose from several options of independent study to complete their coursework. A second option is our General Educational Development (GED) program, which offers monthly testing and free preparation through our network of learning centers throughout the county. These open-entry learning centers offer assessment and self-paced study to adults who wish to improve their skills in reading, writing, math, social studies, and language arts. A third option is our external diploma program, which allows adults over 21 to earn a diploma through demonstration of competencies based on life skills. In this program adult learners meet first with advisors who identify the competencies needed and then with assessors who evaluate the competencies learned. The meetings continue as long as necessary. Each of the three options is designed to meet different learning preferences, time lines, and lifestyles. Understanding the differences between options and determining which will best suit one's needs requires careful analysis.*

Over the past few years I have noticed that many learners enroll in an option without making a thorough comparison of the programs to understand which would be best for them. Mismatches often occur between adult learners and the programs in which they choose to enroll. As a result, learners lose motivation and sometimes drop out. For example, many adult learners choose the well-known GED program without taking a closer look at the other two options. Some of these enrollees have only a couple of courses to take and could more quickly and easily attain their goal by enrolling in our adult high school. Some do not like to take tests. They tend to put off taking the GED test and lose the motivation to complete the program. Others lose motivation because they are unable to focus for the eight-hour GED exam, as it is most commonly offered in our county. These learners find themselves taking the test several times with disappointing results. Others choose to join one of our learning centers to prepare for the GED test, and eventually lose interest because their work schedules and childcare

issues do not allow them to attend with enough regularity to make progress. Over time, they too, stop coming.

I believed that these adult learners needed to become more active in their decision-making about how to complete their high school education. If they asked more personal questions about each of the options, they could gather enough information to make a program choice based on their specific needs. I wondered how I could motivate prospective students to do this.

A workshop on discovery learning led by Ed Vitale, a consultant and curriculum specialist for Virginia's Workforce Improvement Network, interested me in the motivating power of group research. I did some background reading, including Ira Shor's *Empowering Education – Critical Teaching for Social Change* (1992) and Michael Pritza's "Getting Into Groups" (1998). This strengthened my belief that working together in small groups to gather information and make comparisons would help motivate prospective students to ask more questions to get the information they needed for their individual circumstances. I also hoped it would encourage them to discuss and evaluate what might and might not work for them.

A few months later I joined The Virginia Adult Education Research Network, which is coordinated by Ronna Spacone. In this program, groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators from around the state learn about qualitative inquiry methods so they can explore issues from their practice. After doing some reading about qualitative research and participating in some discussions, I formulated the following research question: What happens when adult students engage in group learning to research high school completion options?

## PROJECT DESIGN

I knew an orientation to our programs would have to accommodate an extremely diverse group of people, from those who could read and write little English to those near readiness to qualify for an American high school diploma. Since our orientations are given in a variety of locations, the procedure would have to appeal to learners in a jail, in a community development program, and in our community learning centers as well. These orientation activities would have to be nonthreatening enough to engage the timid and the confident alike.

Colleague Donna Chambers and I designed and developed a three-session, six-hour orientation workshop that led small groups of adult learners through a series of research activities intended to promote



the skills involved in asking questions. Our workshop provided a process: a progression of group activities intended to enable the group to do research and discover the information about each option for itself. We ran the three-session orientation workshop six times in all, totaling 60 participants. Four of the orientations were held in our community learning centers, some during the day and some during the evening, where a mix of new and continuing enrollees attends. Almost all of these students were preparing initially to take the GED test. We ran a fifth orientation at the Pre-Release Center, a program of Fairfax County Detention Center. These participants were also preparing for the GED test. We offered the sixth orientation at a community development program where mostly non-native speakers of English, who are not involved in our high school completion program, come to learn about resources available to them in our community.

In session one of each of the orientation workshops, ten adults got to know each other, talked about their reasons for pursuing an education, and came up with a list of questions against which to compare the three high school completion options. At the end of the session, we organized them randomly into three research teams, gave each team a research topic—one of the program options—and offered the teams an array of printed materials about the programs. The participants were free to select and read any or all of the materials we offered.

During the second session we met in a computer lab to explore the Internet as a tool for researching each of the three high school completion program options. We gave the participants the Fairfax County Public Schools web site as a point of origin. We then explained the use of sidebars and tool bar buttons so they could locate information about each of the high school completion programs. Participants were encouraged to use the telephone in the computer lab to call the program offices for information they were unable to locate on the Internet or in the pamphlets and brochures they had chosen.

In the third session each research team reported on what it had learned about its assigned high school completion option to the other two teams and the facilitators. Each presentation was followed by questions from the audience about how the program option described would suit specific personal needs.

During the weeks of the orientation workshops, my colleague and I kept journals in which we made a simple division between observations and reflections. We gave forms with these headings to teachers, tutors, and administrators who watched the process as well. After each session

we collected the forms. We consulted the adult learners in the workshop by asking a series of questions at the end of each session that focused on what they had learned and how they felt about the activities in which they had participated. At the end of the orientation, we asked the learners to fill out forms evaluating the effect of the entire workshop.

## FINDINGS

Because our approach focused on process and relied on the learners to discover the information they needed, each of the six orientation workshops produced slightly different results. All of the groups, however, came away with an understanding of the differences between program options. During the orientation for students from the jail, for example, participants focused on which program would best support them in the future, when they were no longer incarcerated. The mothers in the community development project discussed how they could juggle family responsibilities with pursuing an education. In the orientations at the community learning centers, participants talked about the content from the perspective of future employment and possible entry into a community college. The participants explored and discussed the information of personal interest and concern; each prospective student was able to learn what he or she needed. The facilitators did not take responsibility for figuring out who needed what.

The workshop activities provided an avenue for participants to engage in their research with enthusiasm. One observing administrator was surprised that a mother recently arrived in this country was willing to leave her two preschoolers with a woman she scarcely knew so that she could continue to attend our sessions. An inmate from the jail volunteered that he regretted having missed the first session. Several people from the community learning centers asked why they had not been given this workshop before. By the second session, learners took ownership of their research. By making phone calls and going to the local library to use the Internet, some students voluntarily continued their research outside of class. One man remarked, "I feel responsible because you are making me do the work."

In all the locations where we held the orientation workshops, a sense of commitment to the research groups developed. A teacher at the jail said, "There was a sense of responsibility and 'connectedness' in the group...In fact, one of the members had a terrible migraine headache, yet he stayed for the session because he didn't want to let his group down." At the community development program office an observing administrator remarked that it was wonderful to see a second-year

learner take responsibility for a newcomer. At one of the community learning centers, participants left the room after the third session with reluctance. Each stopped outside the door to wait for the rest of the group to emerge. The whole group stayed together, talking and laughing all the way down the hall.

When we provided the orientation at our existing learning centers, participants began to interact more and different pattern of classroom relationships began to emerge. One observer of the process summed it up: "One of the more boisterous students became more subdued ...he was not the center of attention that he normally likes to be. The circle arrangement and group participation took away his power ...and there was participation by those who usually feel shy, withdrawn or intimidated by the more vocal students." Instead of looking to the facilitator for help, group members looked to each other for support. In this way, everybody became a teacher, and everybody learned.

Other patterns of thinking and acting changed as well. One very shy and withdrawn learner who came from a social center surprised us all by participating enthusiastically. Another quiet young man beamed about his accomplishment of making a phone call to gather information. He said people usually hang up on him when he uses the phone because they become impatient with his stuttering. One inmate remarked, "Since last week I learned that being a full time college student isn't such a bad idea...until this, I figured that it just wasn't for me."

From this new-found sense of community support came surprising statements of self-awareness, thoughts that could change attitudes, and quite possibly, change lives. Here are some examples: "I am learning a little bit about myself like I need to further my education because if I don't, I will not have a good job to support my family." "What I am learning about myself is that I'm not as dumb as I thought I was and if I put my mind to it, I can accomplish just about anything." "What I am learning from this session is that distractions keep me from focusing fully on my objective...[I] need to grow up and realize what's real important. That's what I've learned."

## **INSPIRED**

As a facilitator of growth, I was excited and inspired by results such as these. As a teacher, I wanted to know that I helped the participants develop some of the learning skills they need for the future. I asked each of them at the end of the six-hour workshop, "What have you learned through our work together?" They told me, "I learned that to work in groups is very important, rather than try to get all the information by

myself." "It made me realize that the telephone, the computer, and printed information is there to help me learn." "The most important things I learned was how to make a list of questions, how to look for information, and these will help me make my decisions."

At the end of the orientation workshops, several prospective learners chose to enroll in the External Diploma Program and others entered the adult high school. One participant left the orientation excitedly midsession to go straight to the adult high school office to register when he realized how easy it was going to be to finish. Most of the participants voiced the wish that they had learned the information sooner.

This project lasted six months and offers encouragement that adult learners can be taught and motivated to ask more personalized questions about each of the program options during orientations. Furthermore, we are encouraged to find that when learners formulate and answer their own questions, they use this knowledge to make appropriate choices.

## CONCLUSIONS

We saw that the research methods we used during the orientation workshop allowed adult learners to get involved and encouraged them to take responsibility for their own learning. Their many individual questions suggested that they were personalizing the information they received. The sense of community also helped adults feel comfortable enough to guide each other. Those who were able to explain, guide, or support, did. Those who needed to learn these skills could do so by watching others in their group. Those who were able to organize a plan of action demonstrated the skills for those who needed to learn it. Everybody supported the group goal in some way.

In this atmosphere it seemed that everybody was a teacher as well as a student. Participants learned about more than the three high school completion options available to them in Fairfax County. They learned to rely on themselves and others to gather information. They also learned to extend their reach for more information through the use of technology.

Based on results from this research project, Ronna and I recommended a full-scale program change. It includes a single point of entry for adult learners in the Adult High School Completion Program combined with a multisession orientation program that encourages personalized questions through working in small groups to research our three program options. The full-scale program change is now being designed.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Marti Giese* coordinates group contract services for Fairfax County Public Schools, where she develops site-based, workforce, and workplace training programs for local businesses and community agencies. The programs she provides include adult basic education, high school completion, English for speakers of other languages, and an array of classes in computer skills, trade and industry skills, workforce readiness, and workplace improvement.



## The Effects of Continuing Goal-Setting on Persistence in a Math Classroom

Meador, P. (2000) The effects of continuing goal-setting on persistence in a math classroom. *Focus on Basics*, 4(A), 7–10

*I have been a math teacher for Portland Adult Education (PAE) in Portland, ME, for more than 15 years. For the last three years, I have been Maine's practitioner research and dissemination leader for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). One of my responsibilities as leader was to conduct a practitioner research project that relates to one of the ten research projects being sponsored by NCSALL. I was interested in John Comings' research on learner motivation and retention. In this research, Comings and his research team surveyed students who were successful in completing their objectives. They found that these students felt that setting goals helped them in their persistence. I decided to observe what effect continuing goal-setting in a math class would have on learner persistence.*

We at PAE have worked hard to make our program accessible, and particularly to make our math courses interesting and inviting as they have evolved over time. Ten years ago, we offered math in a lab setting: students worked individually. We provided no group work or teacher-led lectures. As our program grew and we began to learn of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' standards, we decided to offer math classes that covered a range of math disciplines. We incorporated teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, the use of manipulatives, and journal writing and reflection. We also gave math inventories before we placed students into math courses to ensure that students would feel prepared. The inventory we used was the Math Pre-GED form CC test, with teacher-made inventories for more basic math students.

All of our courses, including math, were free for General Educational Development (GED) and high school diploma candidates; all others paid a fee of \$40 to \$50 per course plus book purchase or were provided with a fee waiver of \$50 if they met income guidelines. We provided transportation for those who lived on the school bus route, and the city bus had a stop at our school. Our program had childcare for eligible students in daytime classes. The only mandatory attendance was for the high school diploma students: to receive high school credit for a course, they could not miss more than three classes. Attendance was not mandated for the other students, but was necessary if they wanted to

receive a grade. Despite the services PAE provided and the efforts we made to make the class atmosphere less intimidating, our dropout rates were more than 50 percent in our math classes.

I teach four math classes, each of which meets twice a week for two-and-a-half hours each session. In this article, I will share the findings from my two Math Concepts classes. Math Concepts is a course designed to help GED students pass the GED math test; it also serves as a pre-algebra course for learners who need a stronger foundation before entering into an algebra class. We had found earlier that combining pre-algebra and GED-bound students in the same class has had a positive effect on persistence. The GED students witness the college aspirations of the pre-algebra students while the pre-algebra students support the GED students as they prepare to take the test. Most of our pre-algebra learners have their high school diplomas, but sometimes some are taking the class for high school credit. My morning Math Concepts class consisted of 21 students and my evening Math Concepts class consisted of ten students. Of the 31 students total, 13 were pursuing their GEDs, eight of whom were English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students; four were taking the class for high school credit; and the remaining 14 were college preparatory students.

### **GATHERING DATA**

During the first class, I explained that NCSALL's learner motivation research found that students who persisted in an adult basic education course attributed this persistence, in some measure, to goal-setting. I had the learners fill out a goal-setting questionnaire based on a survey *Conquering Math Anxiety* (Arem, 1993). It included questions about the barriers and positive forces that might exist for them as they pursued their stated goals. They then listed the action steps they considered important to pursuing their math goals. I gave students a week to work on this and then collected the questionnaires. I responded individually to each person's work.

In the past I had observed that the initial loss of students occurred within the first four to six classes, so I decided to have the learners revisit their goals during the fourth class, reviewing what they listed as barriers and positive forces. As a group, we discussed whether any positive forces had been working for them and if any new barriers had occurred that they had not listed. I also asked them to consider which action steps they were doing consistently and which they thought they needed to work on. In about four weeks (eight classes later) I asked them to revisit their goals once more. I also asked if they thought, with only 11 classes remaining,

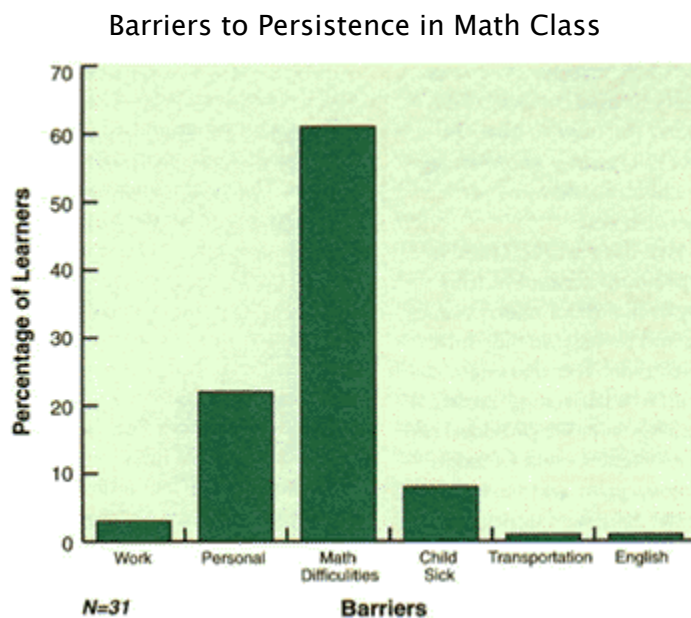


that they would persevere to the very end. Many responses were more like affirmations: “I feel I will. I didn’t say at times it may be a struggle, but I am sure that I can manage through, it’s only 11 more!!!” “Most definitely, if I was going to quit, it would have been earlier in the class.”

At the end of the course, I asked the students who remained to fill out one more questionnaire rating the factors that kept them attending, the factors that kept them connected, and the factors that made it difficult to continue in the course. I also asked them to rate the effect goal-setting had on them completing the course.

## THE FINDINGS

When I started this project, I assumed that my GED students would have difficulty articulating their goals. I could not have been more wrong. The Math Concepts (GED) learners gave heartfelt testimony to what they perceived as their goals, barriers, and positive forces. “My mom sent me up here to finish my schooling and to better myself in many different things so I am going to achieve my goals and make my mom and the rest of my family proud of me and to be proud of myself,” one learner said. My second surprise was the list of barriers and positive forces. NCSALL’s learner motivation project was not specifically focused on math. Those researchers found work, childcare issues, and transportation to be some of the barriers to persistence. The primary barrier that inhibited learners completing my math class, however, was dealing with various math difficulties and phobias.



The “fear of failure” appeared in many responses; frustration with mathematics and embarrassment at not knowing a particular concept also were evident. As seen in the bar graph on page 29 math difficulties were the barrier that students perceived as keeping them from finishing a class. Study strategies was the positive force most emphasized. Strategies such as asking questions of the teacher and classmates, listening, studying, attendance, and completing homework were some of the more numerous responses listed by the participants at both levels. Psychological and academic barriers were at work here, not situational barriers such as transportation.

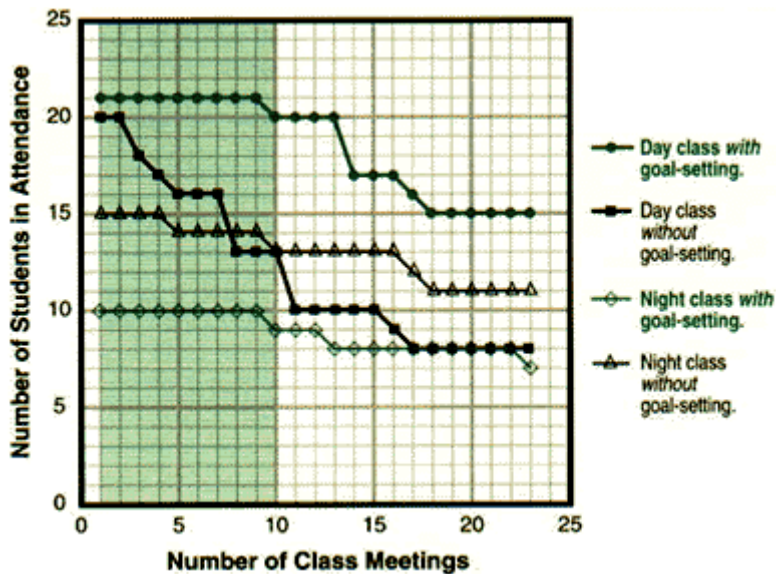
The exit survey yielded additional interesting data. I asked the learners to indicate if they were male or female so I could compare the responses by gender. In answering the question, *What factors kept you coming to class?*, the top four responses to that question for men, in order of importance, were (1) the need to understand the math, (2) goals, (3) the teacher, and 4) friends. Women had as their top choices: 1) the need to understand the math, (2) the teacher, (3) goals, and (4) to get a GED. I also asked the exiting students to assess what factors made them feel connected to the class. Again the responses were different for men and women. I was surprised that the men rated reviewing goals as the most important factor in helping them feel connected while the women had the teacher as first. This might be because I am a woman math teacher and women tend to focus on connectedness. I also recognize that I was biased. I thought that men were probably not comfortable talking about goals or might feel that the goal-setting exercise was not necessary. I learned that goal-setting was very important to this group of men.

I asked the learners to rate the factors that made it difficult for them to attend class, even though this group did complete the course. Again the responses were different for the men and women in my classes. The men placed work as their barrier and the women placed being ill as their number one barrier. Each of these pieces of data provided me with information about persistence and attendance, but my initial question was directed at seeing if retention was affected by placing emphasis on goals. The graph on page 31 displays persistence in four Math Concepts classes, two held during the day and two held in the evening. In the classes of similar makeup and size where we engaged in goal-setting more students stayed longer before dropping out.

In the day class that utilized goal-setting, the retention rate was 71 percent compared to 45 percent for the group that did not set goals. In the evening class the rates were relatively the same: 70 percent for the goal setters compared to 73 percent without goal-setting. And notice that

learners in the goal-setting group dropped out later in the course: there was 100 percent retention in the goal-setting class for nine classes compared to 93 percent in the non-goal-setting group. By the 18th class, the retention rate for the goal-setting group was 80 percent while the non-goal-setting group had dropped to 73 percent. In fact, the retention rate for the goal-setting group remained at 80 percent until the last class. This merits attention because the longer we can keep GED students attending class, the better their chances are of success on the GED math test.

Comparing Persistence of Learners in Classes *With* Goal-Setting Versus Classes *Without* Goal-Setting



## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

My primary reason for conducting this research was to see how effective goal-setting was to student retention in a math class. I learned about much more than that. I found that for some of my Math Concepts students, goal-setting was an important part of their commitment to succeed while others were less enthusiastic. One GED student stated, "I think these goal sheets are really good and they help you." Another said, "Almost every night I reaffirm it [goal] in my journal that I will get to class and complete my assignments." However, another learner commented, "They haven't really had any effect on my commitment to this class."

For goal-setting to be effective, it must be continuing. For me, this meant incorporating this practice into my lesson plans so that my students and I were consciously aware of the process. In addition, I

learned that retention is affected by many factors, not just goal-setting. I discovered the importance of dealing with math anxiety. Before my research project, our math staff had made a conscious effort to address fear of math through journal writing, lab activities, group work, and tutoring. We also tried to establish a community of concerned students who looked out for each other. It is clear we should continue to do even more. In fact, this past semester we asked all our math students to think about the barriers that would keep them from completing a math course. At all levels, from basic math through algebra, math anxiety was the compelling negative force.

We are now collecting data from our students who have persisted through a course to see if their attitudes about math have changed and what contributed to this change. Of 40 students polled in December, 12.5 percent said they hated math and 32.5 percent were afraid of math when they began the math course in September. When leaving the math course, this improved to 0 percent hating math and only 2.5 percent fearing math. Also, at the beginning of the courses 0 percent loved math; exiting, 25 percent indicated a “love of math.” Our next project will be to try to locate students who did not persist to see if their math attitudes changed.

This was the first time that I participated in a practitioner research project. Although I was hesitant at first, practitioner research has transformed me. I found it a valuable tool to “quantify” a “gut feeling” that I had. It also raised more questions. I am now using the practitioner research model with students by requiring my algebra students to research a question they have and use their graphing skills to analyze their data.

My research has convinced me that emphasis on goal-setting is worthwhile. I also realize that goal-setting must be a continuing process, not just an introductory activity at the beginning of a course. And, as one research question is answered, others surface. What effect would an orientation for all students have at which goal-setting issues are discussed? Would weekly discussions of goals be more effective than monthly? How can we better address the problem of math anxiety? This research raised many questions and concerns and certainly merits our attention.


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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Pam Meader*, a former high school math teacher, has taught math in adult basic education settings for more than 15 years. She is the New England representative for the Adult Numeracy Network, NCSALL's Practitioner Research and Dissemination Network (PDRN) leader for Maine, and recently was awarded Maine's Adult Education Teacher of the Year award. She is passionate about mathematics and seeks to instill this passion in each of her students.



Reading Assigned for Session Three on Sponsors 

## Sponsors and Sponsorship

Comings, J. & Cuban, S. (2002) Sponsors and sponsorship. *Focus on Basics*, 6(A), 1, 3–6

*When new students walk into your class, they may appear to be alone, but research now underway at NCSALL indicates that, in most cases, they are not. They arrive in a program with the help and support of a specific person or a few people in their social network. The researchers in the second phase of NCSALL's Persistence Study are calling these people "sponsors" and the help they provide "sponsorship" (Brandt, 2001). Sponsors appear to be an important support to persistence. You may be able to help these sponsors support your students, and your class and program may be able to play the sponsorship role. We hope the research findings presented here help you take advantage of this overlooked resource.*

The report of the first phase of NCSALL's Persistence Study (Comings et al., 1999) identified the support of family, friends, teachers, and fellow students as important to students' persistence, but it did not describe the nature of this support. The second phase of the study is providing in-depth, descriptive information about how personal relationships help and hinder student persistence, and is building a more complex picture of these relationships. Most students in the present phase of the study identify a specific person or a few specific people in their social networks who provide support to their persistence. Although we found no evidence that the literacy programs officially recognize these sponsors, we do find that program staff and volunteer tutors sometimes play the sponsorship role.

We did not interview the sponsors in this study; the students indicated their importance as a support to persistence. Sometimes a sponsor steps forward without being asked, or the relationship begins when an adult asks for help with reading or writing. The sponsors in this study usually have more education and familiarity with educational institutions than do the learners they support, and they act as a guide into the world of education, often identifying programs or setting up initial visits. Sponsors are also personal counselors who advise about education, assist with literacy tasks, and encourage students to achieve their goals. Sponsors sometimes provide money, transportation, child care, and housing. Some sponsors are altruistic, but others want something in return for their help. Sponsors can be a help and a hindrance at the same time.

Some sponsors provided a type of symbolic support: a legacy of support. For example, several students mention the memory of a parent, not necessarily well educated, who valued education and who transmitted this value to them, as a support to their persistence. The parent is no longer providing direct support, but the values the parent instilled in the child are still having an effect. One student in the study, who is from Barbados, remembers the importance his mother gave to his education and learning. He says, "Every day she told me you have got to go to school."

### THREE TYPES OF SPONSOR

Students in the study mentioned different types of sponsor, which we have categorized as: 1) personal, 2) official, and 3) intermediate. These categories reflect the relationships between the student and the sponsor, as well as the type of support provided. Personal sponsors are part of a student's everyday life and include relatives, godmothers, children, spouses and partners, neighbors, friends, and co-workers. Official sponsors are professionals who are paid to provide specific support to students. They include social workers, parole officers, welfare-to-work counselors, professional literacy staff, librarians, and teachers. The third type is a person who is in an intermediate position between official and personal. They are not part of a student's everyday life or a professional paid to provide this support to them. They include pastors, fellow 12-step recovery program members (especially 12-step sponsors), volunteer tutors, and other students. The sponsorship categories are useful to our thinking about sponsors, but individual sponsors may be described by more than one category. Readers should think of these categories as "roles" that define different ways to support students.

### PERSONAL SPONSORSHIP

A personal sponsor, such as a relative who gives emotional, literacy, and informational support, can offer pervasive, comprehensive supports. Susan, a co-worker in Mark's family business, plays the role of a personal sponsor. Mark revealed his problem with reading to Susan, who was the first person to talk with him about it. She offered both to help with literacy tasks and to tutor him, and she found a program for him, calling the local library literacy program and setting up the initial contact for Mark. Susan is part of Mark's life and has shown that she is willing and able to support him in his efforts to persist at learning.

Sometimes, personal sponsors place demands on students that are not supportive to persistence. For example, one student's mother gives



her a place to live during periods of homelessness and encourages her to attend class. The mother provides positive reinforcement such as applauding her daughter when she reads. However, this student's mother sometimes calls the program and requests that her daughter come home and help take care of problems related to her mother's illness.

### **OFFICIAL SPONSORSHIP**

An official sponsor, such as a caseworker who provides a referral to a program and follows up to see how the student's participation works out, gives intermittent, targeted support within a limited time frame. An example of an official sponsor is Sally, a professional General Educational Development (GED) teacher in a drug treatment program. One of her students, Cory, was able to complete some of the math preparation for the GED, but her reading skills were too low to enable her to pass the test. Sally located a basic literacy program and helped Cory to enroll. The GED teacher and the other professional staff in the drug treatment program are supporting Cory's persistence in learning. The GED teacher is in contact with Cory's drug treatment counselor, who keeps track of her participation in the program and can provide referrals to services she might need so that she can persist in her learning.

Official sponsors have limitations. They may not be available to the student on a personal level or outside of normal office hours, and their institutions have official objectives that might interfere with an individual's sponsorship role.

### **INTERMEDIATE SPONSORSHIP**

Intermediate sponsors are in the middle of these two ends of a continuum. They are involved with students for a longer period of time than official sponsors but are not integrated into a student's life in the way that personal sponsors are. Bill, Rod's sponsor in a 12-step recovery program, is an intermediate sponsor. Rod started in a literacy program after he began the recovery process, and then dropped out of the literacy program after a relapse into drinking. Bill gave Rod advice on the timing of when he should rejoin the literacy program. Bill felt that Rod should not take on anything stressful until he was back in recovery, and he was worried that participation in the program was stressful and might lead to another relapse. When Rod did re-enter the program, he did so with more confidence.

A student's connection to an intermediate sponsor is usually not encumbered by the kinds of demands that friends and relatives make on each other, nor is it constrained by the rules and objectives of official

sponsors. Intermediate sponsors may be particularly beneficial to student persistence and may be a model for how a program can play the sponsorship role for students.

We have observed volunteer tutors and students playing the intermediate sponsorship role. Tutors provide transportation and daycare assistance to their students. Tutors and fellow students provide encouragement, discuss barriers to persistence, and connect students to community services that can provide transportation, daycare, and counseling. The programs in this phase of NCSALL's Persistence Study are connected to libraries, which have a traditional role of support to reading and self-study. Libraries and the volunteers they recruit might be ideal community institutions to play the intermediate sponsorship role. They could play that role for students both in library literacy programs and in the programs of other institutions.

### **LEARNING ABOUT SPONSORS**

The programs in this study sometimes learn about sponsors when students casually mention them during intake, in class, or during informal conversations, but we have not observed a systematic intervention that sought to identify or involve sponsors. If programs formally query new students about sponsors in their lives, staff could help students to develop strategies for engaging sponsors to help them persist in the program. Programs could also involve sponsors directly in literacy efforts and provide training and other services to help sponsors to continue and expand their support of students. Professional counselors or support groups among students could discuss the sponsorship role, identify sponsors, and develop strategies to benefit from this type of support.

Identifying sponsorship as critical, defining different types of sponsors, exploring the ways in which sponsors support persistence, and developing approaches to build sponsorship for students could lead to insights into how to increase persistence by better utilizing and expanding a student's network of sponsorship. Since a student may come to a literacy program without sponsors, programs might find ways to connect them to people and institutions that can play this role. Programs can help students to identify sponsors in their personal social networks and in the institutions that provide them with professional help. Sponsors can be found in recovery or substance abuse groups, churches, housing groups, and local neighborhood organizations. A partnership among the sponsor, student, tutor or teacher, and staff might

bring the program experience more directly into the student's life, which could help support persistence.

Research into how children learn to read has identified the support of family and community (the social network of the child) as critical to helping children become good readers (Snow et al., 1998). An individual teacher cannot connect to a child's entire social network and, therefore, focuses on the child's primary caregivers, usually the parents. Adult students, too, need a supportive social network that helps them to succeed at learning, whether that learning is focused on reading, writing, math, language, or passing the GED tests. Programs cannot connect to their students' entire social networks, but they can identify a sponsor or a few sponsors in each student's life and connect to them. The co-worker, recovery process advisor, and GED teacher in the examples above could be powerful allies in a program's attempt to help those students persist in their learning. If sponsorship is critical to student persistence, community organizations (such as libraries) might be encouraged to take on this role, even if they are not providing direct instruction. We hope our research will eventually provide programs with tools that will allow them to build a network of sponsors for their students that is consistent and long lasting.

*An interim report of this research will be available at <http://www.mdrc.org> in late 2002 and a final report in mid-2003.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Reflections on the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project

Morrish, E. (2002) ODWIN: Reflections on the women, violence, and adult education project. *Focus on Basics*, 5(C), 15–20

*Quantitative research has established conclusively that domestic violence is a factor in approximately six percent of all US households, and that 20 percent to 30 percent of women receiving welfare are current victims of domestic violence (Raphael, 2000). Fifty-five percent to 65 percent of women receiving welfare have experienced violence sometime in their lives (GAO, 1998). According to statistics reported in the Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report "Violence against Women," violence occurs more frequently in families with low incomes. Average annual rate of violent victimizations per 1,000 females was 57 for families with incomes below \$10,000 and 31 for families with incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Level of education was also found to correlate with the rate of violence. For victims with less than a high school diploma the average annual rate of violent victimizations per 1,000 females was 48, compared to 28 for female victims who were high school graduates (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995).*

Concerned with violence as a barrier to learning in adult basic education, World Education sought funding through the US Department of Education Women's Educational Equity Act that would enable six programs to enhance educational services for women who have or are experiencing violence by exploring changes in practice and policy. Drawing on the work of researcher Jenny Horsman, who participated in the project, we named as violence many forms of oppression and trauma, including domestic violence, violence by institutions of the state, childhood abuse, workplace violence, and rape. Two years later, we articulate these assumptions about violence:

- violence is pervasive and takes many forms;
- different forms of violence are intertwined;
- violence is supported by institutions;
- violence affects all of us; and
- by participating in institutions that perpetrate violence, we all perpetuate the violence our society supports.

We wanted a project that would support adult education practitioners because we saw that teachers know how widespread violence is and yet hesitate to weave their understanding into their practice. The project gave participants the legitimacy and the support needed to explore the complexities of these issues. One teacher described her inability to connect the implications of violence to her teaching before participating in the project:

I already knew about violence. And I already knew that oppression is a form of violence. I am politically conscious. But before the project, I never put my politics together with my teaching.... The project made me more sensitive in my teaching position. Before, when someone had an attitude or went to sleep in class it would aggravate me. Now it's a red flag for me. Before it was, "Look, if you're not coming here to learn, don't come." Now, I say, "Are you OK?"

Now I have a different mindset. I've seen that there's a connection between counseling and teaching. I wasn't aware of this before.... I will forever be more conscious of the issue as it affects women in the classroom.

The initial Women, Violence, and Adult Education project event was an introductory institute held in April, 2000. Adult education practitioners gathered from across New England to explore issues of violence and oppression. Programs then applied to become part of the three-year project that would explore ways to address the implications of violence on learning. Six programs were chosen; teachers from these programs participated in a series of four two-day training workshops to share ideas, discuss research, and create a supportive community of educators. Wherever possible, at least two teachers participated from each program. This group of teachers has developed strategies and materials that now, in the final phase of the project, are being compiled in a *Sourcebook* that will be published in the fall, 2002. (Look for information about it in future issues of *Focus on Basics*.)

In selecting participants, World Education was looking for geographic diversity, a variety of program structures, and a variety of student populations. We chose the York School, described in the Ridgway & Griffith article; Vermont Adult Learning, a welfare-to-work program in a small town; Even Start Learning, Innovation, Nurturing, Knowledge, Success (LINKS), a program in rural Maine that works with families in their homes; Project Hope, located in a shelter for homeless women in Boston; the Community Education Project, based in a

community organization in a small town in Massachusetts; and the Genesis Center in Rhode Island, which provides classes in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). What happened in each of these programs is profound. Working on the project shifted people's thinking: it changed teachers' practices and influenced students to make new decisions about education and work. While all programs will be featured in the *Sourcebook*, in this article, space restricts me to highlighting the work from three programs. I will outline the activities of the programs and share the views of teachers and students. The examples are taken from personal observation, project reports, and interviews.

### VERMONT ADULT LEARNING

The White River Junction "Getting Ready to Work" is a regional program funded to serve welfare clients, primarily women who are single parents with work mandates. Teacher Katy Chaffee wrote, "Their lives are compromised by very little income. As a result of recent changes in welfare legislation there are enormous pressures and stresses on our participants." She talked more about this when interviewed about why the program joined the project:

We're in this whole structure of violence at the same time we are trying to acknowledge it in other women's lives. It is sitting here even in how we are being asked to work. I don't want to go there—it hurts. I was living it. I saw the life raft out there, I went "Yeah! Grab it!" And so [one of the teachers] participated in the institute and she talked about there being one violence.... So then you have to look at how you participate in that [violence], too.

The program, housed in a storefront on Main Street, draws people from a wide geographical area. They offer classes and individual help. Both participating teachers saw institutional violence as a reason to join the project. Teacher Tammy Stockman explained:

I have been aware for years that violence in every possible form is a huge part of the women's lives. Poverty itself is an act of violence. Often the women had to leave early to go to court. Our site was right around the corner from the court house, and the women were in and out of there all the time, dealing with custody and child support issues, addiction issues, abuse issues. The violence is systemic, not just episodic. The system is set up to hurt and to continue to hurt poor women.

When asked what she was hoping to gain from joining the project, Tammy replied:

Lately, it seems like the violence has been getting worse, and we needed more support than we were getting. One woman came to class with a loaded pistol because of an abusive partner. There was no place for us to get trained in how to deal with things like this because the people above us didn't want to hear about it. They'd say, "Don't tell us that there are so many women affected. We don't believe you." What can you say to something like that?

Participating in this project enabled us to openly discuss violence as a reality and to ideally come back with a language to describe it and statistics to say, "You're wrong. This is a huge problem." I am hoping that once this project is over, we will be well informed and have strength in numbers. The people above us won't be able to sweep it under the rug so easily.

Inspired by the model of self care provided by the introductory institute, the participating teachers in Vermont decided to begin their project with a staff retreat and invited a therapist to join as a mentor-advisor. Katy said:

We needed no further evidence or proof that our participants had multiple experiences of trauma and violence. Did they also have ideas and experiences of wellness: what it is, what moments of wellness feel like, what it would be like to live well; what words that describe it?

The staff emerged from their retreat determined to focus on wellness and to see if this would change the outcomes in their welfare to work program. They were being pushed to become more focused on getting students out of the education program and into work. Nevertheless, they started a well-being support group that met once a week as a regular part of the program. They hired outside consultants—"experts"—to teach and joined the courses as participants.

They piloted three consecutive courses consisting of eight to 10 two-and-a-half hour sessions each. The first was on mindfulness, the second on creative writing, and the third on collage, facilitated in turn by a therapist, a high school student, and an artist. A turning point occurred in the mindfulness course when they decided to lock the door. Tammy wrote:

How had we been so blind to the signals of stress that our participants had been giving? We realized at this time that [what] we had come to see as trust and comfort was actually at a rather shallow level and that much of our participants' behavior was a



direct result of their fear. When the door was locked and the phones turned off and the fear of being interrupted was eliminated, when the collective act of self-care was given top priority and the rest of the world was sent a clear message that this was our time and space, that was when we felt a sense of well being. And that was when trust was built.

Students' reactions included:

I appreciated the safety of this group, that I could try things. In other groups I have felt that I am not as good as everybody else in the room. Here I am not worried about not being able to do what other people can do.

This laid the groundwork for the writing and collage groups. Again the teachers hired consultants and participated as part of the group. Again they unplugged the phones and locked the door. The collage artist they hired was convinced of the power of healing arts in her own life and others. She says:

The creating of one's own artwork is inherently healing and revealing. It allows access to the deeper parts of the self, and as a consequence, draws on and shares in the humanity of all of us.

Following is Katy's report about the collage process. Her reflections and her interviews with students show what a difference this made in the lives of the students and their ability to imagine themselves changing.

There is a cultural expectation that welfare-to-work training should provide goal-oriented, rational, job related programming. This well-being support group provided a weekly personal space for valuing each other, and ourselves for asking questions, and for exploring who we are and what we are meant to do in this world. The format facilitated clarity about career directions for some or an appreciation of personal strengths.

A student commented:

We also imagined a place of well being, and another time, a challenge in our life and then changed places with someone of our choosing.

The students agreed it was valuable to include collage in the welfare to work program. One in particular articulated what developing a collage meant to her:

...It taught me to be in a classroom situation again. I did get a job. It gave me the confidence that I can focus.... I know that the collage I did about change is very important to me. Because I'm very angry at the world that we live in and the conditions that there are. It [the collage] gave me a place to put it just the way it is now. ...It got it out of me. Because I couldn't put it into words—all these things—but I could put it all on the collage. It worked.

Katy and Tammy were pleased with the outcomes.

**Participation grew and attendance improved.** In our program, which is not mandatory, participants often vote with their feet. Participants' enthusiasm developed quickly. Although initially scheduled for four to six weeks, participants wanted to continue longer. We extended the class to 10 weeks.

**Participants gained self-confidence and pride in their work.** Collage required a unique process of listening to your inner self through right brain work. One of our satisfied artists commented, "There is nothing quite like discovering that inside of you is an interesting person worth getting to know."

**The exploration of interior personal space informed participants' ideas about work, relationships, and values.** Career ideas and job direction were never part of the agenda of the collage group. However, greater personal clarity about future directions was an outcome.

### **EVEN START LINKS, MAINE**

This rural family literacy program sends tutors to work with women in their homes, where it can be hard to focus on literacy skills. Life intervenes, often in the form of violence. A jealous boyfriend lingered at the door with a gun when the tutor was there. Child sexual abuse was hidden by the community, including the local doctors; even the literacy coordinator had felt powerless to address it. The teachers and the students needed support. Participation in this project enabled them to hire a social worker to meet with the staff every month for discussion, counseling, and clinical advice. The coordinator, Janice Armstrong, says the inclusion of a therapist at the introductory institute inspired her to hire the counselor. Otherwise, she says, "It absolutely would not have occurred to me." She described the role of the social worker:

...She gave us an opportunity to process our roles with the families, helped me process my role as supervisor of the teachers, and [gave the] teachers an opportunity to save up problems and situations that they were uncomfortable with and needed feedback on. They prioritized the problems and we processed them one by one. She gave very objective feedback... one family had a death in the family. She had very specific suggestions like contacting the death and dying support group at the hospital for support and counseling. She knew specifics and could give the teachers that information. Not only that, she was willing to go on home visits. She did visit this family [and] we were able to get all the children into counseling, and arrange for counseling at school.

There were just so many ways she helped the program. The teachers were sometimes very stressed. She had such a calming way. That is very, very necessary for staff in the type of program we work in. To be able to feel that calm, know that there is hope, [that] everyone will be able to carry on in some way.

As part of the project, one of the teachers was trained by a staff person from a collaborating family service agency to facilitate a support group. Once students were able to address issues in this group, and staff could do the same in their monthly meetings, literacy work could be the focus during tutoring sessions. Janice wrote:

... having a women's support group for learners has opened up time for literacy instruction during home visits because the women have less of a need to talk about their problems to the teachers.

After participating in the project, Janice realized that the teachers and the students had to feel supported for changes to happen. She says this about the student group:

We tried so many different ways to bring these women together and it just didn't work but this clicked. They got together and planned an end of the year trip to Bangor for all their nine families. [It clicked] because of this women's empowerment group. They were meeting together every Wednesday for an hour and then afterwards would stick around and they started talking about what they could do together.

The project resulted in better attendance than usual, and, for the first time, student ownership and participation in the program planning

process. Janice now feels that a counselor is an essential part of her program that she will work to find funding to continue.

### **PROJECT HOPE, MASSACHUSETTS**

Project Hope is a homeless shelter that recognizes the role of supports in addressing homelessness. They run adult basic education classes in addition to other programming for women. The ABE teachers knew violence was a part of the women's lives at home, on the streets, and in the institutions governing their lives. What convinced them to join the project was the murder of one of the students.

In February, 2000, one of my [Anna Yangco] students was killed by her son. As a writing teacher, I get to look at people's innermost thoughts. I thought I knew this woman. But she used religion to mask her problem. She would say "it is in the hands of God." Still, I felt I should have known. In the fall she used to write a lot, but after Christmas break she would hardly write at all. I would ask her "Why aren't you writing anymore?" And she would say "Oh, I don't know. I just can't do it anymore." And then she died, I was so upset. I kept thinking. "What could I have done?" I started wondering what I could do to prevent this from happening again. Then, in March, my boss got a flier about the Women and Violence project and told me I should get involved in it. It was perfect timing. So I went to the first institute and I have been involved ever since.

One of the participating teachers was also coordinator of the Paul and Phyllis Firemen Scholarship, which gave women full scholarships for further education after passing their GED. It seemed that because of the generosity of the scholarship, many of the usual barriers to education would be addressed. For the women at Project Hope, this was not so. Something else held them back. Taking on the work around violence enabled the participating teachers to see if creating the conditions for learning was that something. Anna describes how they began:

When we got back from the first institute, we were thinking, "How do we create positive conditions for learning?" My partner teacher looked around and said, "Why don't we change the room?" So she held a "visioning day" in her class. She asked her students to draw pictures of what they would like the room to look like. She asked, "If you could have anything you wanted in this room, what would it be? No restrictions!" So the students drew these incredible pictures, and we worked on the room all summer based on what they told us they wanted. We painted the

walls, added plants, put a little fountain in, got halogen lights instead of the fluorescent ones, bought new, more comfortable chairs. We hung a stained glass panel in the window.... By the end of the summer, the room looked totally different. And when the year began, we noticed a complete change in people's attitudes. They were much more relaxed, much calmer.

Teacher Char Carver describes what was different about the work they were doing as part of the project:

We changed "self-improvement" activities to "self-empowerment activities" —so we took them to the library [for] a poetry and writing session. Two women got up and read their poems and they had never written before, so it was wonderful! We went out for dinner with the women and they all got dressed up for the occasion. We used music and writing as healing getting them to think outside of the box.... We had an activity period where every week they had to do an act of self-care.

We put money in the budget into childcare, which we didn't have before...the frivolous thing is difficult. We need to put our resources into the women, if we value their endeavor. It's critical that we don't repeat the oppression of poverty. We need to learn how to budget in a different way. How do you explain to other people what you're doing when you buy flowers? But when the women talked about the flowers, they talked about hope.

Anna says this about what she and the students learned from the project:

I've seen lots of changes. By the end of the year, the women can say, "I'm important." They tell me that they don't worry so much about what everyone else thinks. They think more positively about themselves. Last year, five people went on to college. There are always changes, and it's hard to isolate it to just this project. But I have seen their willingness to take risks increase. At the end of the year, we had a yoga class. This was a big risk. We moved the tables back so that everyone was sort of exposed. We were on the floor doing stretches. If this had been at the beginning of the year, I'm sure no one would have come. But at the end of the year, everyone went. And they came back for all four sessions.

## CONCLUSION

This project has taught us that addressing violence does not mean inviting everyone to disclose. It does not mean that we need to address violence directly in curriculum and materials. It means creating the conditions for learning that name and recognize the presence of violence in our lives.

The staff of the programs changed their practices to allow time for activities and elements that are usually considered luxuries in adult education. These included creating safe and beautiful space, doing art, and giving teachers and students time to talk and find ways to reflect. The shift in thinking and programming could not have happened without modeling and encouraging three levels of support: care of self, support from within the program, and support from community counseling and referral resources. The teachers report changes in their students: better attendance, improved writing skills, the willingness to take risks which led to the ability to make changes in their career and educational choices. As Katy Chaffee said, “greater personal clarity about future directions was an outcome.” Surely that is what much teaching in adult basic education is all about.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups

Drago-Severson, E., Helsing, D., Kegan, R., Popp, N., Broderick, M. & Portnow, K. (2001) The power of a cohort and of collaborative groups. *Focus on Basics*, 5(B), 15–22

*Being part of a cohort—which we define as a tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose group—was very important, in different ways, to many of the 41 adult learners at three different program sites who participated in the NCSALL Adult Development Research over the course of 14 months. This finding challenges the view that adults, who often come to their class-taking with well-established social networks, are less in need of entrée to a new community than, for example, older adolescents who are psychologically separating from their families of origin and who have not yet formed new communities of which they are a part (Knowles 1970, 1975; Cross, 1971, 1981; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). Despite differences in the cohort design across the three sites, the interpersonal relationships that peers developed in the cohort made a critical difference to their academic learning, emotional and psychological well-being, and ability to broaden their perspectives.*

The NCSALL Adult Development Research group sees development as a continuing and lifelong process. We understand growth as occurring along a continuum of successive and qualitatively different levels of development. We refer to these levels as ways of knowing or meaning systems that shape how people interpret—or make sense of—their experience. The three most common levels of development in adulthood are Instrumental, Socializing, and Self Authoring (please click here for a discussion of our constructive developmental framework).

### THE COHORT AS A HOLDING ENVIRONMENT

Robert Kegan’s theory of adult development (1982, 1994) considers a person as a maker of meaning throughout his or her lifespan. We employ this framework to suggest why and how the use of cohorts in adult basic education (ABE) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) settings is important in different ways to a variety of students who have different ways of knowing and learning. Because every ABE or ESOL class will likely be populated by adults who make meaning with different ways of knowing, programs that recognize students’ developmental diversity—and support students’ growth accordingly—will be especially effective.

Growth processes, such as learning and teaching processes, depend on connections, and these processes, according to Kegan's theory, invariably occur in some context (Kegan, 1982). Students with different ways of knowing need different forms of support and challenge from their surrounding contexts to grow. We refer to such contexts as "holding environments" (Kegan, 1982, 1994), which, when successful, can help students grow to manage better the complexities of their learning and their other social roles.

A good holding environment serves three functions (Kegan, 1982, 1994). First, it must "hold well," meaning that it meets a person's needs by recognizing and confirming who that person is, without frustration or urgent anticipation of change. It provides appropriate supports to accommodate the way the person is currently making meaning. Second, when a person is ready, a good holding environment needs to "let go," challenging learners and permitting them to grow beyond their existing perceptions to new and greater ways of knowing. Third, a good holding environment "sticks around," providing continuity, stability, and availability to the person in the process of growth. It stays, or remains in place, so that relationships can be reknown and reconstructed in a new way that supports who the person has grown to become.

While this third characteristic of good holding may be difficult to provide in as short a period of time as a few weeks, any classroom can include the other two features: high support and high challenge. Both are essential for good holding. It was apparent in our study, despite differences in the designs of the three programs, that for most participants their learning group became more than "just a class" or "just a group." In all three settings participants spoke of the group as "like a family." We might also call them a "band of warriors," or "fellow strugglers": in short, a cohort. These cohorts served as dynamic transitional growth spaces that helped learners make good use of each other by providing both the challenge that encouraged learners to grow and the support they needed to meet those challenges.

### **THREE SITES, THREE COHORT DESIGNS**

The three sites in our study provided contrasts in their specific cohort designs. At the Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) site, in Charlestown, MA, students started their program together and were enrolled in the same two classes during their first semester. The cohort disbanded by the start of the second term and students independently selected their own courses for that semester. At Even Start, a family literacy program in Cambridge, MA, parents determined their own entry



and exit dates from the program. Many parents had enrolled in this program before our study began and continued after its completion. At Polaroid, in Norwood, MA, all workers began the adult diploma program at the same time, worked toward a common purpose, and left the program at the same time.

Despite these differences in the cohort shape and configuration (and differences in age and social role among participants), the importance of participating in a learner cohort held true at all three sites. Even though these adults, like adults more generally, utilized different ways of knowing, they all described how their cohorts served several key purposes. First, the cohort served as a holding environment spacious enough to support and challenge adult students in their academic learning (see Table 1). Participants at all sites reported that their academic learning was enhanced by their participation in collaborative learning activities within their cohorts. Second, the cohort served as a context in which students provided each other with a variety of forms of emotional and psychological support (see Table 2). Lastly, the cohort challenged learners to broaden their perspectives (see Table 3). Both within and across sites, learners who shared the same level of development demonstrated similar concepts of how the cohort and collaborative learning experiences supported and challenged them in multiple ways. Furthermore, students with different ways of knowing described important differences in these concepts. Overall, these findings suggest not only the importance of a cohort but also that elements other than a specific structure regarding entry and exit might be crucial in transforming a class into a true cohort.

Table 1: Learner's Constructions of the Cohort as a Holding Environment for Academic Learning

| Way of Knowing         | The Cohort...   | Sample Quotations  |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Instrumental Knowers   | <p>Helped them obtain the "right skills, right answers, and facts" they needed to know.</p> <p>Provided information and concrete help.</p> <p>Was valued because they "made us" keep coming, "wouldn't let us quit," "made us do our work."</p> <p>Became informational resource.</p>   | <p>"You have an idea but another person has an idea and can help you...it can help you change" "you give your opinion. If you like that you can take something, something good you take." "You work with group. There is teamwork. You can ask them if you have something difficult or you have something you don't know Sometimes you call each other."</p>   |
| Socializing Knowers    | <p>Supported them by providing a comfortable and safe place to express themselves.</p> <p>"Knew them" as persons, knowing how they felt and thought.</p> <p>Accepted them, enabling them to ask questions and risk making mistakes. Was source of own self-confidence.</p> <p>Helped them evaluate their academic learning.</p>     | <p>"We all got our strengths. We all have our weaknesses. Maybe what I, what I am good at, maybe they lack of it. What they are good at, maybe I lack at it. We have all got our weaknesses to work on."</p>   |
| Self-Authoring Knowers | <p>Provided a place of joining together in collaboration and learning from that process.</p> <p>Helped them to discover their own capabilities.</p> <p>Provided and opportunity to improve upon and demonstrate how they wanted to carry out their own beliefs and purposes. Tolerated and appreciated conflict and difference.</p> | <p>"In groups, we share what we know. If someone knows something a little better, then that person helps others to know something a little better." "[Working with others] I realized I knew more than I thought I did." "When I learn math I try helping my co-students how to do the math, or you do your homework, let me see if you do exactly the way or why you don't try to do this work this way. [It's] good way to learn, because if you see anything, anybody can help you. You can help work together, work in team. You learn more working together."</p> |

*Table compiled by Eleanor Drago-Severson*

Table 2: Learner’s Constructions of the Cohort as a Holding Environment for Emotional Support

| Way of Knowing         | The Cohort...   | Sample Quotations   |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Instrumental Knowers   | <p>Embodied a community of concern (e.g., when a student missed a day of class, others inquired about the student’s wellbeing).</p> <p>Provided more concrete form of support (e.g., help with homework).</p>   | <p>“We work together with our friend...we talk and everybody is friends...we share food from different culture, we sit together...make a little party...when some friend not come in and not in school we ask our teacher what happened to her if she not come?”</p>  |
| Socializing Knowers    | <p>Increased their sense of belonging and decreased feelings of isolation.</p> <p>Eased the pressures of managing various responsibilities in their multiple roles and in their transition into US culture.</p> <p>Knew them, recognized and appreciated them.</p> <p>Encouraged them and enabled them to give encouragement to others.</p>   | <p>“Everybody here cares so much for each other and I think that’s so good...they become like part of your family.”</p> <p>“I told [them] this ‘we’re going to breeze through this and even if it gets harder, we’ll make it because we’ll stick together and help each other.’”</p> <p>“Sometime I get frustrated, especially when I was doing math and sometimes I’ll be tired....But [a classmate] was a good encouragement. She always said, ‘don’t get so mad with yourself.’”</p> |
| Self-Authoring Knowers | <p>Provided opportunities to share their goals and to learn about others’ goals and feelings.</p> <p>Provided positive feelings from friendships with cohort learners; however, their commentary centered mostly on the connections the group created to a shared social status.</p> <p>Had a goal of group harmony not as an end to itself but as a means toward some greater end.</p> | <p>“I enjoy the relations with the other students. We meet, then sometimes we share our life, my life, each life. We are not American people so sometimes we can share our anxiety and our stress about language and that’s good.”</p> <p>“They are there for me so the fact...makes it even easier for me to push yourself.”</p> <p>“Everybody’s learning is different.”</p>   |

*Table compiled by Eleanor Drago-Severson*

Table 3: Learner's Constructions of the Cohort as a Holding Environment for Perspective Broadening

| Way of Knowing         | The Cohort...   | Sample Quotations  |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Instrumental Knowers   | Challenged them to think differently about their own and other people's life experiences.   | <p>"I just feel a lot of, I don't know, gratitude to meet them all [cohort members], and to learn about different things, different things about their countries."</p> <p>"If you have some idea you can share, you can share something good they can take, we discuss, because everybody has children, too."</p>  |
| Socializing Knowers    | <p>Served as a safe haven for learning about other people's experiences, ideas, perspectives, and expertise.</p> <p>Provided a context in which they could broaden their perspectives by learning from "friends."</p> <p>Made differences okay because everyone was still connected and basically the same, which preserved the relationships.</p> <p>Relied upon lack of conflict.</p> | <p>"Everybody has different discussion, different ideas and you can learn from them and they learn from you."</p> <p>"We share a lot of experiences; we get a lot of advice."</p> <p>"They are friendly. They talk with me if I couldn't understand something they help me, they explain to me."</p> <p>"We come from different country that have different culture. We discuss and we learn something from, maybe other country is good, maybe other parents they teach something is different. I will try that, and everybody is different."</p> |
| Self-Authoring Knowers | <p>Provided information and ideas, which they used in service of self-understanding and self-expression.</p> <p>Provided suggestions from others, which they could evaluate and integrate with their ideas.</p> <p>Could withstand conflict as a part of working with and learning from others.</p>   | <p>"Like I was getting other people's ideas, and then I was trying to put my ideas, I was getting more ideas."</p> <p>"I...listen to other peoples' opinions and ideas, but compare their ideas and my ideas [and] think about it, see what happen."</p>   |

*Table compiled by Eleanor Drago-Severson*

## ACADEMIC LEARNING

Sharon Hamilton (1994) provides helpful suggestions for teachers who wish to construct collaborative learning activities to enhance academic learning. She describes three distinct models (postindustrialist, social constructionist, and popular democratic) identified by John Trimbur (1993) and relates them to the characteristics, practices, and beliefs about collaborative learning she has observed in higher education over the past decade. She illustrates how these three models can be applied to classrooms and suggests that teachers adopt one particular model that aligns with their teaching philosophy or personal style.

Each model has its own goals and suggested processes. The “postindustrialist model” of collaborative learning “appears in classrooms in the form of group efforts to solve common problems formulated by an instructor whose curricular agenda determines group structure, time on task, goals, and anticipated answers” (Hamilton, 1994, p. 94). The “social constructionist model” consists of “engaging students more actively in their learning while concurrently developing social skills of negotiation and consensus building” (p. 95). In the “popular democratic model” of collaborative development the challenge for learners is “not to obliterate essential differences in the search for commonalities but rather to envision these essential differences as catalysts for the making of meaning within specific concepts of the particular course” (pp. 95-96). Not only do these models have different goals, but each also assigns different responsibilities to teachers and learners and recommends different principles for designing classroom environments. In our study, we noticed a remarkable correspondence between these three models of collaborative learning and the three different ways of knowing that learners demonstrated at each site. This raises questions about whether teachers really have the luxury of adopting a teaching model that most closely aligns with their personal style or philosophy.

Instrumental learners primarily valued opportunities to work collaboratively because doing so helped them achieve specific concrete, behavioral goals (see Table 1). Their reasoning aligns with the goals of the “postindustrial model.” They said that cohort collaboration helped them to:

- “find the right answers” in math, or the correct sentence structure when writing.
- learn how to use the right words to express themselves better in English, and improve their vocabulary.

- learn how to communicate better with other people at work, at home, and in their daily interactions (e.g., with school officials, doctors, and/or their children’s teachers).
- see classmates and even themselves as holders of knowledge (constructed as an accumulation of facts, and/or parenting practices they could then implement).
- understand the meaning of words and concepts.
- learn how to learn on their own (as evidenced by demonstrating a behavior).

While valuing the supports that were named by Instrumental knowers, Socializing knowers also spoke about appreciating the encouragement they received from peers and fellow parents. Socializing learners especially valued the cohort and collaborative work for the important emotional and psychological support it offered as they balanced the multiple demands of work, family, and school. Their experience mirrors the goals of the “social constructionist model” of collaborative learning. It helped them to:

- feel “comfortable” asking questions when they did not know the answer or did not know what to do in particular situations.
- learn to “socialize with other people.”
- feel less “afraid when speaking English” in front of others (both in and out of the classroom).

Although Self-Authoring knowers mentioned the instrumental, psychological, and emotional reasons why working with cohort members was helpful, they focused particularly on their appreciation of the different perspectives that members in the group brought to any particular activity. Their experience aligns closely with the goals of the “popular democratic model” of collaborative learning. Working with other cohort members helped them to:

- enhance their learning and teaching processes because they were exposed to varying perspectives (points of view) on particular issues.
- understand themselves and other learners’ academic, parenting, and life experiences better.

- recognize and, at times, appreciate forms of difference and commonality across and beyond the cohort.

These three groups of learners' descriptions closely match those described in the literature. This suggests that, in designing collaborative activities, educators, in contrast to Hamilton's suggestions, should perhaps give less priority to which individual approach they personally favor and more consideration to providing all three models in any one classroom: the "new pluralism" to which our research directs us more generally. We elaborate on this recommendation below.

## **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT**

The literature on group learning points to ways these groups can serve as social and emotional support (see, for example Bosworth & Hamilton, 1994; Pedersen & Digby 1995). Our study demonstrates how learners experienced this emotional support differently according to their ways of knowing (see Table 2). While for many of the participants the cohort became "like a family," what "family" actually means differs according to different adult ways of knowing.

Instrumental knowers found the cohort to be a place where their ideas could be compared to those of other people and where peers created an active learning environment. For several of these learners, the cohort sometimes embodied a community of concern. For example, when a student was absent from a particular class, others inquired about the student's wellbeing. Support was discussed in concrete ways, such as help with homework, friendly encouragement, and help pronouncing words correctly.

Socializing knowers were less oriented to discussing the external facts of a situation and more oriented to their internal experience of the thoughts and ideas of cohort peers. For these learners, the cohort was about a way of being in relationship with one another, a way of giving an abstract level of support, and of accepting each other. Lack of conflict among cohort members was essential to their comfort. While individuals with any way of knowing might dislike or feel uncomfortable with conflict, those making meaning with a Socializing way of knowing often find conflict with people or ideas with whom they identify particularly difficult. These students will avoid conflict for its own sake, and feel the conflict as a breach in important relationships that tears them apart.

Self-Authoring learners, however, had a perspective on their feelings about conflict and saw the relationships among group members not as an end in itself but as a means toward some greater end. They did

not experience conflict as a threat to their sense of cohesion with others. They were able to reflect upon their feelings and examine the roots and importance of those feelings. Like Socializing knowers, they noticed connections between themselves and others, cared about those connections, and offered them as important factors in their learning life. However, unlike Socializing learners, they reflected on what these relationships meant to them in a more abstract way. Many Self-Authoring students valued the process of working together because they felt it was effective, challenging, and supportive, not only for their own learning but also for other people's learning.

### **PERSPECTIVE BROADENING**

Interpersonal interactions with cohort members also helped students to become more aware of and to share their own perspectives. Sharing ideas through dialogue and writing challenged and supported learners to broaden their perspectives by listening to and considering others' outlooks. Engaging with others in groups over time challenged cohort learners to experiment with and enact new ways of thinking and behaving. Collaboration with other cohort learners often became a catalyst for growth.

Many learners therefore began to understand their relationship to the cohort in new ways. We observed that some learners' notions of these group experiences expanded as they progressed through their programs. We refer to these changes as a consolidation or elaboration: learners extended their ideas within their existing way of knowing. Also, several students understood their cohort experience in more complex ways. We refer to this as transformational change: students evidenced qualitative and pervasive shifts in their underlying meaning system. The shapes of students' growth varied, depending on their ways of making meaning (see Table 3).

Several learners who were Instrumental knowers commented on how the experience of listening to and learning from cohort members transformed their thinking about themselves, their own families of origin, and people from other countries. These students began to think differently about their classmates and about life experiences in general. By coming to know others in the group whose backgrounds were starkly different from their own, several learners grew much better able to understand and empathize with other people.

For students with a Socializing way of knowing, working with others in the cohort created an opportunity for recognition and exploration of cultural differences that permeated cohort sharing and filtered into



discussions. Several learners began to recognize commonalities across their cohort group that enabled them to manage their differences, rather than feeling threatened by them. A few students grew to be able to generalize their enhanced capacity for perspective-taking beyond the classroom and into other domains of their lives (e.g., work). The holding environment of the cohort supported several learners to be better able to take on other people's perspectives, which helped them in many aspects of their lives.

Self-Authoring knowers experienced the learner cohort as a context for analyzing and critiquing information, which they then used to enhance their competence as learners and in their social roles as students, parents, and workers. The cohort was a safe place that challenged and supported them as they broadened their perspectives on their own and on other people's learning process. Some of these students adopted a broader perspective on their own learning when they came to believe that they could learn from the process of working with cohort members who were different from them. Working with learners from different countries helped several Self-Authoring knowers to develop a new and deeper understanding of what it meant to be a person who came to the United States as an adult learner in their programs.

The holding environment of the cohort served as a context where adults were often encouraged by each other, and by teachers, to challenge their own assumptions, which we believe deeply influences the ways in which individuals think and act (Kegan & Lahey, 2000).

## **SUMMARY**

Our findings teach us about the different ways that the learner cohort served as a space of developmental transition and transformation: a holding environment for growth. Cohort members were indeed partners engaged in a community formed around a common learning endeavor, where students supported one another in their academic and cognitive development and emotional wellbeing as they participated in these programs. Furthermore, we have illustrated the ways learners with different ways of knowing experienced collaborative group learning. We have argued that these seem to mirror the goals Hamilton (1994) articulates for Trimbur's (1993) three models of collaborative learning.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The importance of cohorts and the different ways in which learners will experience them suggest implications for both teacher practice and program design. Since learners make sense of their cohorts and

collaborative learning activities in qualitatively different ways, they need different forms of both support and challenge to benefit more fully from them. Some ABE teachers occasionally use group learning as a pedagogical approach directed toward building classroom cohesion and to facilitate learning (Garner, 2001). While Hamilton (1994) suggests that a teacher would benefit from selecting and implementing one particular model that suits his or her teaching philosophy or style, we submit that choosing only one model would support learners with one way of knowing better than it would others.

For example, a teacher who designs a highly structured activity, in which students are expected to arrive at predetermined answers, might leave Socializing and Self-Authoring knowers feeling inadequately challenged and possibly frustrated. Without appropriate supports, a collaborative learning experience that requires learners to share their own thoughts and feelings might be experienced as overly challenging to Instrumental knowers. Finally, collaboration that asks students to welcome diversity of opinion and conflict within a group might be experienced as threatening to learners who have not developed self-authoring capacities. Therefore, to create optimal holding environments for all adult learners, teachers need to adopt a plurality of approaches, flexibly incorporating aspects of all three models in any one classroom to meet a wide range of learners' ways of knowing and their diverse needs.

Some program designers refrain from using the cohort model because of funding requirements (Beder & Medina, 2001) or because the needs and life situations of their participants seem to dictate an open-entry/open-exit policy (Bingman, 2000). However, although our sites presented three very different cohort designs, most participants valued highly their sense of belonging in the group and benefited substantially from their cohort experiences. While some cohort designs might make for some bumps or challenges along the way, especially for a particular way of knowing, we do not claim that any one cohort design is preferable. Instead, we suggest that good matches to a variety of ways of being supported or challenged might be more crucial to success than a particular structure regarding entry and exit. And, above all, we recommend that educators look for ways to create some form of enduring and consistent learner cohort, employing practices by which students are regularly invited to engage in collaborative learning. Our participants show us that cohort experiences seem to facilitate academic learning, increased feelings of belonging, broadened perspectives, and, at least by our participants' report, learner persistence.

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## Powerful Motivation: The Long-time Tutor is Motivated by Helping Learners

Summers, W. (2005) Powerful motivation: The long-time tutor is motivated by helping learners. *Focus on Basics*, 7(C), 30–31

*In rural Illinois, literacy programs use volunteer tutors to provide services. Tutor/learner pairs meet in public buildings such as schools and libraries. Biologist Will Summers began tutoring with the Reading Link Program of Kaskaskia College, Centralia, IL, nine years ago. He works primarily, but not exclusively, with young men who are institutionalized by the courts. He talked with Focus on Basics about his experiences as a tutor.*

**FOB: Tell me about yourself as a tutor.**

**Will:** I tutor for the Reading Link program, which is part of Kaskaskia College. I tutor everyone they send me. I've been doing this for nine years. I keep it [the tutoring] pretty informal, but coming as I do from the Department of Defense, I'm pretty regimented, although I'm not unfriendly. I call myself a "tutor," not a teacher, and the people I tutor are "learners," not students. That's more positive. That's something Kaskaskia College taught me.

**FOB: What training did you receive from Reading Link to prepare you to tutor?**

**Will:** The training consisted of eight hours of classroom work, spread over two Saturdays; quarterly or semiannual refreshers; and what we call "tutor talks," which are monthly or bimonthly meetings of the tutors in each county. I try to attend at least two formal refresher training classes each year. They help me stay fresh and learn some new ideas. They also keep me interested in the program, and I get to know the other tutors involved. We're a bit of a team. Teamwork and community support are important. The local library provides me with a conference room, a lot of material, and duplicating services. I received my training nine years ago. They're more stringent now, and beginning tutors observe more experienced tutors.

**FOB: How many people do you tutor, and how often?**

**Will:** I try to keep two learners going at the same time. In the last four years I've been going into a Youth and Family Services-sponsored

children's home, tutoring young men aged 18 or 19 who are under court supervision for involvement with illegal drugs. They're street smart, they can survive, they're "with it" characters, and they often have two or three children. Some have served jail time, either before or after I began tutoring them.

Not everyone is under court supervision. Betty, who I'm working with right now, is 36 [years old], has a certificate of attendance from high school, and works in a factory. I tested her and I know she can't read above the sixth level according to the test the college provides: Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT).

I set aside two hours a week per learner. Tim on Tuesday, Betty on Thursday. Betty and I meet at a local high school library from 5:30 to 7:30 every Thursday night.

I would like to meet with my learners every day but time doesn't allow it. I encourage them to get assistance between the times we meet. I don't overload them with a heavy workload of assignments or homework.

**FOB: How do you structure your tutoring sessions?**

**Will:** I've found a method that has been effective for me. For each lesson, I use segments that take not more than 30 minutes to complete. I prepare six or seven different lesson segments in my lesson plan every night, so if the one I choose doesn't grab the learner, I turn to another. I work on keeping a high level of interest. Sometimes we work more than two hours, in 20- to 30-minute segments, if they are willing.

In our first meeting, I have to win them over. I'm not a laugh-a-minute kind of guy. But everyone likes to talk about themselves, so I ask them their age, their birthday, even their [astrological] sign; I want to be able to remember and send them a card. I look for the individual in them and gain their trust. I'd ask about their favorite donut, soda, chips: corn or potato? I bring them a soda and their favorite chips when I tutor them, and we read the ingredients and try to understand the nutrition. I ask about their interests in sports and music. I work to get into their heads: favorite movie, singer, actor? I refer back to that interview page more than anything in the coming months or years. I take their picture and put that into things to read, too. With current word processing technology and digital cameras you can do that. I also get their goals. I ask: "What do you want to do when they grow up?" If they don't have a clue, that's cool.

**FOB: Do any particular activities work best for you in the one-on-one situation?**

**Will:** I like to use newspapers. When I hear “I don’t like to read the newspaper,” I give the learner a felt-tipped marker, have him read an article that catches his fancy, and have him highlight every word he understands. Seeing all the words he knows highlighted builds his confidence.

We also read “Dear Abby” and “Ann Landers.” I read the part of the reader, the person who writes in, and I make my voice sound like a forlorn person. He reads the columnist’s answer. The answer is usually much briefer and more to the point and full of reason. He’s the voice of reason and maturity. Learners respond very positively.

We also read menus. This helps them survive in day-to-day life. We study particularly menus from Chinese, Italian, and Thai restaurants that they’re not familiar with. These menus help build their use of phonetics.

I make my own flashcards by cutting words from magazines, words that start with the same letter, or compound words. We play a game—we did this last night—where I lay out the flash cards. The learner turns them over, picking them up one at a time and reading the compound word. If he gets it right, he gets the card. If he doesn’t, we work on it till he knows it, but we turn all the cards over and start again.

Poetry is very important because it teaches rhyming and anticipating what word is coming next. I spend a lot of time, whether it’s using Dr. Seuss; Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” or “Lenore;” Maya Angelou, Shel Silverstein, Longfellow, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “How Do I Love Thee?” It’s a little schmaltzy, but these guys even cry sometimes.

I have them dictate their life’s story to me. I type it up. I give them a disposable camera to have them go through their day and take pictures. I have a double set of prints made and give them one set and use the other in a book that they write. I create a three-ring binder with photos and a story of their life they get to keep.

**FOB: How do you know your learners are making progress? With Betty, for example, and with Tim?**

**Will:** I test my learners every other month using the SORT provided by Reading Link. We keep track of the learner’s successes. I also submit a monthly report stating the reading materials used, goals achieved, and other notes on my learner’s progress.<sup>1</sup>

**FOB: What are some of the drawbacks to tutoring?**

**Will:** It is sometimes hard to work with this particular population. One guy got violent with me one night. If you say the wrong word to some of these kids they'll be on you or in tears. That's one drawback. Not being able to do enough is another. Seeing your star student hauled off to jail by the police can break your heart.

Not having enough time with each learner each week is another drawback. I try to pack as much as I can into one week's session, but you're limited by what you can expect your learners to absorb.

**FOB: It's obvious from your enthusiasm and longevity as a tutor that you find this rewarding. Can you tell us what keeps you motivated to devote eight hours a week—four of prep time, four of tutoring time—plus travel time, to tutoring?**

**Will:** I keep motivated by the accomplishments of my learners, no matter how slowly they sometimes reach them. I am also encouraged by the support I get from Kaskaskia College Reading Link program. Lastly, I see this is a team effort by all the other reading tutors like me. I am always encouraged by, and try to encourage, my fellow tutors.

The motivational force that keeps me going—especially with the kids—is that it matters: helping them improve their reading ability may make a significant difference in their lives and in the lives of the people they encounter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In general practice, such a short interval between pre and post-testing is not considered good practice. However, additional circumstances in this case led this tutor to test monthly. Focus on Basics is not recommending frequent testing.



## Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting to the Needs of All Learners

Corley, M. (2005) Differentiated instruction: Adjusting to the needs of all learners. *Focus on Basics*, 7(C), 13–16

*How can classroom teachers maximize the learning potential of their adult basic education (ABE) students while, at the same time, attending to differences among them? Instead of expecting learners to adjust to the lessons they plan, teachers need to plan their lessons to adjust to the learners at hand. To do this effectively, teachers need to understand and know their learners, including their learners' current skill levels, strengths and challenges, interests and preferences, and needs and goals. The challenge is for teachers to ensure that the needs of all learners are equally valued and equally served. Differentiated instruction is an approach that does just this. This article defines differentiated instruction; describes ways in which teachers can differentiate content, process, and product; suggests instructional strategies; and outlines challenges in implementing differentiated instruction.*

Differentiated instruction is an approach that enables teachers to plan strategically to meet the needs of every student. It is rooted in the belief that there is variability among any group of learners and that teachers should adjust instruction accordingly (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). It is the teacher's response to the diverse learning needs of his or her students.

Differentiated instruction has been a buzzword in k-12 education for the past two decades but has only recently gained ground in adult basic education. The cornerstone of differentiation is active planning: the teacher plans instruction strategically to meet learners where they are and to offer multiple avenues through which they can access, understand, and apply learning. In differentiating lessons to be responsive to the needs of each learner, teachers must take into account not only what they are teaching (content), but also whom they are teaching (individual students). They need to know the varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of each of their students and then design learning options to tap into these three factors.

Evidence indicates that students are more successful in school and are more engaged if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (Vygotsky, 1986), their interests (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990),

and their learning profiles (Sternberg et al., 1998). According to Tomlinson (2001, 2003), in adopting differentiated instruction, teachers try to address these three characteristics for each student.

### READINESS

Readiness refers to a student's knowledge, understanding, and skill related to a particular sequence of learning. It is influenced by a student's cognitive proficiency as well as prior learning, life experiences, and attitudes about school. Readiness can vary widely over time, and according to topic and circumstance. As Tomlinson (2003) points out, if readiness levels in a class vary, so must the complexity of work provided. Tiered activities are one way to address readiness effectively; for example, all students study the same concept but complete activities appropriate to their readiness levels. Readiness also can be addressed through small group sessions or the provision of one-to-one teacher and peer support or coaching.

### Interest

Interest arises from topics that evoke curiosity and passion in students and in which they want to invest time and energy to learn about. When a student's interests are tapped, that student is more likely to be engaged and to persist in learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1962; Sousa, 2001; Wolfe, 2001).

### Learning Profile

Learning profile refers to how a student learns best. Preferences for learning are shaped by learning style, intelligence preference, culture, and gender. Teachers differentiate by learning profile when they provide learning activities that offer students choices for demonstrating mastery of learning: journals, videotape presentations, role plays, oral histories, or project-based learning. When different modes of learning are offered and supported, more students successfully complete learning tasks (Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Sternberg et al., 1998).

### CONTENT AND PROCESS

In response to the learner characteristics of readiness, interest, and learning profile, teachers can differentiate, or modify, learning experiences in the three areas of content, process, and product (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). Content refers to what students need to learn: the major concepts, principles, and skills that are taught. All learners should be given access to the same content. Teachers should adjust the degree of complexity using diverse instructional processes to

teach the content. In this way, all students learn the same concepts but in different ways.

Process refers to ways in which the content is taught: the activities that help students understand and eventually own the concepts and skills being taught. (For examples of processes, see the box below). The key to differentiating process is flexible grouping, in which learners are sometimes grouped by readiness levels, sometimes by interest, and sometimes by learning profiles. For example, an instructor might group learners with a similar readiness level for reading instruction and then regroup them by interest to discuss current events or a movie they have all viewed. By varying the groups in which learners participate, teachers prevent labeling learners as members of the “fast group” or the “slow group,” thus encouraging a respect for difference among learners. This approach also supports the growth of a strong community of learners among everyone in the class. It would be difficult to differentiate instruction without using flexible grouping.

#### Techniques for Differentiating Instruction

To manage effectively the differentiation of process, teachers need to employ a range of instructional strategies (Tomlinson, 1999), such as:

- Setting up stations in the classroom where different learners can work simultaneously on various tasks. Such stations naturally invite flexible grouping.
- Having students set agendas, or personalized lists of tasks to complete in a specified time, usually two or three weeks.
- Structuring problem-based learning to have students actively solve problems, either individually or in small groups, much the same way that professionals perform their jobs (this also supports building a community of learners).
- Assigning tiered activities to allow learners to work on the same concepts but with varying degrees of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness.
- Using entry points (Gardner, 1994) so that learners can explore a topic through as many as five avenues: narrative (presenting a story), logical-quantitative (using numbers), foundational (examining philosophy and vocabulary), aesthetic (focusing on sensory features), and experiential (hands-on).

- Using choice boards from which learners can select one of several work assignments that are printed on cards and affixed to the choice boards.
- Employing compacting: teachers assess learners' knowledge and skills before beginning a specific unit of study and allow learners who do well on the preassessment to move on to more advanced work.
- Chunking, or breaking assignments and activities into smaller, more manageable parts, and providing more structured directions for each part.
- Encouraging students to use different tools to perform the same task: paper/pencil, manipulatives, computer.
- Using flexible pacing to allow for differences in students' ability to master the key concepts.
- Encouraging independent study for students who want to work on their own on topics of interest to them.
- Using portfolios as a means for reflecting on student growth over time.

## PRODUCTS

Products allow students to demonstrate whether they have learned the key concepts and skills of a unit and to apply the learning to solve problems and take action. Different students can create different products based on their own readiness levels, interests, and learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2001). Students should be given a choice of four or five products from which they may select to demonstrate mastery of learning. Students also may elect to work alone or in small groups on their products. Examples of products include a written report, an oral presentation, a group discussion on key concepts, a short book in which the key concepts are explained and described, a game centered around the characters and theme of a book, or an event planned within a specified budget. Products should be related to real problems, concerns, and audiences, and they should synthesize rather than summarize information.

## CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSION

The greatest challenge to implementing differentiated instruction relates to time: the planning time that teachers need to assess learners' needs,

interests, and readiness levels; to determine key concepts and organizing questions; and to design appropriate activities for each learner. The next issue relates to classroom management and the changing role of the teacher from dispenser of knowledge to facilitator of learning. The third issue concerns the need for teachers to acquire and use strategies that may be new to them. The only way to address all these concerns is through effective professional development that strongly encourages teachers to apply the skills and then provides coaching throughout the process of moving toward differentiation as a teaching approach.

It takes the commitment of teachers, administrators, and students to make differentiation a reality. For teachers and students, the challenge is to move comfortably into a new instructional paradigm. For administrators, the challenge is to support teachers' professional development, provide teachers access to a variety of instructional materials, and encourage the use of new methodologies and teacher support networks or peer coaching (Smith et al., 2003- PDF). Through out the process, administrators need to be the keepers of the vision of an instructional program that responds to the needs of all learners. A differentiated classroom offers appropriate levels of challenge according to learners' abilities, interests, and preferred learning profile, and maximizes learners' potential.

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## WEB RESOURCES ON DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION

Differentiating Instruction for Advanced Learners in the Mixed-Ability Middle School Classroom  
<http://ericec.org/digests/e536.html>

Leadership for Differentiated Classrooms: The Challenge with Mixed-Ability Groups is to Satisfy both Equity and Excellence  
[http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/1999\\_10/tomlinson.htm](http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/1999_10/tomlinson.htm)

Using Technology to Differentiate Instruction  
<http://www.lakelandschools.org/EDTECH/Differentiation/home.htm>

Differentiated Instruction  
<http://www.cast.org/ncac/index.cfm?i=2876>

Strategies for Differentiating  
<http://members.shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/differentiatingstrategies.html>

How to Plan for Differentiated Instruction  
<http://www.teach-nology.com/tutorials/teaching/differentiate/planning/>

What is Differentiated Instruction  
<http://www.smcm.edu/academics/EdStudy/d7-Proj/Projects/ResearchSites/acbrowning/index.htm>

Differentiating Instruction For Advanced Learners In the Mixed-Ability Middle School Classroom  
[http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content/diff\\_instruction.html](http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content/diff_instruction.html)

The Definition of Differentiating Instruction  
<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.3adeebc6736780dddeb3ffdb62108a0c/>

Differentiating Instruction: Finding Manageable Ways to Meet Individual Needs  
[http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/ed\\_topics/cu2000win\\_willis.html](http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/ed_topics/cu2000win_willis.html)

Reconcilable Differences? Standards-Based Teaching and Differentiation  
[http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/ed\\_topics/el200009\\_tomlinson.html](http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/ed_topics/el200009_tomlinson.html)


An ASCD Study Guide for Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms  
<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.8f136d86e0aa2b9cdeb3ffdb62108a0c/templte.article?articleMgmtId=72c40f05c1520010VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD>

Differentiated Instruction Resources  
<http://www.sde.com/Conferences/Differentiated-Instruction/DIResources.htm>

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Reading Assigned for Session Three on Instruction 

## A Conversation with FOB...The Best of Both Worlds: Using Individualized and Group Instruction

Garner, B. (2005) A conversation with FOB...the best of both worlds: Using individualized and group instruction. *Focus on Basics*, 7(C), 19–26

*Why not have the best of both worlds, decided the staff of the Ahrens Learning Center, Jefferson County, KY. This urban adult education center enrolls nearly 1,500 learners a year into adult basic education (ABE), literacy, basic skills upgrade, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), workplace, and college transition classes. After using individualized instruction—students working on their own at their own pace, with help from a teacher—for many years, Ahrens tried a few models before settling on a combination of individualized instruction and group instruction. Since the program restructured its classes, enrollment has doubled. Focus on Basics talked with teachers and staff of Ahrens to learn why they made the switch, how the change was greeted, and what their model looks like today.*

**FOB: I understand that your program has changed its method of delivery of instruction. What did the original program look like?**

**Kitty:** Years ago, the students were in a large learning lab. We drew some students out occasionally to do group work. The big change came when we divided the lab into individual classrooms, with one teacher in charge of each classroom. We did that about five years ago. That was the best thing that has happened to us.

**FOB: Why?**

**Anne:** At the time the teachers and I decided to change our method of instruction, we were in a period of malaise. We knew we were doing as well as we could, given the limits of the independent learning model, but our experience made it clear that this model wasn't effective for many of our learners. We used Allen Quigley's *Rethinking Literacy Education: The Critical Need for Practice-Based Change*<sup>1</sup> as an initial catalyst for change and to try to keep current on new research. The 2002 *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*<sup>2</sup> is one of the most recent documents that has influenced our instruction.

The decision to change was mostly made cooperatively; both teachers and students saw the benefit to dividing the study-hall-type learning lab into smaller communities of learners. We worked hard to

give students lots of information on the benefits of classes with group instruction. We constantly assured our students that they would be in a safe learning environment; they could disclose an area of academic weakness without fear of embarrassment.

**FOB: What happened when you broke the lab into smaller individualized instruction settings?**

**Kitty:** The students felt like they had their own classroom. They got settled, hung up their coats, made coffee, and were seeing the same people every day. Bonding occurred; it never did when we were in the big lab. I had just one group lesson a day, along with individualized instruction, at that point. About two years ago, we were strongly encouraged to go to a college-like setting, with one group after another. Using only group instruction didn't work because it didn't give us enough time for individualized instruction.

**FOB: So you went from individualized instruction in a big, rather impersonal lab with different teachers at different times, to individualized instruction in a classroom with a set teacher, to a traditional model of group-based instruction in different subjects. Now what are you doing?**

**Diane:** Each teacher is using teaching methods and strategies that are effective with his or her specific class. With my literacy-level students, I usually have an hour and a quarter of individualized instruction with students, everyone working on their own. Then we take a break and I do an hour of group instruction. If I have a volunteer that day, I like to break [the group] into two groups.

**FOB: How do you pick the topics to teach in the group instruction?**

**Diane:** I pick topics based on the students' test results: usually some type of reading skills, like summarizing, cause and effect, [and] some times we do vocabulary work, or a phonics lesson on decoding skills. I try to vary it each day. Right now the research shows that we need to do more strategic teaching of phonics and fluency, so I try to include alphabetics and guided oral reading, procedures including repeated reading, paired reading, and echo reading. All of us use things from the newspaper, authentic materials; recently we were studying American history, and voting procedures.

**Anne:** What about the activity with James Holmberg?

**Diane:** We had an author who was writing a book on Lewis and Clark. He wanted our class to proofread it, since he was aiming for a four- to six-

year-old reading level. The students were honored to have an author in the class. They told him what they didn't understand, what vocabulary was new to them. They got their names in the book as guest editors.

The group component adds so much. The students look forward to working together as a group. As they share their ideas, they try to help each other. A lot of times someone's question is beneficial to the whole group. Group work, from my perspective, has turned out to be wonderful, and has presented many teachable moments.

**Nonie:** When I am trying to address a variety of learning styles—I'm explaining verbally, drawing diagrams, using manipulatives, getting students to write, read, formulate questions, and analyze information—the entire group is getting instruction in multiple modalities. If I employ enough strategies, everyone in the group will find at least one and maybe more than one explanation that helps him or her.

**Kitty:** I love hearing the students contemplate answers to multiple choice questions out loud. They agree, disagree, and go through the thinking process together. They truly learn from each other. Sometimes I just sit back and listen. If the students feel comfortable enough to make mistakes around each other and really listen to each other, they are helping each other refine their cognitive skills in the process. When I observe all of this positive interaction in my class room, I feel as if I am accomplishing a big part of my goal as a teacher.

**Nonie:** Working together as a group allows us [teachers] to model the thinking process. We can think out loud and work our way through difficult reading comprehension questions and math problems involving multiple steps, using context clues to understand new vocabulary, and so on. This helps students learn how to tackle these questions on their own.

**Diane:** I've noticed that as students read silently they're decoding, but not working on comprehending. The group gives me the opportunity, as we read out loud, [to work on this with them]. I say "This is the picture I have in my mind as I read" and I model for them how to make meaning as they move along. Then I tell them to practice.

**Meryl:** That was one of the things I was doing this morning: explaining that when we read, we make a video in our minds. When I read a title in class, I explain the picture that comes to my mind, and I ask them what they're imagining. Then the conversation really snowballs.

**Kitty:** The GED test [tests of General Educational Development] now takes cognitive skills to a higher level than before. Many students have a

difficult time getting past the comprehension level. They still try to look for answers directly stated in passages. Making inferences and drawing conclusions are higher-level thinking skills. Group work is a wonderful way to develop these skills.

**Nonie:** Another benefit is it allows you to help students see that they have to connect what they're reading about to what they already know. Yesterday, for example, we were reading about a mathematician in 1777 Germany. I asked, "What do you know about the year 1777?" Someone answered, "I know 1776 was when the Declaration of Independence was signed." That helped us establish a frame of reference, and the class had some idea of what life was like and how people dressed. It encouraged them to think of this time in history. That's an important reading skill: tying prior knowledge to the passage they're reading.

**Kitty:** When we're introducing anything new to the students, they always ask, "Is this going to be on the GED?" I say, "This came from such and such book. You're going to be asked critical thinking questions, [you're going to need] good reading skills." As long as we tell them how this is going to be applicable, the students are generally very receptive. They want to know that their time is being well spent and that the material is relevant.

**FOB: So, by providing group instruction, you can model processes you want students to learn, such as helping them learn how to link their background knowledge to what they're reading. This helps them develop the higher-order skills they need to pass the GED. What other benefits do you see group instruction offering?**

**Meryl:** We need to ask our adult learners what types of jobs they have or have held in the past. Many of the jobs today involve working together in teams, and may require skills that the learners need to practice or improve. We have many people in our center who have jobs in fast food restaurants, and they need to be able to work with others. The group work in our classes can provide opportunities to enhance the skills they need to do so. It also gives the teacher the opportunity to model conversations in ways that can improve learners' ability to work in teams.

**FOB: How do you structure the individualized time?**

**Kitty:** Teachers structure their classes differently. In my class, the first half hour is spent getting settled. That's the time when I give students work, check over their assignments, and talk with new students. I then teach a group lesson in reading, science, social studies, or writing for an hour. We take about 30 minutes after that for individualized instruction, and then I teach math for an hour. After math, I am available for

approximately two hours to help individual students with their work. I also use this time to retest students.

**Nonie:** I have all my students enrolled in PLATO, a computer program developed by PLATO Learning, Inc. (<http://www.plato.com>). It is perfect for individualizing instruction in either a broad topic, like reading, or something specific like finding the main idea, or multiplying fractions. It's thorough, gives students a lot of feedback, and keeps them engaged in ways that sometimes a book does not. Most learners enjoy it and can work for extended periods of time when I am busy with the group.

Occasionally I have someone who knows the material but needs to brush up. Usually I give them the option of working from the book and reviewing or skimming the material.

**Diane:** For the learners I work with, I don't think one without the other would work: as much as everyone benefits from groups, in reality, each student has his or her individual goals. If we're doing group work on how to blend letters, some times one person needs work on decoding. The individual time is the time for that.

**FOB: How do people make sure they get a teacher's attention during individualized instruction?**

**Nonie:** When my students are using the computer, I check on them frequently, looking for anyone experiencing frustration. Some of our older students aren't familiar with computers, so I check to see they're not stalled.

When I'm teaching the group lesson, the individual learners know they're on their own, but we don't have such a huge group that the independent learners can't come get me when they have a PLATO-related question. If I have 15 to 18 students in the room, two or three are likely to be working independently. When I'm not doing the morning group instruction, it's all individualized. In the afternoon, the room is quiet; I can give each student individualized instruction.

**FOB: You mentioned two or three students working independently?**

**Nonie:** I have two, and often three, classes a day, but I usually have several people who need to work independently. There's always that choice. For example, I have one student now who is working independently on the computer to beef up one skill to pass the GED. If I have someone who is very behind the class in math, I may have that person work independently on math and join us for group writing.

**Anne:** Choice is really important. Choice encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. We urge the students to be partners with their teacher in making these choices.

**Meryl:** It's so important to shift the power to the adult learners' shoulders. It helps to build the partnership in the learning process. It's so important for them to know why [we do what we do].

**Nonie:** I use the word partnership when I talk to adult students about their role as learners in my classroom, and I do respect their wishes if they choose to work independently. However, I stress that we know that learning is social, that it is a result of demonstration and collaboration, and I very seldom have students who decide to work exclusively on their own. To teachers interested in exploring the value of group instruction further, I would recommend books by Frank Smith, or read his article "Learning to read: The never-ending debate" in the February, 1992, issue of Phi Delta Kappan. Another excellent source for information on this topic is Judith A. Alamprese's "Teaching reading to first-level adults; Emerging trends in research and practice" in *Focus on Basics*, 5A (<http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=274>).

**FOB: You offer group instruction and individualized time, and students can opt to spend group time working alone if they would like. Do you use any other models?**

**Kitty:** Sometimes I have the students work in small groups or in pairs. For example, [in my GED class] we did some newspaper reading. I organized them into pairs. Students started asking me questions. I asked them to ask each other. They were timid at first but then they opened up. If we make the students feel comfortable in the classroom then their level of anxiety goes down and they're free to ask questions and share ideas with each other.

**Anne:** Our evening classes meet twice a week. Because the instructional time is limited, these classes are more like some college models, with primarily whole group instruction. The classes are divided both into skill levels and into reading, math, and science/social studies content areas. Students are scheduled into two classes and are assessed for progress as a group every six weeks. Learners change schedules when appropriate.

We initiated this latest learning model in July, 2004, and are still smoothing out some bumps. Because we operate on an open-entry basis, we found that some students felt overwhelmed; they didn't have the slow adjustment period that a four-day program can allow. Some also felt unprepared to do the academic work. We revised and lengthened our

orientation to address these issues. We now provide conference time to discuss normal feelings and apprehensions. We give them a menu of what to do if they feel their needs aren't being met. We don't want them to "vote with their feet" and walk away. We want them to talk to us about their learning.

**FOB: What made you decide to offer content area group instruction at night?**

**Anne:** When we looked at last year's statistics, we saw a revolving door. We are a big center; we should have had people attending more consistently and for longer periods of time. With our new schedule we have eight different classes taught at one of three skill levels: fundamental, intermediate, or transitional. The level descriptions are vague, so people feel encouraged about their placement. The curriculum is circular and ongoing; it spirals. We are teaching a similar curriculum every six weeks, but embedding new skills or using the skills in a new context. For example, if the math instructor teaches perimeters, some pairs of students might be working with situations that require only whole numbers, while others might work with a perimeter application that uses fraction or decimals. If students don't progress out of a level, they repeat the class, but the curriculum spirals up a bit so they don't feel unsuccessful.

**FOB: Can you describe the initial changeover from a learning lab to individual classes and then to group instruction?**

**Nonie:** I came on board after the change had been made to individual classrooms, but the teacher who had my classroom was not doing group instruction. The students missed their former teacher, were accustomed to their own quiet independent work, and were not highly receptive to a new teacher and a new style of learning. Anne was encouraging me to start group instruction, and I was very willing, but I couldn't get much cooperation from the learners in forming small groups to work together. One day Anne asked again, and I heard myself tell her that I was going to start whole group instruction the next day. In truth, I had no clue how to persuade the students to try something new. The next morning, however, I said "I would like everyone who has not passed the GED writing test to join me over at the black board." The entire class looked stunned and suspicious, but slowly got up and came over to join me. We simply had a class, and then the next day, everyone took his seat by the blackboard in readiness for the class. The transition was that easy.

**FOB: To pick up on a theme you mentioned earlier, the group instruction model helps build—and probably depends upon—**

**community in the classroom. Do you do things consciously to set the stage, to build community ?**

**Nonie:** I address every student by name every day and use names in class frequently, so everyone picks up on names right away. Of course I model supportive behaviors and talk about that when necessary: “Remember that reading is not a performance; we’re all going to get stuck on difficult words from time to time. Be sure you give the reader enough time to think about pronouncing a word before you help out. Reader, let the class know when you’d like some help—we’re all learning together, and asking for help is one way to learn.” I find that adult learners tend to be patient and helpful with each other, but I am always modeling those behaviors myself.

**Kitty:** I do the same thing. When we had the large learning lab, it was quiet. Now it’s wonderful to hear the students share stories with each other about their jobs and children, help ease new students into the class routine, and support each other in their quest to meet their goals. I try to remember the students’ birthdays, and I ask about their families and their jobs. I try to make the class room a comfortable and welcoming place to learn.

**FOB: Students can enroll at any time at your center. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the model you use in terms of open enrollment?**

**Kitty:** One of the weaknesses is that we get new students weekly, and those students then join the groups already in progress. Sometimes the students feel as if they need to catch up, especially in math. Since I can’t keep re-teaching the same skill over and over because the existing students are ready to move on, I try to begin each lesson with a quick review and then move on. Sometimes this leaves students frustrated. They tell me that they feel as if they’re not catching on to what I’m teaching at the time. I assure them that they just need to try to understand the concept to the best of their ability, and that if they continue to feel frustrated after a week or so, they can work on their own. I also offer to help them individually in the afternoons. Most students deal with it very well, though. Other students are always eager to help the new ones, and this definitely helps ease the transition period.

One of the positives is that we can accommodate people who have jobs, young children at home, and difficult life situations. We’ve found, though, that sometimes open enrollment can keep students from making a strong commitment to their schooling. When students know that they don’t have to come to school every day, they can find reasons for not



attending. This happens a lot with some of the younger students and with those not totally committed to furthering their education. It's one thing for them to say they want their GEDs and quite another actually to be disciplined enough to come to school every day in order to see those dreams realized. As a teacher, having the same students every day is an appealing idea, but we have very aggressive enrollment goals given the funding we receive. We are, however, looking carefully at other options.

**Nonie:** I agree with Kitty that “open” works well. Although it can be a bit chaotic at times and is definitely not perfect, it does work, and we have yet to come up with something better to suit students’ needs.

**Anne:** Finding out which teaching practices are most effective with adult learners is a process. We talk about it; we discuss ways to improve instruction all the time. In the last five years we have evolved from the learning lab model to classes and then to group instruction. We now include strategic teaching, modeling, guided practice, cooperative learning, and the posing of open-ended questions that encourage learners to think, discuss, and share ideas with one another in our repertoire of teaching tools. We don't have it perfectly right yet, but we are always looking at how we can improve our instruction.

## RESOURCES

For more on changing from one mode of delivery to another, see “Getting into Groups” by Michael Pritza, in *Focus on Basics 2A*, <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=415>, and “Implementation Isn't Easy” by Janet Geary, in *Focus on Basics 7A*, <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=127>

## PARTICIPANTS

*Meryl Becker-Prezocki* is the Ahrens resource teacher who works with both teachers and learners in the area of special learning needs. She has a background in special education, and more than 30 years in elementary, middle, high school, and ABE.

*Diane Graybill*, a reading teacher at the Ahrens Center, has taught in ABE for 10 years, starting in a welfare-to-work program, and moving onto a GED program.

*Anne Greenwell*, program coordinator, started at Ahrens in 1990 after having taught high school English, and moved from teaching to coordinating nine years ago.

## ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE

*Kitty Head* started in ABE in 1986, integrating handicapped adults into an ABE program, and three years later started teaching in the GED program, which she continues to do.


*Nonie Palmgreen* has been working in ABE for 17 years, including three and a half years teaching job readiness skills and the remainder of the time focusing on GED and upgrade instruction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quigley, A. (1997). *Rethinking Literacy Education: The Critical Need for Practice-Based Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>2</sup>Kruidenier, J. (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.

[http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/adult\\_ed\\_02.pdf](http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/adult_ed_02.pdf)

Reading Assigned for Session Three on Instruction 

## The Community High School of Vermont: An Uncommon High School in an Uncommon Setting

Woods, T. (2005) The community high school of Vermont: An uncommon high school in an uncommon setting. *Focus on Basics*, 7(D), 25–29

*Everyone in Vermont is entitled to a free and appropriate public education, and it must be equal for all Vermonters regardless of race, age, gender, religion, or personal condition. It is a basic civil right written into the state's constitution. The overwhelming majority of the state's incarcerated population are high school dropouts. A great many of them are youth aged 17 to 22 years. The state legislature was concerned that offenders, especially young offenders, did not have access to public education. In response, the state enacted in its Public Institutions and Corrections statutes Public Law 28VSA120, which created an independent school within the Department of Corrections, approved by the Vermont Department of Education, able to award secondary credit and high school diplomas. This independent school has come to be known as the Community High School of Vermont (CHSVT).*

With 47 full-time teachers and approximately 350 part-time adjunct teachers distributed among the state's nine correctional facilities, the school offers courses and instruction to youth and adults. The CHSVT is also present in eight community probation and parole sites to allow students to complete schooling they started in prison.

The state law that created CHSVT made education mandatory for incarcerated offenders who are under 22 years of age and who do not yet have a high school diploma or an equivalent credential. School is voluntary for older offenders and high school graduates. As Vermont's largest high school, CHSVT has a total enrollment of more than 4,100 students: approximately 85 percent male, 15 percent female. Of the 3,206 individuals served in 2004, 2,179 were incarcerated in correctional facilities and 1,027 lived in community settings. These enrollment figures are deceptive, however. That they can be tabulated and readily presented in two sentences might cause one to envision a large, static, and captive population of students that is parceled out into various classrooms from September to June, completing coursework until they either graduate or their sentences are completed. The reality is more complicated. A typical offender may enter one correctional facility, then move numerous times to other facilities within the system. Disciplinary actions, threats of violence, health and safety needs, failure to meet programming

expectations, court appearances, and population management all contribute to inmate movement. Offenders who reside in the community under field supervision or on probation can receive disciplinary sanctions that send them back to prison for rule violations, causing individuals to bounce back and forth between prison and the community. It is not unusual to find that one person has moved as many as 16 times in a year.

As well as the student body being transitory, many students are also former dropouts and many have long histories of school failure. CHSVT faculty members have created a structure and delivery system to re-engage students. They have had to cast off many traditional practices of public education because they didn't work with the students when they were in public school and they aren't effective with them now. The CHVST delivery system is effective because it: motivates students by providing a pathway to a real diploma; emphasizes student-centered approaches; accommodates individualized student needs; and fosters positive teacher-student relationships.

### **INDIVIDUAL GRADUATION PLANS**

The CHSVT diploma is the same as any other public school diploma awarded in Vermont. To graduate, students must earn 20 credits in the school's course of study, including credits in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health, art, trades and vocational studies, and computer studies. In addition, students must demonstrate a minimum level of proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Entering students' graduation needs vary greatly. Some were expelled from school when they were in the eighth grade and may not have earned any high school credits. Others may need just one or two more credits to earn a high school diploma. At any given time, 40 percent of students have a prior history of being placed in special education classes. In many instances students' academic skills are significantly behind those of their age peers. Still other students may have completed the required coursework to earn credit in their public school, but were not awarded any credit because they had too many absences. Some students are returning to school after 30 or 40 years.

No matter what the student's background may be, faculty work with him or her to craft what CHSVT calls an individual graduation plan: a roadmap for attainment of a high school diploma. In the graduation planning process, teachers interview students to learn what their strengths are. Teachers find out what the students want to learn more about, what they have done since leaving school, and what they want to accomplish in the future. The school obtains students' prior education

records and transcripts. Teachers and students devise ways to assess and award credit for the prior learning. Looking at what has already been accomplished and what still remains, the student and teacher map out a strategy for fulfilling the remaining graduation requirements. The students choose the courses to meet these requirements.

The individual graduation plan becomes a working document used to record a student's progress as he or she earns credits. It includes transcripts, charts showing credits earned and credits needed, worksheets detailing how needed credits will be earned, and a statement verifying the student's proficiency in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. The graduation plan resides physically in a student's education file and follows the student wherever he or she goes in the system.

## **CHOOSING COURSES**

Working within the school's graduation requirements, students decide which courses to take. Teachers are encouraged to teach their passions and, in turn, respond to students' interests. This has resulted in a wide variety of course offerings ranging from the traditional textbook course to highly experiential, hands-on learning.

Classes tend to be small, with perhaps four to eight students in each. The hour-long classes are usually scheduled two or three days per week; occasionally they run just one day, or every day. The number of classes students take at any one time varies because students have different demands on their time. Some, for example, are participating in programming related to their substance addiction; others have facility jobs or work in corrections industries. As mentioned previously, students under 22 years old are required by state law to go to school if they do not already have a diploma. They must attend courses totaling at least 15 hours of class time per week, or approximately three hours of school per day.

The school enters into independent learning contracts with students. These contracts may follow the prescribed course of study, but the student does some or all of the work independently outside of class. As an alternative, a contract may involve a unique set of learning objectives that do not fit any existing course, but involve an area of study about which the student is passionate. For example, one student found himself in need of just one more English language arts credit, but none of the language arts courses offered at his school appealed to him. He and a teacher worked out a plan whereby the student would study dogs and kenneling, a subject about which he was passionate. They agreed on

course requirements that addressed language arts topics of reading, responding, verbal and written expression, and research. The student was excited about coming away with not just the language arts credit he needed but also valuable information that would serve him well when he starts his own kennel: a goal of his when he returns to the community.

## **GED?**

Sometimes a new student, who doesn't know about graduation plans, says, "I don't want school. I only want a GED [certificate of completion of the tests of General Educational Development]." The CHSVT prefers a diploma, but it will assist any student in attaining a GED if that is the student's goal. The CHSVT will help students prepare, make arrangements for testers to come to the site, and pay for the tests. Faculty members use this as an opportunity to connect with the students and encourage them to use the GED as a starting point for continuing their education rather than as an end point. The school often finds that goals change for the student who initially "only wants a GED," once he or she considers new options and is exposed to other students' ideas through attendance in classes and graduation ceremonies, and looking at transcripts that list newly earned credits. Students see others making progress on their diplomas and they want to experience that success too. Many students who earn a GED go on and work on their diploma.

## **MOTIVATION**

When students meet with CHSVT teachers for the first time, they often report a sense of hopelessness about their prospects for graduation. They say that their previous difficulties in school make them think it will be impossible or pointless to try to earn a diploma.

The CHSVT faculty motivate students by showing them that getting a diploma is not the impossible task they think it is. Teachers make the school environment a place where students will feel safe and be treated respectfully. In such an environment, there is kindness; there are no put-downs. Teachers work to create the idea that when students walk through the classroom door, they leave the prison environment and enter a world that respects and values learning, in which everyone has something to offer. Confidentiality is respected. In only two situations are teachers required to report to authorities what is said in the classroom: when the teacher believes that a crime is being, or is about to be, committed; and when the teacher believes that an individual's safety is at risk.

Commenting on the character of the CHSVT, students said:

You don't remind us of teachers. You don't come in and preach to us. You work around my needs. —J.H.

You treat us like we're in school, not prison. It's a student/teacher relationship versus an inmate/guard relationship. —D.S.

At first I didn't want to come to school, but I got to like it. I even got another person to join the health class. Now he's in school all the time. —S.G.

Frequent feedback is another motivating factor. Students can monitor their own progress by pulling out their graduation plans. They receive credit awards soon after they complete course requirements, and with everyone talking about progress, credits, graduation plans, and diplomas, even the students who arrived thinking a diploma was beyond reach begin to see that a diploma is possible.

Receiving credit on the basis of what they know or can do rather than on time spent in class is also motivating. Tests, portfolios, projects, and other student-generated products serve as assessments that document students' knowledge and skills. These products are used to fulfill course requirements necessary to earn credit. For instance, a mathematics course may use a textbook that has chapter pretests and posttests. Students can leapfrog over chapters they already know, or even the whole text, by passing chapter pretests.

In a creative writing course, the requirements may ask a student to compile a portfolio of a variety of types of writing. The writing must show evidence of proper use of writing conventions, use of the writing process, and clear expression of ideas in final drafts. A student may write very quickly outside of class to produce the finished portfolio. It sometimes takes time for students to get used to the idea that, in CHSVT, they can work through the requirements very quickly if they so choose. This provides a strong incentive for students to study outside the classroom.

The school recognizes learning that takes place everywhere. Teachers assess prior learning through tests, portfolios, and assigned tasks that require students to demonstrate skills or use knowledge. Prior learning credits are powerful motivators. They jump-start a student's education, particularly when he or she has no academic credits to begin with.

Instead of using grades, the school measures progress by assessing students' proficiency in fulfilling the course requirements. In a

history class, for example, a student may be asked to demonstrate certain skills in archiving and handling old documents. This could be met by observing the student as he or she uses proper techniques. In an oil painting class, one requirement may ask a student to use elements of composition such as line, texture, and negative space. A teacher might assess the student's ability by asking him or her to point out these elements in his or her completed paintings. In a math course in which the course objectives include performing basic operations with whole numbers, a math test that asks the student to perform these operations will be a suitable assessment. A defined minimum score on the test would signify proficiency. The important point is that if the student does not demonstrate proficiency, it doesn't mean the he or she has failed. It just means the student has not yet reached the necessary level of proficiency to receive credit. The student is given as much time as he or she needs and is encouraged to keep trying until he or she succeeds.

### **OPEN ENTRY/OPEN EXIT**

The CHSVT has adopted a model it calls open-entry/open-exit to make it possible to accommodate students who enter and leave in midstream. In this model, as much as possible, courses are designed so that each lesson can stand alone. A "stand-alone" class can be envisioned by thinking of a guest lecture series at a museum, or a guided nature walk with a park ranger. People attending such activities need not have attended previous sessions to benefit from the current one. In the CHSVT History of the 20th Century course each decade is addressed separately over just a few classes. A student may not have been present for the 1920s lessons and started sometime during the 1960s lessons. The student can start anywhere in the course and will eventually be able to pick up all the lessons when the cycle repeats. This works very well for most subject areas, and enables teachers to award partial credits when students leave before completing a course.

Mathematics requires both scope (what is taught) and sequence (in what order) because a student must work through a definite progression of math concepts and skills. In a CHSVT mathematics course, each student works at his or her own pace. In the classroom some students may be learning place value, others fraction addition, still others algebra or geometry. The teacher does not say, "today we are going to study \_\_\_\_\_," but instead cruises among students, providing individual help and feedback as needed.

Both stand-alone and the self-paced individualized methods of instruction are extremely well suited to the transitory nature of the



student body. Both are also very conducive to adaptations and accommodations for students with special needs or those with large gaps in their knowledge base. They allow teachers to work with the student at his or her level rather than force teachers to aim for the middle of the class's range of abilities. Each student gets exactly what he or she needs.

Because failure in school has been such a big part of CHSVT students' lives, the school works very hard to remove the possibility of failure. Most students who were once labeled as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed in public schools do just fine in the CHSVT regular education program. This is because features common to special education programs, such as individualized self-paced instruction and small groups, are built in and available to every student.

### **CHALLENGES OLD AND NEW**

CHSVT has had its bumps. Corrections education in Vermont was essentially born of a problem. The state's youth who ran afoul of the law and ended up in state correctional facilities were not being educated under local educational jurisdictions. Moreover, the local school district did not want to pay for students' education once they were under the custody or supervision of the Department of Corrections. The legislation that created the school opened up an alternative way to provide education to the state's incarcerated youth. The political battle remains over how to pay for it: should it be funded with general fund tax dollars as it is now, or should education funds be used to pay for prison education?

Corrections issues are sometimes at odds with education issues. Security may deem it necessary to lock down a living unit, at worst putting a halt to all education for the day. At best, students come to classes, but they are agitated and distracted. The school can live with lock-downs and other security concerns. A more pressing and serious concern is attitudes. A few individuals (fortunately a very few) believe that inmates are incapable of change, that they will always con you if you let them, and that the only effective means of management are punishment and force. This attitude is out of step with the Department of Corrections' mission and runs counter to fundamental beliefs of the school. To combat this attitude, teachers try to inform all corrections personnel of the school's activities. They seek to involve staff in individual student matters, for example, inviting officers to attend a graduation ceremony, asking officers to assist in reminding a student to attend a class, or to provide encouragement. A continual public relations campaign is waged in which corrections staff are reminded that the school's successes with students are made possible by the help and

cooperation of all staff, and that the school assists security by taking the young, difficult inmates and engaging them in productive activity rather than allowing them to be idle.

A form of détente has evolved between the CHSVT and Department of Corrections. The school does not make corrections decisions. Corrections does not make education decisions. Occasionally the lines are crossed, but, for the most part, the détente holds.

Looking ahead, many challenges remain. The school has recently completed what it considers to be its core curriculum, and now must decide how that core should be implemented at all of its sites. Faculty members are also working to define better the methods for awarding credit for prior learning, in much the same way that prior learning credits are awarded at the college level. The school is attempting to expand its use of course syllabi, which will improve the practice of making credit requirements explicit for students and keeping track of students' progress.

In the future, we will attempt to resolve our longstanding dispute with the state Department of Education. The funding issue, especially funding for special education, is thorny. Since more than 40 percent of our students have a history of receiving special education services, it must be determined whether the student continues to be eligible for special services while incarcerated. Making these determinations and complying with special education law requires personnel and resources. The school has difficulty keeping up with the paperwork requirements. In most cases, however, because of the school's model of education delivery, in which all students can work at their own pace and receive individual help when it is needed, students don't need special education services while at CHSVT. They are able to make progress through the regular education program successfully. As a result, the school receives very little special education money from the state Department of Education. In fact, CHSVT special education has been level funded since 1987, despite a threefold increase in student numbers.

The special education issue leads into the much larger and more complicated issue of providing education at the school's eight community sites. The CHSVT is at loggerheads with the Department of Education over who pays for special education at the community sites. While accepting financial responsibility for special education students who are incarcerated, the CHSVT maintains that youth in the community on probation are the financial responsibility of the community, and local school districts must pick up the tab. The Department of Education

disagrees. The result of this impasse is there is no special education for youth in the CHSVT community sites.

Hiding just under the surface of this disagreement is another issue. Right now, in a very few cases, local school districts are referring students to the CHSVT community sites, as an alternative placement, and the students want to attend. The school was never intended to serve youth who are not under the custody or supervision of the Department of Corrections. At present the CHSVT has no authority to bill school districts for services rendered. This has not stopped CHSVT from accepting community students. Where this will lead and whether it is good for Vermonters is as yet unclear. CHSVT faculty members have expertise with students who have traditionally been labeled as difficult, and the school has established practices that help meet these students' needs. The larger issue of governance will need to be decided. Vermonters will have to ask themselves: Do we want a statewide school to serve some of our citizens? If so, to what standards will it be held accountable? If not, how will we enable local schools to educate all of our youth?


## **A DECADE**

Meanwhile, CHSVT is entering its tenth year as an independent school. Last year it awarded 106 diplomas. That's a long way from the 18 diplomas awarded in its first year. The school has changed attitudes of offenders from one of "I dropped out when I was 16 and you can't make me go to school" to one in which an offender enters a new correctional facility and stops at the school office to ask, "Where is my grad plan, where are my credits?" The school has seen its students participate in rowing races on Lake Champlain; history students have worked in cooperation with museums and town historical societies to help organize and preserve their collections; CHSVT art exhibitions have been held on college campuses; horticulture students have entered prize-winning vegetables at state fairs. Graduates don their navy blue robes and mortarboards as the school itself dons the common trappings of a high school in a most uncommon setting, helping to ensure all Vermonters' constitutional entitlement to an appropriate public education.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Reading Assigned for Session Three on Instruction 

## Separate Yet Happy

Garner, B. (2004) Separate yet happy. *Focus on Basics*, 7(A), 29–30

*Youth have always been a big presence at Dona Ana Branch Community College (DABCC) in southern New Mexico. In fact, the college solicits lists of dropouts from neighboring school districts. They send letters encouraging these former high schoolers to go back to high school, but remind them that if they do not, they should consider adult basic education. Over the past few years, instructors of General Educational Development (GED) preparation courses were reporting that the adult/youth mix in their classes was difficult to navigate. The younger students were interested in technology, wanted activity-based and hands on learning, and were moving at a faster pace than the more mature students; the older students were more traditional. Last summer, the adult basic education instructional (ABE) team discussed ways to enhance the program. They decided to separate the younger and older students by creating an additional GED class specifically for 16- to 21-year-olds who had stopped out of school no more than three years before. Focus on Basics talked with the instructors who are teaching the new class and the original class, which now has only older students.*

In the fall, 2003, DABCC started a GED preparation class for younger students with 26 students enrolled. The first accommodation they made to meet the needs of this age group was scheduling. The class started at 10 a.m. rather than 8 a.m. because most of the students arrived late when the class started at 8. It was held twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, for four hours a day, 10 to 12 and 12:30 to 2:30.

Lilia-Rosa Salmon taught the class. The age range of students was 16 to 22. She has only good things to say about it. “I had heard that most of the instructors were complaining about the younger students because of discipline issues,” she explained. “When we decided to form a youth-only class, people asked, ‘Who would teach it?’ I said I would.

“I don’t know why, but I never had a discipline problem at all. Since they’re surrounded by [students] their own age, they didn’t act up. They were more comfortable joking around and saying silly things and we would all laugh. I told them to watch their language and respect others, and not laugh at others asking questions. And that was it.

“Most of them were very fast learners. They did homework. Every one of the [13] students who completed the semester moved up a level [one

went on to college]. I wouldn't be scared to send these students to college. I know they would be ok."

### USING AMI AND INTERNET

Having recently participated in a study circle on adult multiple intelligences (AMI), Lilia-Rosa decided to integrate a lot of AMI techniques into her class. The activity-based instruction gave the students more time to move around the class and suited their energy level. She also split class time into group activities and individual time. This was especially necessary because despite the narrowed age grouping, the students' academic levels were diverse. This semester, she is using similar techniques with the class. She has also arranged to have the class spend part of each week in the computer lab. Lilia-Rosa was surprised to learn that although her students could do anything on the Internet, their word processing skills were very weak. The students work on their GED essay-writing skills and computer skills in the lab. "We did the IQ test that is available for free on the Internet," she remembers. "I was amazed that only one of my students was average: the rest were above. I even had two in the genius category. Of course, this is the Internet. But I was surprised. This is a group of young adults who are not very informed about the world, and who were not successful in schooling. The IQ information was very encouraging for them."

Lilia-Rosa is 22 years old, and admits that her youth is probably a contributor to her success with this age group. "I need instructors to keep me active and focused. I try to give the same to them," she explains. "I do think it [her age] has an impact. I can probably relate more to their stories, to what they have to say [than older teachers]. They are comfortable telling me things. It's a huge responsibility to me because they see me as a young person like them, but yet I can work and be in college, so I'm a role model. They see that perhaps they can do it."

She feels that the students feel themselves to be part of adult basic education now. In the mixed age-group class, she says, she thinks they felt out of place: neither part of the public system or the ABE system. And they felt that as dropouts they couldn't do the same work as others. This semester, Lilia-Rosa took them on a field trip to New Mexico State University; they have been doing a lot of talking about how they can get into college with GEDs.

When other teachers ask her if she is having any problems, she responds that she's sorry they had such a hard time, but "I haven't had any problems at all. I can't even say I'm such a good instructor. I didn't even have to work to make a community in the classroom: they all started

talking to each other and found their common interests. During the break, they all sit together and have lunch. Now they are all friends.”

### **THE “ELDERS”**

How did the “elders” do without the younger students? Anastasia Cotton is teaching the older students. She feels that separating the age groups has been working out well for both groups. Her students know they need their diplomas, she explains, and “they know they don’t want to be stuck at \$5.50 an hour. They want to work. They’re focused. This year, I have had a lot fewer complaints from students about other students. We could focus in on certain area, for example in reproductive health, AIDS, and homosexuality. Before, the older students didn’t want to talk about potentially taboo topics. The younger students made some [older students] very self-conscious. Now, the older students are a lot more open. But, again, I don’t have really older people in there; probably the oldest is 38.

“Nevertheless, the interests of a parent with two or three kids is very different from the interests of a 16-year-old who is still trying to date. For example, their music is different, so if you want to use music in the class, it’s easier to do with the students separated by age.

“I’ve never seen a class participate more than this semester. I don’t know whether that’s because the “kids” —under 18— are not in there, or what.”

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Barbara Garner* is the editor of *Focus on Basics*.





## Beyond the Scope of the Teachers: Deciding to Employ a Social Worker

Merritt, N., Spencer, M. & Withers, L. (2002) Beyond the scope of the teachers: Deciding to employ a social worker. *Focus on Basics*, 6(A), 7–9

*“Let’s Write About You” was an exercise in writing developed by Independence, Missouri, adult literacy instructor Tammy Sturm in the summer of 2001.*

*Tammy found that students complained regularly about not having anything to write about. She therefore began lessons based on students telling their personal stories where they were “the expert.”*

In “My Bad Day,” a student we will call Cindy shared her story of violence, abuse, and her search for answers. She wrote the following:

“I didn’t like dealing with him when he was drunk because you couldn’t control him and you never knew what he would do. He would get real violent when he was drinking... I got real scared because he was threatening me...I decided to hide in between two mattresses...I could hear him screaming...”

“Even though he had hit me a number of times, I felt I would deserve whatever he gave me.”

“It made me realize that I couldn’t continue to live like that...I was living dangerously...I had to think about what this was doing for my children...I didn’t need this kind of relationship in my life.”

Cindy cited keeping her job as the reason for enrolling in the Family Literacy Center Adult Education and Literacy (FLC AEL) program. Upon entry, she said she needed a GED—General Educational Development certificate—quickly; however, her entry scores on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) indicated she would need intensive instruction and time to build her skills. As Cindy participated in the classroom, began to trust staff, and participated in “Let’s Write About You,” it became evident that she faced the threat of losing her job, financial worries, parenting concerns, and unresolved domestic issues. These problems all accompanied her to class, affecting her initial progress as she attempted to concentrate on learning.

Like Cindy, most adult literacy students bring myriad social challenges and barriers into their programs with them. At the Family

Literacy Center, staff documentation revealed that students in adult education and literacy classes were continuously facing a wide range of issues that interfered with their ability to attend class regularly, study, and focus on their personal goals and learning. Parent educators, adult education teachers, and the director spent inordinate amounts of time—teachers estimated it at upwards of 25 percent—listening to students’ personal problems and assisting them in finding resources, which, in some cases, involved sources of personal protection. We realized that as professionals we were not educated to meet the social service needs of these students adequately and asked ourselves: Do we need to offer social services as a formal part of our AEL program? In this article, we share the challenges we were facing, what we decided to do, and how our program has changed as a result.

### **OUR PROGRAM**

Established in 1990, the mission of Family Literacy Center, Inc. (FLC), is to provide comprehensive services that respond to the educational and special needs of children, adults, and their families to Eastern Jackson County families in need of basic education and workplace skills. Of the adults living within a five-mile radius of our location, 77 percent do not have a high school diploma or GED. In 2000-2001, FLC provided 251 children with early childhood education, served 564 adult literacy students (of whom 98 percent were female), and 130 teen parents. The collaborative intergenerational services we offer include adult literacy, early childhood education, parent and child time together, parents as teachers, and teen parenting classes.

### **CHALLENGES**

Cindy and her classmates come to study to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED exam. In most cases, the issues that caused these adults to drop out of school have not been resolved when they enter our program. Nearly all the problems involve difficult circumstances that may include long-term unemployment, abusive relationships, homelessness, lack of resources to meet basic needs, and children or elderly parents with chronic health problems. As a result, many students are in crisis, causing chronic disruptions to their education. The disequilibrium associated with crisis serves as a powerful motivational force that can heighten the client’s susceptibility to intervention (Bergin & Garfield, 1993). On the other hand, people in crisis—our students among them—experience strong feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, powerlessness, and hopelessness. After a crisis period (typically lasting four to six weeks), students will either return to their previous coping

skills or develop a new set of responses that may leave them functioning better or worse than prior to the crisis (Parad & Parad, 1990).

Concerned that our educational mission was being undermined by the wide range of stress-producing issues learners brought to class, we requested and received a planning grant from Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning (MAAL). MAAL is a metro-wide initiative operating under the umbrella of the Heart of America United Way in partnership with individuals and organizations from virtually every sector of the Independence, MO, community, including major philanthropists in the Kansas City area. The grant would allow us to document these issues in greater depth and develop a design and grant proposal that would, we hoped, enable us to address these problems so that FLC AEL students could focus on learning.

We contracted with a social worker who conducted classroom observations, 33 student interviews, and eight staff interviews. Students described feeling high levels of stress from many different sources including finances, health problems, interpersonal relationships, and lack of community resources. We learned that many students come from families that had not demonstrated positive parenting skills or positive interpersonal relationships. One student described being locked out of the house all night as a disciplinary measure. The social worker noticed, during conversations with individual students, with groups, and during support groups, that many students had difficulties concentrating due to a preoccupation with personal issues. This often resulted in what we felt to be excessive time and energy being used to discuss these concerns, leaving diminished time for study in the AEL classroom. The breadth and depth of problems faced are apparent in the following student responses:

- met biological father after having no contact for 18 years;
- has cancer but was not receiving treatment due to demands of parenting and lack of support network;
- kicked out of home at age 15 for smoking;
- moves around between homes of other relatives.

In addition, 44 percent of students reported physical, sexual, or emotional abuse during childhood, 55 percent of students indicated current involvement in abusive relationships, and 92 percent of students experienced insufficient financial resources to meet daily needs.

## WHAT TO DO?

The planning grant enabled us to document and validate our concerns: stressful events in learners' lives were accompanying them into the classroom and distracting them from learning. As we were then structured, FLC AEL offered minimal intervention and assistance: the three part-time teachers, trained in education, lacked the time, knowledge, and strategies necessary to deal with case management.

A committee that worked on the planning project decided that the complexity and seriousness of the issues facing our students warranted pursuing funding for a full-time social worker to work with the adult literacy program students. A similar model had been used with the teen parent program at the FLC.

A program grant, also from MAAL, allowed the FLC to contract with Heart of America Family Services (HASF), a counseling and family support agency serving the bistate Kansas City area, for the employment of a master's-level social worker (MSW). This grant was written to provide small group and individual counseling to assist students in removing barriers to their educational goals. Individual intervention was chosen to complement the instructional strategies used in the program. The proposal outlined a seamless system of support in meeting the social service needs of adult learners. By hiring a social worker, we hoped that AEL student attendance and GED attainment would increase, and that students would gain knowledge of community resources and problem-solving skills.

Nikki, the full-time MSW we hired through HAFS, serves students in three separate sites in the Independence community. Nikki uses an empowerment approach, which, in social work practice, is the process of helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and to develop influence toward improving their circumstances (Barker, 1995). The techniques Nikki uses include accepting the client's definition of a problem; identifying and building upon existing strengths; teaching specific empowering skills; and providing mediation and advocacy to mobilize community resources needed in a state of crisis. Nikki believes that the empowerment perspective has become an influential tool for students in the program she serves. Via individual counseling and small group instruction, she assists students in setting educational, career, and personal goals. In the first six months since she joined us, she has assisted 35 GED students in goal-setting. She has also provided short-term counseling, interpersonal relationship-building,

academic instruction, and crisis intervention to 37 other students. Visiting individually with 73 students, Nikki has developed rapport with them. This has made the students more likely to depend on Nikki, rather than their classroom teachers, for assistance, thus allowing the teachers to focus on instruction.

Nikki has implemented Survival Skills for Women (<http://www.flinthills.com/~ssed>), a 10-week course that expands participants' growth and economic potential with sessions focusing on money management, child management, and re-entry to employment. Cindy was one of 10 graduates of the program and provided the inspirational speech at their graduation. Nikki also implemented a Young Men's Support Group for 10 males under the age of 25. This group met for six weeks, building positive relations between the members and strengthening the members' skills in areas chosen by them: making positive choices, job readiness, personal health, parenting, and assertiveness. Nikki has facilitated students' use of outside resources, referring 34 participants to support services such as treatment programs, housing, and vocational/technical services. She has built and maintained relationships with 23 community agencies.

## **INTEGRATION INTO FLC**

As adult education and literacy, early education, and parenting staff interact with adult students, they refer them to Nikki and ask the learners' for permission to give Nikki their names. Nikki participates in weekly staff meetings to provide insight into family dynamics, confidentiality, and ways to address stressful situations. She is also available to staff for personal consultations, which facilitate their ability to be effective in the classroom setting.

## **IMPACT**

It is an FLC AEL practice to compare attendance data to previous years. Since Nikki joined us, the average contact hours per day has risen from a three year average of 56 to 65.4 hours. The average students per day has risen from a three-year average of 14.2 to 17.7 students. Since July 1, 2001, 14 students have obtained their GED, including Cindy, with seven others scheduled to take the tests over the next two months. The number of GED recipients is slightly higher than in previous years.

The shock felt by the FLC staff when they realized how many students had serious barriers was probably the most unexpected outcome of the project. The initial planning grant enabled us to identify more

precisely the barriers faced by our learners; however, the implementation of the project has revealed the magnitude of the issues in their lives:

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 43% | Youth (ages 16-18) smoking cigarettes                       |
| 21% | Single-parent households                                    |
| 15% | Youth living on their own without parental/guardian support |
| 12% | Inability to access reliable transportation to AEL site     |
| 7%  | Criminal behavior and involvement with probation and parole |
| 4%  | Homeless 16 to 18 year olds                                 |
| 3%  | Suspected use/sale of illegal drugs                         |

Adding a social worker to the AEL sites has been a successful endeavor that FLC's Board of Directors is committed to continuing. A reduced grant amount will be requested through the Alliance for an additional year of implementation. The program will be committing a portion of funding to the project in the upcoming year, along with United Way. During a recent dialogue, four students shared with Nikki their great appreciation for her assistance. They commented that her guidance, words of wisdom, and knowledge kept them coming to class even though they faced many challenges. Cindy and several other students wrote a poem for Nikki and gave her a candle, because she "was their light."

The multitude of services offered is a giant step toward meeting the personal and social needs of AEL students, allowing them to focus more energy on continuing their education. The addition of the student liaison social worker has demonstrated the center's proactive approach to best serve its participants like Cindy, once fearful and lacking hope, now enrolled in college and becoming equipped to achieve her goals and capture a promising future.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*Nikki Merritt, MSW*, has worked in community-based, school link, social services for the past seven years.

*Miriam Spencer*, Executive Director of Family Literacy Center, has worked with family literacy programming for more than 10 years.

*Lori Withers* is a Parents as Teachers parent educator assigned to serve families within FLC's programming.





## Who Helps the Helpers? Supporting Counselors in Adult Basic Education

Coleman, C. (2002) Who helps the helpers? Supporting counselors in adult basic education. *Focus on Basics*, 6(A), 11–14

*When I was asked to write an article about supporting the role of counselors in adult basic education (ABE) programs, my first thoughts were about my own experiences with school counselors. My most striking memory of a counselor in a guidance position dates from a meeting I had at the end of my time in college. When I sat in my college advisor's office that day, I was looking for more than advice on how to write a resume. I was looking for support in determining my next steps, practical information about my career options, and, perhaps more than anything else, a good "listening to." Professor Jones provided me with what I needed. Her guidance and willingness to listen were valuable and necessary resources for me as a student.*

What does this have to do with the field of adult basic education (ABE)? Some adult education programs employ counselors, occasionally called "learning support specialists." They are often the first people adult learners meet in programs. They can set the tone of a new learner's experience of ABE. How are their professional development and support needs met so that they can be as effective with adult learners as Dr. Jones was with me? What are the challenges inherent in the role of counselors in an ABE program? In what ways can they be supported? These are the questions I hope to address in this article.

### ROLE DEFINITION

One of the first challenges for counselors is defining their role: "What exactly is it that I am supposed to do?" In discussions with eight counselors from around the country, this question stood out as crucial. The role of counselor differs from program to program, as my conversations revealed. "I help students with whatever problems they have that get in the way of their learning," says a counselor from a Massachusetts school system-based evening program. Another counselor, from a community college ABE program, describes her job as giving people the TABE or the BEST [placement tests] when they come in, and letting teachers know who is in which class. Yet another described her work as keeping track of students' goals and maintaining records of what goals they have accomplished. One counselor is responsible for all the

aforementioned tasks: “My job as a counselor is to make sure that our program is doing all it can to make coming to class possible for each student. That takes in a lot of territory from correct placement in the first place to helping them get housing, food stamps, or a job.”

Problems arise when the role is not well articulated within a program. A program director explains: “The ideal role of the counselor is to support students, to get into the classroom and find out what the issues are, to find out why people are leaving and follow up with them, to bring in speakers on special topics which are about supporting the students. Unfortunately, that isn’t always the way it works. In the past what has happened is the counselor does everything. In a large program like this one, with several smaller sites, the counselor had to do all the administrative work as well as all the counseling. There were so many hats for the person who was the counselor. That role is in transition now and is closer to what we had envisioned as ideal where support of the student is the focus.”

Not only do counselors get confused by these myriad hats; students do, too. They aren’t always sure what the counselor’s main role is or what issues they should talk about with the counselor. This seems especially true for programs in which counselors are also teachers and in programs where the counselor is also doing much of the administrative work. “It’s hard to balance it all—being the counselor and the resource person, being the nitty gritty detail person, and being the stern follow-upper person,” says a Massachusetts counselor. “It’s a real mix of different kinds of skills.”

Clarifying a counselor’s role may be the easiest form of support a program can offer a counselor. In Massachusetts, attempts have been made to help clarify the role of counselor and to provide support for it. In the early 1990s, focus groups for counselors were formed, facilitated by the System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES). According to Cathy Gannon, facilitator of the Central SABES counselor sharing group, these groups examined the role of counselors in programs, looked at what was initially required in the 1990 mandate for counseling to be included in programs funded by the Massachusetts Department of Education, and sought ways to support counselors in performing their jobs.

A 1994 report entitled “Learner Support Services: Adult Basic Education Counseling Focus Group: Final Report,” recommended a change of job title from the vague term “counselor” to the more specific descriptor “Learner Support Specialist.” The report defined the purpose of counseling in adult basic education as “providing learners with

support services that will assist them in successfully meeting their educational goals” and listed these tasks as part of the job:

- Participating in intake, assessment, and class placement of learners.
- Meeting with students and with classes to explain program services.
- Helping set individual goals, and listening to concerns or issues of students.
- Checking attendance and working with staff to follow up on absences.
- Meeting with teachers, staff, and students to identify problems and needs as they relate to academic performance and educational planning.
- Assessing the need for outside services, researching these services, and making appropriate referrals.
- Assisting in developing strategies to address waiting lists and/or recruitment of students.

This year, a group of counselors in southeastern Massachusetts, facilitated by Southeast SABES, is re-visiting this list. They believe that the National Reporting System requirements for follow-up on student goal attainment and measurement of educational gain that meet validity and reliability standards have led to an increased emphasis on the role of counselor in programs. By the end of this summer, they hope to have a newly revised definition as well as set of resources for ABE counselors. The Counseling Sharing Group of Southeast MA is also discussing and studying areas such as transitioning General Educational Development (GED) students into community college settings and increasing student retention. According to Betty Vermette, the facilitator of the group, “These were needs that came up in a survey we did last year. Many of the topics that people listed fell under the counselor role: recruitment, student retention, the intake process, goal setting, placement, transitioning to college, etc. Based on this, we initiated the Southeast Working Group for Educational Counselors.” In revisiting the definition of the role of counselor, this group hopes to help counselors deal with the issue of lack of clarity.

### **LACK OF TIME**

When people are unclear on their role within an organization, they can easily fall into the trap of trying to be all things to all people, leaving little

time to do much of anything very well. Lack of time to do adequately all of the various tasks of both a counseling nature and often of a more administrative nature was cited as a challenge by some of the counselors with whom I spoke. One counselor puts it this way, "This year, the director has a person who can help with the data entry and with making calls to people on the waiting list. That has helped a lot. It took some of the pressure off. I used to spend most of my time doing that. It didn't leave much time to do more of the real counseling."

She now feels that she can be more proactive. "Now I can look at next year and set my own goals about how to improve things. I have time for planning." She also comments on role definition: "I know what I have to do; I know what I want to do, and I know how to do it." She talked to me at length about her ideas for developing an orientation for new students, developing resources on transitions from the GED program to college, and increasing her own information about what resources are available in the community for adult learners.

Following up with students on attendance takes time. Record keeping takes time. Giving intake and scoring assessment tests is time consuming as well. Counselors can devote all or most of their time to keeping up with this work. When program directors are able shift some of the more administrative aspects of the job away from counselors, they feel less pressure in terms of time. One counselor I spoke with describes herself as "so relieved" when some of the administrative duties of her job were shifted to other staff. "It leaves me more time to get to know the students, to make sure I'm available to help them, to do more of the counseling I think I should be doing."

### **EFF AS A SUPPORT**

One support that many counselors may not initially consider comes from Equipped for the Future (EFF), a project of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) that is a standards-based reform initiative. It aims to improve the quality of the adult literacy system and build the capacity of the system to assist adults more effectively in accomplishing their goals in life. It looks at what adults need to know and to be able to do in order to function in their roles as community members, family members, and workers.

Carolyn Beirs, GED program manager at Family Learning in the school district of Greenville County, South Carolina, explains: "As with most educational programs, [in ours,] lack of time, funds and staff offer major challenges. Most of the family literacy programs I've visited don't have trained counselors on site, but collaborate with the local Mental

Health Department for referrals and, in some cases, bimonthly classroom visits centered around issues of concern: stress, time management, domestic violence, to name a few.” Using EFF as a guide, her program’s staff developed a new intake process that provides counselors and teachers with increased opportunities for conversation with new students. They talk with students about their goals and the people in their lives who provide them with supports, both emotional and practical, such as transportation and child care. They developed an interview form, she says, “to slow down the enrollment process and take time to have dialogue with individual parents and talk about goals, support, obstacles, etc. before they enroll. Teachers were encouraged to use the EFF standard ‘Take Responsibility for Learning’ during orientation.” Prior to this, intakes were done over the phone or in brief face-to-face meetings, with placement testing and enrollment happening on the same day. Carolyn stated, “EFF is for all adults, which I feel is a concept that is often understated. Consequently, I feel counselors might consider looking at the Framework tools to enhance the work they do with adult learners. The standards ‘Listen Actively’ and ‘Observe Critically’ along with the four ‘Interpersonal Skills’ seem the most likely support.”

### **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

One of the most interesting challenges that counselors in ABE settings face is how to build relationships with learners. Learners spend most of their time with their teachers. They tend to go to their teachers first with questions, issues, and problems. Counselors need to be proactive in “marketing” their services. They need to let learners know that they are available for them. Two counselors talked about this. “It can be hard as the students sometimes see you as the lady who does the testing but they don’t necessarily think that you are there to talk to about problems you are having in class or problems you have getting to class consistently, for example. You have to make sure you’re visible.” One counselor told me that she tries to be available informally at break times, before classes start, and after classes start. This gives her the opportunity to know the students a little better and to let them know she is there.

Mentors can support counselors as they develop strategies for building relationships with learners. Central Massachusetts has had a counseling sharing group since 1992. The composition of the group has changed over time, but its focus has remained the same: to give counselors in ABE programs the opportunity to meet and learn from each other, to provide resources to counselors in their work, and to explore ways to improve counseling services to adult learners. This group has explored many methods of support, including:

- creating a directory of ABE counselors with contact information and descriptions of that person's program role;
- bringing in speakers on topics of special interest to counselors such as stress reduction or grief counseling;
- creating a mentoring process through which new counselors are mentored by more experienced colleagues.

The mentoring program has been one of the most valuable support services this group has offered. A frequent comment was: "I was feeling lost, but as I started to see how others were dealing with these issues, it helped a lot. Just having one other person who was doing the same job was so helpful!" Several of the counselors I spoke with mentioned the mentoring process as being helpful to them. Mentors considered that it was helpful, stating that it encouraged them to seek out new information and stretch themselves in response to the questions they might get from those they were mentoring.

## REFERRALS

When do problems go beyond the scope of what should be handled by part-time, nonlicensed counselors in an ABE setting is a difficult question to answer. "It is hard to know sometimes when to refer [people out to other service providers]." This seems especially true when the learners have built a strong and positive relationship with the learning support specialist. It also can become problematic when social services in the community have been cut due to budget cuts or other constraints, leading to long waiting lists for services. One person I spoke with said it would be "so helpful if we had someone who we could run things by a psychologist, whom we could talk to about how to help a student while they are waiting to be assigned a counselor at an agency in the community." Most counselors say that knowing when to refer becomes easier with experience, but the support and advice of other learning support specialists, as is the case in the various sharing groups, were helpful in determining the best approach. Another means of support is to bring in outside speakers from various regional social service providers. This has been a strategy all the Massachusetts counselor sharing groups have used that seems to have been helpful.

In the northeast region of Massachusetts as well as in the Boston area, Michelle Forlizzi has been working with a "Counselor Roundtable." Participants have examined goal setting, assessment, and follow-up with learners (issues driven, in part, by policies of the Massachusetts Department of Education). The roundtable also tries to address

professional growth issues. In her role as coordinator, Forlizzi hears about the many barriers faced by counselors. Chief among them are lack of counseling models, lack of counseling hours, supervisory support, and technical assistance. Another is a general lack of knowledge about the systems with which some students interact: Supplemental Security Income, the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Education and Training, among others. Because they see having a clear model of the counseling role as being a key factor in providing quality counseling services to students, the Northeast Counseling Roundtable is currently embarking on a research project to look at one model of counseling and its impact on students in programs. They will look at programs that have a person on staff whose job is only being the counselor and compare these with programs without a staff person whose job is counseling, but who instead follows the “teacher as counselor” model.

Michelle believes that models in which the counselor’s duties are divided among teachers create a situation in which counseling roles and responsibilities lack clear definition. The research her group is undertaking may shed some light on the ways in which we need to support the counseling role within the ABE setting.

## **WISH LIST**

Some supports do exist for counselors in ABE programs, but how can we as a system improve upon them? I asked the counselors with whom I spoke for their wish lists of supports. Many say they wish to be less isolated in their jobs. Counselors in large programs gain a great deal from connecting with their counterpart, “the night counselor” or “the day counselor.” Some say it would be very helpful to have available a manual that delineates procedures. Others would love to have a trained therapist they could call on to run things by when they feel overtaxed. Some would like to see more workshops offered on topics of interest to counselors. Most wanted more opportunities to connect and share with their peers in other programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Some exciting approaches to counselor support and development are in place around the country, but more needs to be done. And what happens if we are not able to provide the support that counselors in ABE programs need? In this time of budget cuts, is supporting the role of counselor so important? What would have happened if I had not had a Dr. Jones in my experience in college? It’s hard to say. Would I have had the support and the resources I needed to leave the relative safety of academia and move

forward into a career? Maybe. I was lucky. I had a lot of other things in my favor: strong family support, a new college degree under my belt, and, perhaps more importantly, underneath the fear I had the confidence to ask questions, explore, and believe that I could succeed. If there had been no Dr. Jones, I might still have fared well. I wonder, without the other supports in place, how some of my GED students would have done. For many of us, there is a time when a person in our lives whose support, encouragement, and provision of practical information enable us to achieve our goals. The counselor in an adult learner's life could be that person. As a field we owe counselors the support they need to continue their important role of supporting our learners.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## A Mind/Body/Learning Approach to Counseling: Helping Students Handle Stress

Jacobs, M. (2002) A mind/body/learning approach to counseling: Helping students handle stress. *Focus on Basics*, 6(A), 14–17

*Going back to school while working as an adult education teacher and counselor at the Community Learning Center (CLC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, brought me face-to-face with my old test and school anxieties. They were heightened by limited time, raising teenagers of my own at home, caring for my spouse and an aging parent, and having responsibility for housekeeping chores. To ease my own tension, I started practicing Tai Chi, Qi Gong, yoga, and meditation on a regular basis.*

In discussions with my students, I learned that they had no outlets for their stress, usually considerably more tension-provoking than mine. Despite a mandatory, study skills workshop designed to empower them, many students were still missing classes because of health and motivational problems, weakening of commitment, poor time management skills, interference from job schedules, and family conflicts. I started to think that the best way to address the students' counseling and academic needs would be in an ongoing classroom setting.

At the same time, the CLC started to use the Massachusetts Department of Education's new student registration form. The form listed personal health goals dealing with stress reduction, nutrition, and improved self-confidence and self-esteem. Students could now potentially meet academic and health goals in one class. I realized that the opportunity had arrived for me to apply the knowledge, skills, and convictions I had acquired over the past 10 years in studying mind/body medicine and psychology.

### INITIAL SKEPTICISM

At first my colleagues at the CLC were skeptical about the idea of my teaching a counseling class instead of one of our traditional adult basic education (ABE) or General Educational Development (GED) preparation classes. It represented a big change in both what and how we were teaching. I was suggesting teaching basic academic skills and providing group counseling through a health content format. Eventually, my co-workers supported my initial idea to offer a weekly, 1.5-hour, mixed-

level, health education and counseling class for morning ABE and adult secondary education (ASE) students.

We began offering this class in September, 1999. It was so popular with the students that in September, 2000, a second counseling class, also meeting once a week for 1.5 hours, was added at the CLC for morning English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) advanced students. I call both the classes “health education” to remove any stigma associated with counseling and therefore attract more students. I incorporate reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and study skills with health science content in both. We do not only vocabulary building, highlighting main ideas of paragraphs, and writing activities together but also aerobic exercise, stretching, yoga, meditation, and cognitive restructuring: learning to view things more optimistically and with a sense of humor. In the supportive atmosphere of the group, we openly discuss problems that students are having.

### **STRESS MANAGEMENT AND CREATIVE ARTS**

Teaching health education has given me the freedom and flexibility to respond to students’ interests and needs. At the beginning of each semester, students tell me what they want to explore and learn. To facilitate this process, I have them complete a questionnaire to find out which health-related topics and activities interest them.

This past school year, my students and I have worked on some stress management and expressive arts techniques. We practiced focusing the mind in the present moment to facilitate learning and counter the negative cognitive effects of stress (forgetfulness, distractibility, negativity, pessimism, anger, anxiety). I taught them how to do the simple exercises I do, as well as yoga stretches, sitting, walking, and standing meditation.

Based on the research of psychologist James Pennebaker (1997), who studied the power of writing in emotional and physical healing, I have promoted at-home journal writing in both health classes. My students experience the healing process and I get regular feedback on their interests, needs, likes, dislikes, and progress. In class, my students and I have taken writing a step further by experimenting with guided imagery and drawing to stimulate creative writing. I have used these expressive arts, which I was learning in a course at Lesley University, as a way for students to understand themselves better and gain self-confidence. Tapping into the creative process has improved students’ writing and captivated their interest.

I first taught my students how to turn off the stress response and bring about the relaxation response, a state in which the mind/body is brought back to balance (relaxed state) and is no longer fighting or running away to protect itself from a perceived danger. During relaxation, our blood pressure decreases, heart beats slower, metabolism slows down, breathing deepens, and muscles loosen. We become more open and receptive to new ideas and ways of being in the world around us. Electroencephalographs, which record brain waves, provide evidence that our brains also slow down.

**MINDFULNESS EXERCISE: "I AM A CRANBERRY"**

When I put the small cranberry on my palm, closing my eyes and softly breathing, I felt the cranberry was not only a piece of fruit but also a natural and living thing combining the rain, the soil, the seed and the season. I slowly put the acid cranberry into my mouth. When it melted in my mouth, I felt it integrate into my body, my soul, and even my mind. When I absorbed this cranberry, I also absorbed the essence of nature. I felt that I was also a member of our natural world, just like the cranberry absorbing the nutrition of the world and contributing to the world in return.

Finally, I felt I was becoming a cranberry, although only a small part of our organic world which, however, is important. This whole inner experience is somehow magical and significant to my mind. I think this special process of thinking is also a helpful psychological meditation for my mind's health.

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## **BRAIN WAVES**

Researchers Elmer and Alyce Green (1984) of the Menninger Foundation have described four types of brain waves or electrical rhythms that correspond to the stages of our mind or consciousness: beta, alpha, theta, and delta. Beta waves are rapid (13 to 26 cycles per second) and occur during stressful, everyday life situations when we are dealing with the outside world or are involved in "active thinking." Our negative, fearful, or angry thoughts and detail-oriented thinking are associated with beta rhythms. The slower alpha brain waves (eight to 13 cycles per second) characterize the relaxed mind, where our focus is more inward, such as when we daydream or meditate. During this state, we are wide awake, but creative ideas or images arise from the unconscious mind. In other words, when we are relaxed, creative ideas just come to us. Instead of the mind going blank when we feel stressed about writing, ideas and images flow. Theta rhythms (four to eight cycles per second) bring us almost to the point of sleep. They produce a dream-like state filled with

unconscious images, and we feel drowsy. Delta waves, the slowest brain waves (zero to four cycles per minute), occur during deep sleep.

**Walking Meditation Exercise:**

**“I am The Tree of Knowledge”**

I can see people walking around me. They feel good being next to me. They are looking for a place to rest. It seems to me that they know how easy it is to find peace under a tree. I feel the wind that brings the birds; they fly around and come to me. I spread my arms for them. I feel strong.

While the birds are singing, I’m laughing. I’m happy. I see men, women, and children playing in the playground. They are happy too. Happiness is in the air. I feel strong. It touches my soul.

Ewerton Borba

The Greens conducted many studies on the relationship among the mind, creativity, health, and healing. They found that as participants’ brain waves slowed down in alpha and theta states, they experience healing of physical disorders (i.e., high blood pressure) and the expression of creativity. These results happened naturally as soon as the body and mind calmed down and were free of stress and active or worried thinking. The students participating in their studies were taught how to slow down their own brain waves to bring about body/mind relaxation. Once relaxed in alpha or theta consciousness, participants reported having more images, increased energy, improved concentration, and creative thinking, all of which helped them in writing papers and taking tests. They even noted an increase in positive thoughts, a sense of empowerment, and openness to the possibility for change and growth.

### **PREPARING FOR CREATIVE EXPRESSION**

Expressing our creativity, therefore, not only is beneficial for our health and learning but also makes us feel happy. We get a rush of energy and produce something that makes us feel good about ourselves. By setting favorable conditions in the classroom, we adult educators can help our students to reduce stress and express their creativity, leading to broader and more optimistic thinking.

First, however, we need to prepare the mind of the learner. I use movement and mindfulness meditation, starting with a five to 10 minute exercise to calm the body and stimulate creativity. When the blood is circulating, oxygen is feeding all the cells of the body, particularly those of the brain. With increased oxygen, the brain has more energy, and we feel alert. In the classroom, we dance, sing, chant, do some simple

sitting/standing stretches or yoga postures, march in place, or even walk around the classroom.

## MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES

After exercising, we turn the focus inward with a 10-minute mindfulness activity that slows down brain waves and stimulates creative expression. I remind students not to worry about how they look or whether they are doing an activity correctly or not. We concentrate on doing only one thing very slowly, gently, and silently. Breathing can be a mindfulness activity if we observe the rhythm and sensations of each in-breath and out-breath. Or, we practice progressive muscle relaxation, starting with the face and working down to the feet, tightening and then relaxing different muscles. Sometimes we do a guided imagery activity, free writing, or draw pictures to practice mindfulness.

Almost any activity can be performed mindfully. One of my favorites is to eat a dried cranberry mindfully. I have students select one berry and hold it in their left hand. They examine its texture and shape, notice how it feels in their hand, and then smell it. I ask them to think about how that piece of fruit grew and became what it is and how it got to them. Then, I tell them to put it in their mouth and let it rest on their tongue, noticing any changes in their mouth. Next, they bite into it so that they have two pieces of fruit in their mouth. Lastly, I instruct them to eat the fruit as slowly as they can with the thought that it could be the only food they will eat all day.

After eating a dried cranberry mindfully, I ask the students to write as much as they can, in the present tense, beginning with “I am a cranberry.” At the end of the class, students share their writings, thoughts, and feelings about the creative process. They report feeling happy, proud of themselves, energized, and relaxed. The boxed text provides some examples of ABE and ESOL students’ writings from such a class on mindfully eating a cranberry.

### MINDFULNESS EXERCISE: “I AM A CRANBERRY”

I am a cranberry, and I enjoy that I grew up under sun light with a nice view. I remember the people taking care of me and how proud I was. I felt like a VIP. I’m used to enjoying myself, and I never think about the future even though one day I heard people talking that my time was coming up to be taken away.

But what has happened here? Hey! It’s so hot! I can’t breathe. I am suffocating. Why am I drying up? Oh, I’m getting smaller and smaller, and that’s not right. What is this box, and it’s so dark here! It changed everything for me!

Now I'm another thing. I'm a dried cranberry, and I'm trying to enjoy my challenges. Now I like to be eaten from a nice person, to feel his soft tongue on my body, to feel his pleasure eating me. It will be a new feeling, and like every new experience, it's so exciting for me.

Isak Spahiu

## STUDENT FEEDBACK

The student feedback from the health education classes has been overwhelmingly positive. In classroom discussions, specific writing assignments, and journal entries, students share their joy, energy, feelings of peacefulness, self-explorations, and heightened self-esteem. They report a decrease in negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and frustration. Their enthusiasm has spread to other classmates who have not yet enrolled in health education, and we now have a growing waiting list for September classes.

## CONCLUSION

In the three years that the CLC has been offering health education/counseling classes for morning students, all the GED students who have taken it have passed their GED exams and received their high school equivalency certificate. They even continued attending their other classes until the last week of school, unlike most of their classmates, whose attendance trailed off after registering for their tests. The GED graduates, almost all of them young adults, said they would not have stuck with the program if it had not been for their health class. It kept them motivated despite stress outside of the class and learning difficulties in the areas of writing and math. During the school year, none of the ABE students who attended the health class for at least three months dropped out of school.

I hope this approach to counseling will become part of the core program at the CLC and be seriously considered by other learning centers whose students could benefit from health education classes. As Derren Lewis-Peters, a 17-year-old student who completed his GED in June, 2002, writes,

Attending this class [ABE/ASE Health Education] has been an eye-opening journey filled with positivity and excitement. As I write this, on the eve of my last class, I can feel a sliver of sadness come over me, but I can rejoice in the fact that I've come away from this a smarter, wiser young man with a better understanding of myself and the people around me, all because of this one, fantastic class.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Reading Assigned for Session Three on Counseling **Retention and the GED**

Jones, J. (1998) Retention and the GED. *Focus on Basics*, 2(B), 15–17

*Having spent 12 years as a Director of Social Work Programs by day and a GED instructor by night, I have long been aware that my students face serious barriers in reaching their goals. Just entering a school building is stressful for some. More than once I have walked through the parking lot to invite potential students, anxious about returning to school, inside. I have manipulated every facet of the learning environment and curriculum that I could to make classes user friendly. Students complained that they could not sit comfortably at desks designed for high school students, so I changed the location of the classes to conference rooms equipped with large tables and comfortable chairs. I developed a thorough orientation and goal-planning program to introduce students to classes, answer any questions, and allay their concerns as to what was expected of them. I also individualized my curriculum as much as possible to target student needs. The students seemed genuinely pleased with the classes and their progress, yet absenteeism and retention problems persisted. In 1996, by the Christmas break, I was experiencing drop-out rates as high as 60 percent.*

Consequently, during the break, I consulted 20 students. I discovered an array of problems and concerns that affected their classroom attendance, nearly all of which had nothing to do with academic ability. If students with such problems were to stay in class, I thought, the problems would have to be identified early on, before the students became overwhelmed and quit the program. I felt I had to find a way to elicit and address the concerns that could prevent my students from succeeding in class.

**ACTION RESEARCH**

At a teachers' meeting one afternoon, my supervisor suggested I join an action research group to explore strategies to address this issue. Action research is conducted within the confines of the classroom, by the teacher. I would choose the question to be researched and the data collection measures, and the results would be applicable to my concerns. I joined the group. For my action research project I decided that, when new students came to class, I would interview them. I would attempt to discover why they had dropped out of high school, how dropping out had affected them, and what goals they had for the future. A few weeks later I would have them elaborate upon this in essays. I would use this information to refer students to appropriate social services. I also hoped

that by demonstrating that I was interested in their lives, I would build stronger bonds with my students. My formal research question became “Will retention be improved by using interviews and creative writing assignments to identify barriers to attendance and providing referrals to services to address these barriers?” To document the research, I would take notes on interviews with students, collect writing assignments, maintain attendance records, and keep a journal, field notes, and anecdotal records.

### THE INTERVENTION

The GED class I targeted to study was located in a rural community in the mountains of southwestern Pennsylvania. A total of 27 students were involved, including a comparison group of ten who attended class from September to December and did not participate in the retention intervention, and 17 new students who did. The students ranged in age from teenagers to senior citizens, 20 were female, seven male, all were white. They worked independently or in groups studying a full range of GED subjects. Classes met two evenings a week for three hours a night. My program does not have an intake center. All orientation and testing are done in the classroom by the teacher. Those who are interested in joining a class simply walk in during any scheduled class session and begin. I frequently receive a phone call from the program administrator before a new student arrives, but often learners read recruitment posters or learn about the classes via word of mouth, and arrive unannounced.

Prior to conducting this research, I typically chatted with new students about their motivations for attending classes and their future goals. Although I encouraged a free exchange, because it was our first meeting I could not elicit much information. My first intervention in the action research project involved reformulating this talk into an in-depth fact-finding session. Taking new students one-by-one into a separate classroom, I began with general questions about why they had dropped out and were now enrolling. I asked about the positive aspects of their lives, such as families, work, hobbies, and interests, taking notes throughout. I spent a considerable amount of time on goals and in reviewing the challenges and support systems they could expect to encounter. The interviews varied in length from ten to 20 minutes. The technique proved somewhat helpful, but, since we were just beginning our teacher-student relationship, the students were still not all that forthcoming.

After students had attended four classes and we had established a rapport, I invited them to complete a writing assignment about

themselves. I explained that I was very interested in their success and wanted to be aware of their concerns. I asked them to respond in writing to the following questions. “People drop out of high school for many reasons. Why did you decide to drop out of high school? How has dropping out of high school affected your life and the lives of your family and those closest to you? What are your goals? Where do you see yourself a year from now? Why did you decide to pursue a GED at this time?”

I was hopeful that the students would consider their responses carefully and provide truthful, comprehensive answers. But I was unprepared for the painfully honest replies. Here are a few excerpts:

“Dropping out of school was the biggest mistake of my life...and has affected my life tremendously. It lowered my self-esteem a lot. I was embarrassed to tell people I quit. I felt like a failure My sister quit school a few months after I did. I don’t know if it was because of me and my mom’s poor example, but she will find out how hard it will be to make a living without an education I returned to school to feel better about myself and try to set an example for my younger sister.”

“The consequences facing me after I dropped out were more than I bargained for. I came to find that you are not going to get hired for a job much above minimum wage. This problem was magnified when I found myself with two children barely a year apart in age. My situation landed me at the welfare office, someplace I had never pictured myself going. It is quite amazing where the choices you make and the path you choose take you...The GED classes are doing wonders for me. I feel a sense of accomplishing something more than just collecting a welfare check every two weeks. It is a wonderful feeling to have...We do things in our lives at times that seem right at the moment, failing to assess the consequences they may lead to in the future. Dropping out of high school is a choice, and does affect different people in many different ways. I myself have felt the burden of my choice, and I am sure many others have also.”

“The reason I dropped out of school was because I was in many different foster homes and just the thought of meeting new people scared me. I was always moving from place to place. I would have friends, then I would suddenly be moved to another home...I was moved around so much that I never really had the chance to learn...Then one day I ran away, and I was nowhere to be found, so they signed me out of school, and I never went back.

The main thing is that I'm here now, and I really want to learn. I decided to want something and that's my GED. My goal is to be able to look at the people that made me not want to learn and say to them I did this on my own. I got my GED. And I'm very proud of myself."

These essays provided me with great insight into the lives of my students. In addition to reading them, I devoted class time to discussing the essays individually with each student. I became aware of their concerns and, in some cases, phobias about academics, and I gained a better understanding of the circumstances that had influenced their decisions to drop out and then to attend GED classes. Based upon what I learned from these essays and from conversations in class, I referred students to a variety of agencies, including the county assistance office, a local day care center, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Job Center, medical and vision services, Victim Services, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and job training. Sometimes I provided the application forms, assisted in their completion, and ensured that they were delivered. In other cases, I made phone calls on the behalf of the students. My experience as a social worker stood me in good stead, but all the information about services is accessible to the public. The support services assisted the students in diminishing or removing barriers to success in the program.

## RESULTS

Unlike the control group, the students in the intervention group arrived early and often stayed late to review materials. They formed their own out-of-class study groups. I spent my budget to the penny in an effort to keep them supplied with the materials, texts, workbooks, and study guides that they requested. These efforts seemed to translate into academic gain. Of the comparison group of ten students, only four successfully completed the program, for a retention rate of 40 percent. We consider program completion to be the receipt of a GED or a one or more grade level increase in Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) test scores. The intervention group of 17 students maintained an 82 percent retention rate. All 14 of the remaining learners who had participated in the intervention raised their reading and math levels by an average of two grade levels, compared to the comparison group who raised their on average only one grade level. Nine of the 14 students completed applications for postsecondary training and one participated in a youth work experience program. None of the students in the comparison group enrolled in such programs.

**REACTION**

I embarked upon an action research project because I was concerned with retention. The intervention I chose learning more about students through interview and essay writing, working to develop a rapport, and providing referrals to social services resulted in both increased retention and impressive academic gains. The interviews and essays served as an impetus for bonding. I continually attempted to strengthen my relationship with the students by inquiring about personal interests and providing efforts for them to experience success in the classroom. Even if students were unable to complete an assignment correctly, I encouraged them by recognizing the diligent efforts they made. We grew as a community of learners. The study not only proved successful for the students, but also renewed my zeal for teaching. My students' excitement became contagious.

I will continue to utilize the interviews and essays, and to provide referrals with future groups and hope to enjoy similar success. In my view, although helping students deal with intense issues can be emotionally taxing, I would encourage other teachers to attempt such strategies. Students cannot thrive academically when they are overwhelmed with outside concerns.

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## Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills

Reder, C. & Strawn, C. (2001) Program participation and self-directed learning to improve basic skills. *Focus on Basics*, 4(D), 15–18

***LSAL's data indicate that self-study is prevalent among high school dropouts. How can ABE programs take those efforts into account?***

*An analysis of baseline data collected by the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) offers a tantalizing glimpse of the formal and informal learning activities underlying adults' literacy development. Few adult educators will be surprised to hear that many in the LSAL population participate in adult basic or secondary education programs to improve their reading, writing, and math skills. After all, that's why these programs exist. More surprising is the finding that substantial numbers of adults in the LSAL population engage in self-directed learning activities to improve their basic skills or prepare for the tests of General Educational Development (GED). This is true both for individuals who have previously participated in adult education programs and for those who never have. A better understanding of the relationship between program participation and self-directed study for basic skill improvement could offer some interesting new ways to think about program design and outreach, student retention, and lifelong learning.*

### THE DESIGN OF LSAL

The design of NCSALL's Longitudinal Study helps us to investigate these and a range of other important issues in adult literacy and education. Two features of the LSAL design are particularly relevant here. First, the LSAL is a panel study: it closely follows the same group of individuals over time. They are periodically interviewed, their literacy assessed, and information is collected about their program participation, informal learning activities, uses of written materials, employment, social networks, personal goals, social and economic status, among other information. The LSAL panel consists of approximately 1,000 individuals randomly sampled from its target population: individuals who, at the time the study began, lived in the Portland, OR, area; were aged 18-44 years; did not have a high school diploma or GED; were not still in high school; and spoke English proficiently. A second major feature is its comparison group methodology: approximately equal numbers of the target population were sampled who had or had not recently enrolled in

local adult education programs. The design allows us to make important comparisons between those in the target population who participate in programs with those who do not. These comparisons provide new and important views of the distinctive characteristics of participants and of the contributions that program participation makes to adults' literacy and life development.

### **SELF-STUDY AND PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

Most American research on adults' self-directed learning has focused on professionals and others with relatively high levels of formal education, who are presumed to have "learned how to learn" through their years of formal schooling (e.g., Aslanian, 1980). Few studies have investigated the self-directed learning activities of adults who dropped out of high school. We know little about their self-directed learning, especially among those who never participate in adult education programs. Can they improve their skills on their own? Do they need to participate in formal programs to develop their literacy abilities?

We explored some of these issues a number of ways in the first (or baseline) interviews. For example, individuals were asked about many aspects of their preceding life histories, including whether they had, after leaving school, ever studied by themselves to improve their reading, writing, or math skills or to prepare for the GED. We were careful to differentiate such self-study from homework activities associated with any adult education classes they might have taken. When individuals responded affirmatively, we asked further questions for details about when and how intensively they had studied by themselves to improve their skills.

Although we need several years of data to observe literacy development directly, the LSAL baseline data already indicate that informal, self-directed learning may be an important part of adult literacy development. This component has largely been overlooked by both researchers and programs. One in three (34%) of those who have never participated in adult education programs have studied by themselves to improve their skills. Nearly half (46%) of those who have previously participated in programs have also self-studied to improve their skills or prepare for the GED.

Adult educators are often challenged and sometimes frustrated by the high turnover in classes. Data from the LSAL may help us to reconceptualize such sporadic participation in ABE programs as part of a broader process of cumulative skill development over time. Most program administrative data use 12 hours of seat time as the standard for



minimum participation (and funding). LSAL quantifies participation in finer detail, recognizing a minimum of one class session as a period of participation. By “period of participation” we mean one or more sessions with the same teacher that ends because the student leaves or the class ends. Periods of participation may or may not conform to the standard number of weeks per term. This focus helps us see more varied and complex patterns of participation. Among those in the LSAL population who have ever participated in classes, more than half (58%) have done so in more than one period of participation. Individuals attending programs in multiple periods of participation often go to different programs, with varying intensities, duration, and reasons for starting and stopping during each period of participation.

This complex, sometimes fragmented process of participation is best captured and understood from the learner’s perspective rather than through the lens of administrative data in which students’ participation is studied only in relation to the outreach, recruitment, and retention of students in the current program. When analyzing the same LSAL data from two different perspectives, that of cumulative participation hours and that of hours accumulated in individual program attempts, we get two different representations of participation. Framed as individual program attempts, stopping in and out of different classes might be interpreted as a series of failures. Students, however, experience moving in and out of programs as a process of accumulating participation and development over time. In the LSAL survey, students were asked how many classes they had participated in, how many hours per week the class met, and how many weeks they stayed in the class. Table 1 illustrates how the math works out differently if you only start counting class hours after 12 hours of seat time.

*Table 1. Two ways of counting participation*

| <b>Class 1</b>                          | <b>Program count</b> | <b>LSAL count</b>   |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|
| Hours                                   | —                    | 4 hours per week    |
| Weeks                                   | —                    | 2 weeks             |
| Total time in class 1                   | —                    | 8 hours             |
| <b>Class 2</b>                          |                      |                     |
| Hours                                   | 4 hrs per week       | 4 hrs per week      |
| Weeks                                   | 8 weeks              | 8 weeks             |
| Total time in class 2                   | 32 hours             | 32 hours            |
| <b>Total participation time counted</b> |                      |                     |
|   | 1 class, 32 hours    | 2 classes, 40 hours |

We used the initial LSAL data to compare these data and learner perspectives, illuminating somewhat different patterns of participation. If we look at periods of participation prior to the baseline (first) interview,<sup>1</sup>

on average, learners experience 54 hours (median) of instruction per period of participation. Using the 12-hour threshold common in administrative data, however, we would report only 27 hours. When we look at cumulative hours over periods of participation, on average, 10% of learners stop participating before completing 12 hours of instruction. However, that increases to 22% of students who leave when the 12 hours of participation are limited to one attempt. Instruction appears to have longer duration in the learners' perspective than from the program's frame of measurement. In future reports, we will be able to compare the actual administrative data collected by the state to the self reports of students. When periods of focused study outside of program participation are added to this picture, programmatic perspectives on skill development may shift significantly to reflect learners' experiences more closely.

### **LEARNING WITHOUT PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

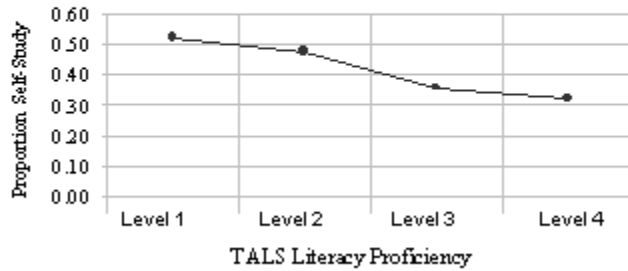
Although it is perhaps not surprising that so many individuals who participate in programs also engage in self-directed efforts to improve their basic skills and prepare for the GED, it is somewhat unexpected that such a large proportion of those who never go to programs also engage in such self-study. This suggests that a substantial reservoir of individuals may be actively trying to improve their skills, and that programs are not reaching or are unable to serve them through their current offerings. Perhaps new conceptions of how to support and enhance such independent learning (through the use of distance technologies and new media, for example) will better connect these learners with adult education programs.

### **SELF-STUDY AND LITERACY PROFICIENCY**

The ability to study on one's own may depend on having certain levels of basic skills. The surprisingly high rate of self-study found in the LSAL population may be related to the study populations' relatively high levels of literacy proficiency. The LSAL population, by definition, is comprised entirely of high school dropouts who have not passed the GED. They do, however, have relatively high levels of literacy proficiency as measured by the Test of Adult Literacy Skills (TALS), which are the scales used in many familiar state, national, and international adult literacy assessments (Kirsch et al. 1993; OECD, 1995). Figure 1 plots the percentage of individuals reporting previous self-study as a function of their assessed TALS literacy proficiency.<sup>2</sup> Instead of the expected finding that individuals with higher skills are more likely to engage in self-study, the figure shows the opposite. Individuals with higher skill levels are less

likely to have engaged in self-study efforts to improve their skills or prepare for the GED. Individuals at the lowest levels of skill are the most likely to engage in such self-study efforts; about half of the LSAL population functioning at the lowest proficiency level (level 1) has previously engaged in such self-study activities.

Figure 1. **Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency**



### PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND LITERACY PROFICIENCY

Literacy proficiency may affect not only self-directed learning of basic skills but also participation and learning within basic skills programs. LSAL data show a clear negative association between students' assessed literacy proficiency and their evaluations of program effectiveness. Table 2 shows that those who are most satisfied with their adult education have lower literacy proficiency scores than those reporting that programs did not help to improve their skills.

Table 2. **Program satisfaction and literacy proficiency**

| Extent to which programs helped improve skills | %  | Literacy Proficiency* |
|--|----|-----------------------|
| Not at all                                     | 25 | 290                   |
| Somewhat                                       | 44 | 281                   |
| A great deal                                   | 31 | 267                   |

\* TALS scores. <sup>2</sup>

Our interpretation of such data will be more definitive after we have directly measured changes in individuals' skills over time. Until then, a tentative interpretation of these baseline data is that local adult education programs appear to assist students within a relatively narrow range of

literacy proficiency. Students coming in with skills above this range may not be well served.

Is there a relationship between the lower satisfaction with programs and the lower rates of self-study we observed among people with higher literacy proficiency? We might reasonably surmise that dissatisfaction with programs leads people to build on their established skills by studying on their own as an alternative to formal education. However, the data show that those who said that programs helped “not at all” were significantly less likely to engage in self-study than students who answered that programs helped improve their skills “a great deal.” Even after we take literacy proficiency into account,<sup>3</sup> there is a positive relationship between self-study and program satisfaction: those students who have also self-studied report that formal programs assisted them more in improving their skills. To understand what this relationship is about, we need to examine data from subsequent years, in which we will have additional information about changing patterns of self-study, program participation, and assessed literacy proficiencies.

## IMPLICATIONS

Data from the LSAL may encourage new ideas about adult education students and new models of programs to serve them. Increasing our knowledge about the extent to which individuals who never attend formal programs undertake self-study to improve basic skills and prepare for the GED is part of what we have to learn. These results bring to mind learners who are already engaged and might be served by programs through distance technologies and new media, even though they may not be able or interested in attending programs. As the LSAL continues to document changes in individuals’ literacy proficiency and practices over time, the contributions of program participation and self-study to literacy development should become clearer. By measuring development over time, it will be possible to determine whether individuals with higher literacy proficiency choose different methods of skill development than those with lower scores and which strategies for development are more effective than others. Feedback from Focus on Basics readers about your interpretation of these findings is welcome, as we continue to design and analyze future waves of data.

<sup>1</sup>This particular analysis excludes periods of participation current at the time of the first interview, since such periods by definition would not yet be complete.

<sup>2</sup>The TALS Document Literacy proficiency is plotted in the proficiency ranges typically reported, with level 1 the lowest and level 5 the highest. On a 500 point scale, level 1 is 0–

225, level 2 is 226–276, level 3 is 276 to 325, level 4 is 326 to 375 and level 5 is 376 to 500. See Kirsh et al., 1993, for a description of these proficiency levels.

<sup>3</sup>Statistical models were used to examine the three-way relationship among literacy proficiency, self-study, and program participation.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Reading Assigned for Session Three on Instructional Modes 

## Solving Problems with Computer–Assisted Instruction at the East Texas Literacy Council

Snowden, K. (2000) Solving problems with computer-assisted instruction at the East Texas Literacy Council. *Focus on Basics*, 4(C), 29–32

***Computer-assisted instruction helped solve scheduling problems and build community among learners and volunteers.***

*The East Texas Literacy Council was established in 1987 in Longview, in the heart of east Texas. An affiliate of both Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach Literacy Action, we cover Gregg County, which includes the city of Longview and surrounding rural communities. In 1999, together with 158 community volunteers, we served 554 adult learners. Over the years, as our student numbers grew dramatically, we had become frustrated by how long it took to match a tutor with a student: almost three months. The students were even more frustrated and began to drop out. We were also concerned about the intensity of instruction our students were receiving. For some, two hours a week was all that their stressful, busy schedules would allow. But many others wanted more instructional time. We felt that both concerns could be addressed by the development of a computer-assisted learning center. They could.*

Computer-assisted instruction has been an integral part of our services since 1992. Using computer-assisted instruction, students may begin their program of study immediately without having to wait for an available tutor or class, and may significantly increase their hours of instructional time each month. Now, working with a tutor, in the learning center, and attending classes, students may log upwards of 20 hours of instructional time a month.

We offer two programs: basic literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). In the basic literacy program, we match students one-on-one with trained volunteers to help them learn to read. In the ESOL program, we offer English classes in a family literacy format. Once students transition out of either the literacy or ESOL program, they may study for the tests of General Educational Development (GED) working one-on-one with staff or a tutor in pre-GED and GED materials. In addition, we offer workplace literacy classes for both basic literacy and ESOL students. These classes are held at our office or at the workplace, depending on the needs of students and their employers.

When potential students come to us we first help them identify their educational goals. Based on their goals, we determine which

program (basic literacy or ESOL) will be most appropriate. Once placed in programs, we work with them to create individualized learning plans designed specifically to address their immediate educational needs and help them meet their long-term goals. While each student's learning plan is unique in content, all learning plans include computer-assisted instruction in combination with classes or one-on-one tutoring.

All students enrolled at the Council have the opportunity to work on assignments in a 10-station networked computer learning center. Literacy students use educational software packages designed to help them improve their basic skills. We are in the process of upgrading our networked, basic literacy software. ESOL students use The Rosetta Stone, a program published by Fairfield Technologies. We found this program to be affordable, flexible to student levels, and enjoyable to use. A variety of other educational software is available in the learning center including math games, vocabulary builders, and even a typing tutor. In addition, we have an independent, single-user workstation where a student may study for his or her GED examination, independently or in conjunction with staff or a tutor, using the Pre-GED 2001 and GED 2001 educational software published by Steck-Vaughn. The learning center and GED workstation are open and available to students during our regular office hours and two nights a week. Currently the learning center, including the GED workstation, averages 600 hours of use per month, with an average of seven students in the lab at any one time.

### **OFF-SITE OPTION**

Students need not come to our office to use computer-assisted instruction; however we have taken the technology to the students. In the ESOL program, some students attend English classes offsite at locations throughout Gregg County. In addition to ESOL classes for adults, childcare and children's activities for children ages three to 11 are offered at all sites. In these programs, adult students and their children can study in a portable learning center equipped with eight lap top computers. While adults are in class, children use the computers. We have taken these labs and classes to churches and schools that our clients or their children are already attending. This allows us to introduce the computer to those most likely not to have a computer in their home or to use one in the workplace.

### **OTHER BENEFITS**

Integrating computer-assisted instruction into our program has helped us expand the instructional services we can offer our students, speed up our learner-tutor matching process, and increase the instructional hours



we offer. In addition to program benefits, we believe that the use of computer-assisted instruction has other direct benefits to students, staff, and volunteers. Students working in the learning center set their own schedules, making it possible for them to balance work and school more easily. Many of our students, especially ESOL students, have work schedules that change from week to week. This makes it difficult for them to attend a class consistently. However, because the learning center is available both days and evenings, these students are able to find times to study.

For many students, the classroom is a particularly difficult environment. Some students may not understand the social norms of American adult basic education classrooms. Others do not want anyone to know that they cannot read or speak English. Working in the learning center gives these students a chance to develop their skills independently, without the additional pressures of the classroom or potential for embarrassment.

This was certainly the case with Petra, who is in her 60s and recently immigrated to the United States from Colombia. She attended school there for three years as a child and spoke no English when she first came to us. After talking with her, we placed Petra in the learning center and a bilingual English class specifically for students who are recent immigrants and speak no English. We believed she would be comfortable in this class, where she could immediately meet other people with similar backgrounds. Far from seeing the class as an opportunity, however, Petra was too embarrassed to attend, afraid that the other students would laugh at her for being “so old” and not knowing any English. Therefore, to prepare herself to attend this class, Petra came to the learning center in the evenings and worked on improving her English using *The Rosetta Stone*. As a result of her hard work, Petra has now moved from level 0 to level 1 on the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), an ESOL evaluation tool that includes an oral interview and a reading and writing section. She is looking forward to joining a class in September.

## PEER INTERACTION

Working in the learning center gives students the chance to meet and work with other students. We have observed that as a result of this interaction, students become more cohesive as a group. For example, our ESOL learners are from many different countries. These students cannot communicate with each other in their native languages, so they must speak English to communicate with each other at all. Recently we had a trio of students who consistently studied together in the computer

learning center. One student was from Mexico, one from Israel, and one from Iran. They arrived at the Council at the same time every morning and ate lunch together at noon. They were fascinated by each other's cultures and made great strides in their English through the process of getting to know each other. This dynamic was a new one to our program; one might say that they created an impromptu student support group. This would have never happened if we had offered only one-to-one tutoring.

### **COMPUTER SKILLS**

As students study in the learning center, they learn to manipulate the computer operating system and a variety of different types of software, which helps them acquire computer literacy skills as well as increases their self-confidence. We serve a wide variety of clientele, including some severely developmentally disabled students who are referred to us through state agencies. These students have never used a computer, and some initially do not even have the coordination necessary to operate the mouse.

Harry is in his 50s and lives in a supervised group home. He has poor coordination, and the medication he takes causes his hands to shake so severely that he is unable to hold a pencil. When Harry first came to us, he was withdrawn and quiet. He was fascinated, however, by the computers, and liked to watch other students use them. When asked if he would like to learn to use the computers, he said he was "too stupid" to learn. Based on that comment alone, we were determined to help Harry learn to operate the computers. It was a slow journey but, with time, Harry has learned to operate the mouse and navigate through various software programs. He has even learned to type (albeit very slowly) and is now able to write short notes on the computer. Harry now loves coming to the learning center, and especially enjoys announcing to staff and volunteers what he would like to work on that day and later showing off his completed work.

### **BENEFITS TO STAFF**

When students enroll at the Council they are immediately assigned to the learning center as part of their individualized learning plan, prior to being matched with a tutor or placed in a class. This affords several benefits, giving staff the opportunity to

- Locate suitable tutors or classes for students without delaying their program of study

- Observe students' work habits and commitment to their individual educational programs
- Work with students individually and intensively, making it possible to assess further the students' strengths and abilities in an informal setting.

Once students have been matched with tutors or placed in classes, they are expected to continue their attendance in the learning center. This allows staff to maintain personal relationships with students and easily monitor their progress.

### **EXPANDED AND IMMEDIATE**

Another benefit to the program is instant gratification for the tutor. Following tutor training, while volunteers are waiting to be matched with students, they are encouraged to assist in the learning center. Learning center volunteers are given a software operations manual and are trained by either the literacy or ESOL program coordinator on a one-to-one basis. Volunteering in the learning center gives the new volunteer the opportunity to become immediately involved in our program without any delay following training. It gives volunteers not necessarily interested in tutoring or teaching a class the chance to work regularly with students without a long-term commitment. In addition, learning center volunteers have the opportunity to help both ESOL and literacy students, making it possible for them to get to know many students. Over time, as relationships develop, volunteers and students may "self-match" and a one-on-one tutoring relationship or even a small group may form. This is not necessarily a goal for either volunteers or students working in the learning center, but these "self-matches" evolve out of established working relationships, making it more likely for the match to succeed in the long term.

For example, Mike is a tutor in his 60s who has been volunteering with us for a number of years. He has had several successful student matches, but recently decided to volunteer in the learning center to accommodate his schedule. While volunteering in the learning center he met Ross, a student also in his 60s. These two found they had a lot in common and enjoyed meeting to talk. Mike enjoyed working with a student closer to his age, and Ross likewise enjoyed working with someone to whom he could easily relate. They now meet on a regular basis to work together: the self-made match has been successful.

## CHALLENGES

While computer-assisted instructional technology has its benefits, we have also discovered that certain challenges are involved, such as the cost of purchasing and updating equipment and software. It has taken us many years to create our learning center because the technology and its upkeep are so expensive. We saved money for three years before we could purchase our first two computers. Later we bought additional equipment with funding from community development block grants and the Junior League of Longview. Only in the past two years have we been able to purchase the equipment for our portable learning center, with funds from the GTE Corporation and the Junior League of Longview. To offset the cost of buying new equipment in the past we have accepted donations of used computers. However, in most cases we have not been able to load our software onto these older computers. We now try to avoid these well meaning in-kind contributions and purchase new equipment whenever possible.

We have also found that, because technology changes so quickly, it seems that as soon as we have it installed it is obsolete. Over the years we have had to learn to invest wisely in equipment and software, knowing it would be some time before we would be able to update. Our learning center is now almost 10 years old and we are currently seeking funding to replace our old equipment and software.

While integrating technology into our programs and services has come with certain challenges, we feel that it has helped us strengthen our program overall and made it possible for us to meet the needs of our students, volunteers, and community better. The use of technology has made it possible for us to expand our range of services and opportunities within the community, particularly with the availability of our portable learning center.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Kelley Snowden* has 12 years of university teaching experience. She was the ESOL Program Coordinator for the East Texas Literacy Council for the past two years.

## Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?

Kelly, M. (1996-97). Will cooperative learning affect GED Retention?  
North East, PA: The Pennsylvania Action Research Network.  
<http://www.learningfrompractice.org>

### 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 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 ÆD.

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**

- Do you like working in groups? Why or why not?
- Does the instructor give you enough information on the subject before moving you into groups?
- Does changing partners within a group affect its effectiveness?
- 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]

- Does working in student groups make learning new material easier?
- Do you ever use collaborative learning in another instructor's class? (Check all that apply).
- History

- Math
- Science
- Do you think collaborative learning could be successfully used in other sections? (Check all that apply).
- History
- Math
- Science
- I prefer working in a group setting.
- I am more comfortable asking another student questions than the instructor.
- Working with other students gives me confidence about my knowledge of the subject.
- Working with other students shows me different ways of approaching and solving problems.
- Other students encourage me in my classwork.
- Issues *not* relating to class are discussed in student groups.
- I receive encouragement/support in issues outside of the classroom environment.
- If I miss a class, I can depend on someone in my group to give me the work that I missed.
- Working with other students has helped me to know more people in our class than I would have without the group settings.
- Have you ever used this type of learning before this class?
- Have you tried this type of learning elsewhere?
- 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*)

- Do you ever pair or group students to work together in class?
- Do students tend to work together even if you have not specifically requested they do so?
- Do students seek each other’s opinions and/or explanations in your class? Before consulting you for instruction?
- Does there seem to be a unity among students? If so, does this camaraderie seem more obvious with this group than with former groups?
- 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%   |
| Average 1992-1996 = | 57.3% |
| 1997                | 85.7% |

## Getting into Groups

Pritza, M. (1998) Getting into groups. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), 20–22

***In Gilmer County, Georgia, a shift from individualized instruction to classes and group discussion increased student retention and participation***

*I am an instructor at the Gilmer County Adult Learning Center in Ellijay, Georgia. Gilmer County lies at the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains in the extreme north and central part of the state. Like many rural counties, Gilmer, once relatively isolated, is rapidly becoming a satellite community of a major urban area, in this case, Atlanta. Our students are a diverse group in terms of age and academic development; the youngest is 16, the oldest is 92. They range from non-readers to those who have completed the tests of General Educational Development (GED) and are studying for entrance to technical school or community college. With the exception of a dozen or so currently enrolled Hispanic students, all are Caucasians in the middle- to low-income brackets. Women outnumber men by about five to one.*

Like many others in the field of adult basic education, my colleague, Art LaChance, and I were concerned with student retention. Our drop out rate was consistently about 34 percent. About ten percent of these would enthusiastically enroll, but never return. A larger number began well but their attendance gradually tapered off until they finally disappeared without notice or explanation. A surprising number, perhaps another ten to 15 percent, were within easy reach of their goals when they suddenly and inexplicably left the program. Follow-up calls to these students did not yield results. We both felt personally and professionally frustrated by our apparent inability to keep these students engaged for the full course of the program. We knew that they were falling short of their goals, and we felt a lack of effectiveness as an organization. We wondered if we could do anything to change this pattern, or whether it was an unalterable fact of adult education. We had never looked at the problem critically, however, until we participated in a practitioner inquiry project sponsored by the University of Georgia's Department of Adult and Continuing Education in Athens. It was with this project that we really began to consider the possible causes for such high numbers of dropouts.

We began by brainstorming ideas about what we could do to increase retention. Would different methods of intake or the creation of

a weekly student orientation affect retention rates? Would awards and certificates of level completion have an impact? What about asking our students about the kinds of study and activity they preferred? We wondered about creating regularly scheduled classes in reading, writing, or math, which we didn't have at the time, or starting discussion groups based on current events. We had success with some team building and discussion-prompting activities in the past, so this idea seemed to have merit.

We then considered our students. All of them were influenced by variables over which we had no control: problems with family, money, illness, transportation, child care, and the like. Many of them told us that they had never seen education as a necessity. Even in the face of recent industry lay offs or the inability to find work, many still saw education as irrelevant. "Why," they asked, "do we have to know this stuff?"

As I mentioned, we had been offering individualized, self-paced study with instructor assistance and self-directed computer-based programs. We began to wonder whether these methods were contributing to our high attrition rate. Students had liked the few group activities we had led. Perhaps a more successful method would include greater participation from both students and instructors alike. This hunch began to take precedence over other ideas. We eliminated most of our other questions and focused on the issue of participation. Our research question became: Will group participation in structured classes and discussion groups increase student motivation and retention?

The first step in our investigation was straightforward. We asked our students to respond to a simple questionnaire about the possible instructional approaches we could use at the Center. Choices included individual study with either text materials or interactive computer programs such as PLATO (which we were already doing), study in pairs, or group study in a classroom environment. The groups would focus on language, math, and writing skills. More than 85 percent of about 50 students answered that they would prefer studying together as a group.

## **STUDENT INPUT**

We then interviewed students in more depth to determine at what point and in which subjects they felt they most needed help. We began to hold loosely organized classes two or three times a week based on the needs of the greatest number of students. We included students at all levels and left attendance to their discretion, rather than making it mandatory. Since we have two instructors, one of us was always available to those students who preferred to work individually.

Classes were at first informal and unscheduled. We would simply move around the Center and ask “Who wants to do class?” and get together for an hour or so, creating a lesson from whatever students were working on at the time. As we progressed, the classes became more structured and scheduled, though during the span of the project we were careful not to make these sessions seem unnecessarily academic or authoritarian. We did not want to re-stimulate negative past experiences, and we considered student feedback and participation to be two of the most important elements. We also began discussion groups based on topics selected by the students and on exercises from “Beyond Basic Skills,” a newsletter of classroom ideas published by the University of Georgia. These groups provided a place in which the students could talk about issues they felt were relevant to their lives, like work and personal finance. In these forums, they questioned the relevance of education, asking “How is education going to improve the quality of my life?” and “How can my life improve by learning percents and geometry?”

## **HARD QUESTIONS**

Sometimes answering these questions was hard. During our project, I kept a log of my observations and reflections. The log entries seem to be most useful in shedding light on recurrent themes about student needs and observations. In reviewing the log entries, I discovered the importance of making material relevant to students’ lives. “Today,” I wrote in my log, “Linda and Troy [names have been changed] asked why they have to learn this stuff. Can we make more money? If I say No, but your quality of life will improve,’ they ask really hard questions: How would my life improve without more money?’ There seem to be very few students who will buy the academic reasoning.”

As part of our inquiry project, we turned to attendance records for data, extracting the cumulative monthly hours of all students who were not mandated to attend and comparing them to hours of attendance in the months before the project began. The data are displayed in Figures 1 and 2. We were struck by the fact that the average number of attendance hours for non-mandated students had increased about 50 percent during the project. At first we were skeptical about such a large increase, but a review of attendance records showed the data to be correct.

Art and I interpret this data to be an indication of the success of our project, and because of this we have incorporated group classes and discussion into our present methods of instruction and curriculum presentation with some real success. Classes are full and students actually make time to include them in their daily schedules. Both the classes and

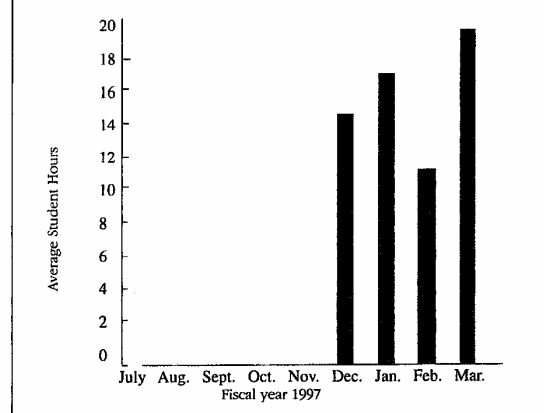
the discussion groups generate energy and enthusiasm in the students, which leads to greater participation and time spent in the program. Participation, especially in the discussion groups, is open to all students, making the classes multi-level. This exposes many of the learners to ideas and subject matter that they would not otherwise encounter and fosters student interaction. It seems to spark in some of our beginning ABE students a desire to participate further: they say they feel good about "going to class." We have noticed that class participation seems to foster study groups, with more advanced students often helping those who are less far along. Because of this, students actually seem to be spending more time involved in their studies.

**Figure 1:** The Numbers of Students and Total Hours of Student Attendance for Fiscal Year 1997. Our project was in effect from December through March. During February, no groups were held. The hours are for non-mandatory ABE students only.

| Fiscal Year 1997         | July  | Aug.   | Sept.  | Oct.   | Nov.   | Dec.   | Jan.  | Feb.   | Mar.  |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| Total Number of Students | 46    | 55     | 71     | 71     | 41     | 21     | 43    | 39     | 39    |
| Total Student Hours      | 423.5 | 632.75 | 572.25 | 604.25 | 394.75 | 299.25 | 726.0 | 448.25 | 770.0 |

Of course, this study also created some new problems and challenges. We need to recognize that many factors which influence motivation and retention are probably beyond our influence, and so concentrate on those that we feel we can help to change. As instructors, we realize that we should constantly remain open to change and to restructuring our methods of approach according to the needs of the students, both as a group and as individuals. What works one time, with one group, may not necessarily work the next. Certain constants, such as the need for relevant content, may be extrapolated from our daily work, but the solutions to the problems we encounter may vary from time to time and group to group. This has led us to believe that there is no single solution to the problems of retention and motivation, but many solutions must be applied according to the demands of the time and the needs of the students.

**Figure 2:** The Average Student Hours for Fiscal Year 1997. Project was in effect from December through March. During February, no groups were held. The hours are for non-mandatory ABE students only.





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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pritza began work in adult literacy as a volunteer with the Gilmer County Reading Program in 1992. In 1993, he accepted a position with the program, where he now serves as an ABE/GED instructor. Pritza has been involved in practitioner inquiry research since 1995, and is currently working on a degree in Alternatives in Education from Skidmore College in New York.



## Power, Literacy, and Motivation

Hart, G. (1998) Power, literacy, and motivation. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), 1, 3–5

*“Will you support the construction of an adult education center on the south side of Tucson? Please answer YES or NO.” Lina Prieto, working on her GED, the single mother of two sons, put the question to each city council member and each county supervisor as they stepped up to the microphone. It was September, 1996, and 2,000 people in the auditorium waited for each to answer. An occasional “grito” (shout) rose up out of the crowd. Even the children waited intently beside their parents, aware that something unusual was happening. Signs demanding support for adult education lined the huge room at the Tucson Convention Center and bobbed above the crowd. The politicians stepped up to the microphone one at a time to answer her. “Yes!” “Yes!” “Yes!” Eleven times “Yes!”, eleven times a huge eruption of shouting from the crowd, and on the last “Yes!” we rose to our feet and raucously celebrated victory. We—immigrants, drop outs, single mothers on welfare, minimum-wage workers, under-paid part-time adult educators—hugged one another, waved our signs, and gave “high fives” all around. The politicians looked out with wonder over the scene until they, too, were engulfed by the thrill loose in the room. A building for adult education was going to be built, for sure, but this jubilation was about more than that. It was about power.*

At Pima County Adult Education (PCAE), we have come to believe that literacy is a means to greater power and personal freedom, not an end in itself. It is the prospect of achieving power and not the concept of literacy that truly motivates both students and teachers. Lina Prieto, the other adult education students who had spoken before her, and the audience itself were acting with intent to influence their own destinies and their community. Literacy had helped them to act, but the excitement and satisfaction they felt arose from the knowledge that they were, in those moments, powerful.

My colleagues and I at PCAE have grown weary of working with people desperate to change their lives, only to contend with the fact that from one year to the next about 50 percent of PCAE’s 10,000 students drop out before achieving their learning goals. We know that the reasons for that are numerous and complex, and that many are associated with what it means to be poor. We also know that some students leave because what we are able to offer as a program simply doesn’t appeal to them. We believe that many students sense what some adult educators already know: that our own status as adult educators relative to other public

educational institutions is a mirror image of their own powerlessness. We think that far too many conclude that getting a GED or learning to read at a higher level probably won't change their lives, and, painful as it is to admit, at PCAE we believe they may be right.

### **AN INVESTMENT**

We held a series of formal and informal meetings and discussions throughout 1992 and 1993, some in the context of a series of day-long staff retreats. As a result, we decided to invest time, energy, and money to introduce the potential for power and civic engagement in an integrated way into our curriculum. We did this to motivate students to use and respect literacy as a tool of action rather than to regard it as a concept unrelated to the reality of their lives and their powerlessness. We also did it to motivate ourselves through deepening our commitment to the meaning and potential of our work as adult educators. The philosophies and practices of Myles Horton, the great plain-speaking American adult educator, and, to a lesser degree, his friend, the great and courageous Paulo Freire, provided fodder for our discussions and models for our actions.

An experience in 1988, when PCAE students and staff staged a large public demonstration that led to a 200 percent increase in funding, had taught us something important: students and adult educators changed when they felt they had some say in their lives. Students involved in planning and organizing the demonstration stayed involved with the program for years, some as paid teaching aides. Teachers involved in and inspired by the powerful impact on themselves and their students grew increasingly discontent with the standard academic, skills-based curriculum that, despite endless tinkering, never seemed to have an impact on attrition levels.

Despite that previous experience, however, we still didn't know how to introduce and sustain ongoing discussions with our students about power. We weren't entirely sure how to identify issues of common concern or how to organize broad-based civic actions and interventions designed to address them, or how we would connect all of that to the adult education classroom. We needed help to proceed. We got it, from the Pima County Interfaith Council (PCIC), an organization associated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), founded in the 1940s by the late organizer and radical Saul Alinsky. The PCIC worked originally with faith-based constituencies and a few secular institutions to research issues of importance to the Tucson community, especially those affecting the poor. Some of the issues coming to light based on PCIC's work included

lack of child care and transportation, inadequate job training for living-wage jobs, low wages, latch-key children, and the disintegration of families, neighborhoods, and schools. PCIC's lead organizer and I began to meet and form the basis for a working partnership that recognized mutual interests. With PCIC's help and guidance and PCAE's commitment of training, staff time, and leadership—including the creation of the position of Coordinator for Civics and Citizenship—we began to convene forums and one-to-one meetings for students and staff to identify issues affecting their lives.

During these forums and one-to-one meetings, student and staff leaders began to emerge. Issues such as low wages, gang and crime-burdened neighborhoods, and parents' sense of disconnection from their children's schools came to the fore. At times with and at times without teacher guidance, small groups of students began to research issues. Their research included the analysis of public policy documents, the development of effective questions and agendas for meetings with public officials, the preparation of speeches and position papers, and learning how to reach consensus on strategy and conclusions through dialogue. The use of high level literacy skills was, of necessity, essential to all of these tasks. Training for staff and students also included public speaking skills, the mechanics of presenting at large public meetings, and conducting smaller group meetings with public officials and others. In fact, most of these activities were pointed towards meetings with public officials, of which there were eventually many. Student and staff skills were tested and refined during those encounters.

Under the guidance of the Civics and Citizenship Coordinator, six student leaders took paid positions with PCAE as student advocates and student mentors. Their responsibility included, among other things, assisting student councils and identifying other students with leadership potential. Eventually, a core group of about 40 students and staff formed a group called the "Friends and Students of Adult Education." They continue to meet regularly and to take an active and public role in issues of concern to adult education students and adult education in general.

Staff and student participation in this civic process was and remains a matter of self selection at PCAE. Individuals determine whether or not they want to be involved and their level of involvement. They demonstrate their interest through attendance at meetings and their willingness to volunteer for assignments such as research, meetings with public officials, or disseminating and explaining information to other students and staff. At any given time at PCAE, we may have 25 or so student leaders who are actively involved and a few of hundred who stay

informed by attending student council meetings and meetings of the “Friends and Students.”

In the beginning of our relationship with PCIC, some of our approximately 170 staff were immediately interested, and others were skeptical. Some of those who were most cautious have since become ardent proponents of civic involvement. Others were ambivalent at the inception, and remain that way to this day. Everyone had questions and concerns: Is this type of civic involvement appropriate for an educational program? Might we lose our funding if we antagonize the powers that be or get caught up in partisan politics? Does PCIC have a hidden religious agenda? Will my job be threatened if I choose not to participate? Today, most teachers appear to be comfortable or are becoming more comfortable with PCAE’s efforts to link adult literacy education with the notion of power. Clark Atkinson, a teacher with more than 25 years of varied experience as an adult educator and a strong advocate for teachers’ rights, was one of the most dubious at the outset of our involvement. He said recently that he believes that our work with civic engagement has been the most important thing PCAE has ever done.

We have had a number of outward successes based on the issues identified and addressed by students and staff. They include hosting the candidates for Governor and State Superintendent of Public Instruction in our classrooms, where they were challenged to publicly commit and demonstrate support for adult education. This later materialized into a statewide family literacy initiative. Adult education students played pivotal roles in the development of a city-wide program that nearly doubled the number of after-school programs for elementary-age children. In partnership with teachers, they have formed a non-profit corporation called Adults for Community Transformation (ACT). They confronted powerful local bureaucrats over the placement of a swimming pool at a local neighborhood center instead of a long promised adult education center. Ultimately, they got not one facility, but two. They worked with staff and parents at a troubled high school to create a jobs program for students that is now being lauded and duplicated throughout the city. Hundreds of students studied interviewing skills and participated in a walking canvass of some of the city’s more troubled neighborhoods and later helped to present the results to the City Council and the County Board of Supervisors. Working with some of the city’s most influential political and business leaders, they have been instrumental in the creation of a new job training strategy that guarantees employer-pledged, living-wage jobs with a career path. In the spring of 1997, students worked with the Board of Supervisors to get \$2.25 million included for adult education buildings in a county bond issue. After the

bonds passed in a very tight election, 500 attended a County Board of Supervisors meeting in July of 1997 to successfully request that the money be allocated ahead of schedule.

These successes speak for themselves. But what about the impact on students, their learning, and their willingness to stay involved? Skills of involved individuals have certainly grown. Right now, our attrition rate remains about the same, and we report about the same number of student goals achieved as in the past. And, there has been a price to pay: power generates opposition. Former allies, both individuals and institutions, have grown distant and, in some cases, inimical, as they perceive that their interests and their access to resources may be threatened by an active adult education constituency competing for those same resources. The risk is real that in questing for power we might lose some, or, in the worst case, all of our ability to even offer educational programs. We might lose our jobs, too. We also clearly recognize another risk: that we as teachers, i.e., the literate, might exploit students. That possibility requires constant vigilance and introspection. The buildings we have won, for example, cannot just end up being nicer places to work for adult educators; they must serve and strengthen the adult learner community. We must be vigilant also that PCAE itself is not similarly exploited by the IAF or PCIC for their own purposes.

We will not understand the full impact of our work for many years to come. We have shown ourselves that linking literacy education with the notion of power transforms the perspectives and motivations of educators and students alike. We have seen people's lives and the lives of their families change. When GED student Lina Prieto, who questioned city and county officials, speaks powerfully to a room of 2,000 people, she knows she has the ability to influence the direction of her community: she has power. Her seven-year-old son sitting in the audience sees it, too. When teachers see students involved in the civic process, they recognize that they themselves are engaged in meaningful work: they have power. When government officials see that the community they serve has a voice, they see that power belongs rightfully to the people. For the people at PCAE involved in this process, adult literacy education, and power will never rightfully be separate from one another again.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Greg Hart* is the director of Pima County Adult Education in Tucson, Arizona.





Reading Assigned for Session Three on Student Involvement 

## Build Motivation by Building Learner Motivation

Garner, B. (1998) Build motivation by building learner motivation. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), 11–12

*The Goodwill Learning Center in Seattle is in an enviable position: supported by Goodwill Industries and private grants, it is not dependent upon government funds. The staff are free to experiment. Students suggest courses, and those with special skills teach them to others. The current roster of classes includes traditional topics such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), math, reading, writing, and preparation for the tests of General Educational Development (GED). At the students' suggestion, the roster also includes public speaking, passing the written driving exam, small business, and cash English. In cash English, students learn the standard spoken English they need to succeed in the formal economy.*

Director Pat Russell-Sims feels that participation motivates students, builds their confidence, and opens them to new vistas. At the Goodwill Learning Center, participation comes in two forms. It can mean being involved with the general running of the school; it can also mean being involved with other students. Learners, who include those studying ESOL and all levels of adult basic education (ABE), participate in hiring staff and in setting organizational policy. The students in each class determine their own rules; for example, students decide whether snacks can be eaten during class, whether children can be brought to class, and whether homework should be given. There's a peer tutoring program, and four of the Center's staff of seven are former students, which indicates that student involvement works.

Despite the Center's commitment to the concept, building student participation isn't easy. A student council started a number of years ago by a small group of active students provided the Center with a way to get student input. The group didn't grow, however, and when the core members graduated, it faltered.

To complement the work of the student council, another group of students started a newsletter. They write, lay out, and circulate the two-page publication. Students get copies in their mailboxes every week or so. It is entitled the *Goodwill Community Learning Center Student Newsletter, News By, For, and About Students*.

To further increase student participation in the overall running of the school, the Learning Center has instituted quarterly all-school

meetings for the students. “We thought about calling them ‘assemblies,’” explains Marvin Lewis, a former student and now an Americorps volunteer responsible for student involvement, “but assemblies means high school, and lots of people don’t like that.” To prevent classes from being interrupted, the first two meetings did not coincide with class time. Of approximately 175 students enrolled at the time, about 55 attended each of the first two meetings. They broke up into small groups to generate suggestions about how to improve the Center. Their lists included a request for child care and more computer classes; the administration is looking into the feasibility of both. Another request, for more ESOL classes, was fulfilled almost immediately.

Not happy with the attendance at all-school meetings, the Learning Center is experimenting with ways to increase it. They’re particularly concerned with attracting night students. Now, all school meetings are held during regular class time. The Center will hold two meetings a quarter, one during the day and one in the evening, so students who go to class in the evening can attend. They serve food: donuts, croissants, bagels, fruit, and juice.

To broaden ownership of the meetings, responsibility for facilitation rotates. “A lot of students bring a lot of experience with them—from church or other places,” Lewis points out, and the Center runs a public speaking class, so finding students to facilitate isn’t hard. Lewis works with the facilitators, helping them prepare for the meeting.

Lewis is an example of a student whose motivation was enhanced by being given the opportunity to participate in the running of his school. He shares his story with us here. He would be the first to admit that, while building learner participation is not easy, it can be effective.

### **A Learner’s Story**

by Marvin Lewis

Looking back, my first memories as a learner come from home. There were always books around. Momma and ‘Deddy’ had the biggest; they were the Bible. My older brother and sisters introduced school books to me. I had good models for early childhood reading and writing. I was read to a lot by all family members. I was well-rooted in reading and writing before I hit kindergarten.

On the first day of school, Dick and Jane was read to the whole class by yours truly. That’s only because I learned from my sister. As for forces working against me, well, when you are the only Black person in

your class from grades three through six: well, use your imagination. Kids can be mean at times; sometimes it was me. Once you get called a slur you're not really concentrating on the classroom, you're concentrating on retaliating.

I was working at Goodwill Industries when I decided to take classes at Goodwill Community Learning Center. It had been 18 years since I graduated from high school. While working, it hit me that unless I improved my education I would continue to be in dead end jobs since all I had were labor skills. So I started taking classes.

My family and friends were very supportive. They thought it was wonderful. The atmosphere was good. The Learning Center let me work at my own pace. What I liked the most about it was how the students were given the opportunity to have a major say in things.

Then I became a peer teacher. I helped with sharing information, getting information from everyone in the class. I really can't remember how they figured I had an interest in doing this. I think they asked me.

Of course, I got discouraged because it was new to me. But fortunately, a staff person shared with me that discouragement along with frustration is a learning process. As for quitting, it entered my mind, but I was immediately snapped back into reality by looking into my children's eyes.

The advice that I would share with staff and program directors would be this: don't fake the funk. That means don't pretend with the students. We can see right through it.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Marvin Lewis* is the seventh son of 16 children. His parents moved from Louisiana to Washington in 1952. He is the father of three children and an American Red Cross volunteer in disaster relief. As an Americorps volunteer, he is in his second year as a student organizer at the Goodwill.



## Staying in a Literacy Program

Willard, A. (1998) Staying in a literacy program. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), 13–15

*I was 54 years old when I got started in a literacy program. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I had struggled all my life with my reading and had been told so many times that I could not learn to read. That had always bothered me. Deep down inside, I thought I could do better than what others had said about me. Getting started in a reading program was one of the best things I have ever done for myself. After my first reading lesson I told myself, "I'm going to try to make a difference in the literacy field."*

When I was five years old and started kindergarten I was right in the middle of everything at school. I was eager to learn. Sometime in the first grade when I had my first reading lesson, things changed. I really struggled in that lesson. From then on the teacher's voice seemed different when she talked to me. When the other children in my class did things, I was not included anymore. So, when we had reading class, I just sat down in my seat and tried not to be noticed. I would be so worried about being called on to read that I lost the concentration that I needed as well as the content of the lesson. I lived in fear, thinking I was not good enough to learn how to read. It was not long after that first reading lesson that I gave up on being a formal learner. Then, after time went by, I became angry because I was being left out of the mainstream of life. I didn't want to be an angry person, but it just happened.

I faintly remember that there were some meetings between my mother and someone from the school. But this was the 1930's, and no one understood learning disabilities then. If you were not learning to read, you were looked at as a dummy. My mother could not read very well and she could not help me with my school work. As I look at my dyslexia and my symptoms I can see some of these same symptoms in my mother's life. I now feel that she must have been dyslexic, too. My father could read quite well but he was a conductor on the Chicago Northwestern Railroad and he worked ten to 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. He did not have the time or energy to help me. My parents were kind to me and encouraged me to do the best that I could do in school. There was a lot of love in our home and it was a place where I could escape from all the frustration at school.

My teacher placed me in the back of the room away from the rest of the students. I was in a room full of other students, but I felt like I was there all alone. I was passed from grade to grade. I graduated from high school, and because I did well in football I attended college and I played football there for two years. Then I was told that I could no longer stay in school because my grades were not good enough. When I left school, I took a lot of frustration and anger with me.

I then went to work for Hormel Packing Company. I worked with my hands and did not need to know how to read. I married, and my wife and I had one child, a daughter. Hormel was a good company to work for and my family got along fine financially. I worked there for 31 years until the plant closed and I received early retirement.

One day in 1984, my wife read a newspaper article about Bruce Jenner, who had won a gold medal in the 1976 Olympics. The article told about his athletic achievements, but it also told about his being dyslexic. My wife suggested that the “symptoms” of dyslexia that Bruce Jenner exhibited could have been a description of me. That story started me thinking that maybe I had a learning disability. Maybe I wasn’t a dummy, after all, as I had been told so many times at school! I was motivated to be tested to see if I had a learning disability. I then went to the University of Iowa Hospitals and was diagnosed as having dyslexia. I was elated to finally know that there was a reason why I had struggled to learn to read.

I decided that I was going to seek reading help and, at age 54, enrolled in an adult reading program at Iowa Central Community College to make changes in my life and to try again. I wanted a quick fix. I hoped that I could learn to read in three to six weeks, then leave the program and never look back. Of course it never happened that way. It had been 34 years since I had been in school and it was hard to get over the hump and get started again. After the experiences from my school years, I came into the program with a lot of frustration and was defensive. I would rather be looked at as someone who didn’t care about learning to read than someone who cannot learn to read. Until I saw the program and tutor as non-threatening, I could not start learning to read again.

My tutor was a retired adult basic education program administrator. She had never tutored anyone before. She worked with me from her heart. She was not going to let me get out of this program without teaching me to read. She asked me to do reading outside of class. I did not want to be seen at the public library getting books that were at my reading level, so I read 26 Nancy Drew books which my daughter had collected when she was a young girl.

My tutor had an ability to look at me and see the little things that could keep me going in the program. We started each lesson talking about things that had happened in the world since our last lesson. Sometimes we would read from the newspaper to help in our discussion. She helped involve me in what was happening in our community. Every second Thursday, the public library held noon programs with presentations about various topics. After our lesson on those days, she and I would take sack lunches and go to these presentations. My tutor became someone I could call “friend.” Because of this friendship, I felt comfortable in this reading program and I wanted to work harder to improve my reading.

One of the most important things my tutor did for me was to enable me to function in my new job. Although I had received early retirement from Hormel Packing Company, this retirement pay was not going to keep a family of three going without some supplemental income. I still needed to work. It was hard to find a job for someone over 50 who couldn’t read. I feel that because my wife helped fill out my application and I did well in my interview, I got a job as an insurance adjuster with Farmers Mutual Hail Insurance Company. This job was extremely hard for me to do, but my tutor helped me learn how to spell words that were used in insurance. We practiced writing insurance reports. Because of her help I was able to work for this company for 14 years.

About a year after I got into my reading program, when I was ready to do more, my tutor got me involved in other parts of the program. I did public speaking, I told my life story to schools, I was on the advisory board for the reading program, I went to a support group, I helped plan the first Iowa State Literacy Congress, and I grew from all this. All of this involvement also helped me to keep going. I began to feel good about what I was doing. The more I reached out, the more confidence I gained. I became open about having dyslexia.

My tutor then encouraged me to find out more about my learning disability, dyslexia. I attended an Iowa State Orton Dyslexia Conference. I learned that 70 to 80 percent of the adults who seek reading help have some kind of a learning disability. I went to more conferences to learn more, and began meeting and networking with people who were professionals in the learning disability field. I heard researcher Dr. Albert Galberta tell about his work and how cells (ectopic cells) get misplaced in the development of the brains of dyslexics, which causes us to have processing problems. Again, I subconsciously heard, “You are not a dummy! You can learn, but you learn differently.”

I stayed in my reading program for two and a half years. Many things kept me going. Initially, perhaps the most important motivation to me was that I wanted to prove to myself and the rest of the world that I was not a dummy. This motivation led to learning which led to more motivation to learn more... Somehow I got a spark in my life and I became a formal learner again. Another thing that helped me was to stand up and say, "I'm an adult learner." This forced me to set standards for myself because others were watching me as an adult who was learning to read. My wonderful tutor, my understanding of dyslexia, my involvement in literacy issues, the discovery of who I am, were some of the things that motivated me. The chemistry in my home helped to keep me going. I got all the encouragement and support I could want from my wife and daughter who was a senior in high school at the time. I knew that had I not sought reading help, my family would have been very disappointed. My learning to read was so important to my daughter, that when she went off to college at the University of Iowa, she became a volunteer tutor to teach adults to read at nearby Kirkwood Community College. She then organized other college students to become tutors and they helped other adults to read.

Twelve years have passed. I am not an adult literacy student anymore, but I continue to learn. I have kept up on what the latest research has found in the field of learning disabilities. I have traveled many miles advocating for literacy. I have attended Individual Educational Plan meetings at the request of parents. I'm on three different literacy boards. I have continued to do public speaking about adult literacy and about dyslexia. This has taken me to schools, universities, national conferences, and churches. I have had the opportunity to go to Eastern Europe in 1993 and in 1995 to study how learning disabilities are dealt with there. I now work as an adult literacy coordinator for Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Each fall I teach an adult education class at several Iowa community colleges about understanding learning disabilities. In 1996 I completed a fellowship with The National Institute for Literacy.

Last summer, five other adult learners and I organized and conducted a leadership workshop for adult learners at Illinois State University. The six of us are now working with mentors to plan a March 1998 meeting at the Highlander Retreat near Knoxville, Tennessee, to form an adult learner national organization. I have a passion to bring adult learners together and to help them find themselves in life and to continue to make a difference in literacy.



## Peer Tutors/Mentors: Effect on Motivation and Persistence in GED Classroom

Guglielmi, K. and Dzekevich, G. (1999) Peer tutors/mentors: Effect on motivation and persistence in the GED classroom. *Adult Education Teacher Inquiry Projects, 1998-99.*

[www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer\\_Center/Literacy\\_Resources/crans.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/crans.html)

### INTRODUCTION

Student retention continues to be a major concern for adult educators. Students come to our programs for a variety of reasons (i.e. personal satisfaction, employer required, prior to job training, etc.) but frequently leave prior to completion of their intended goals.

When we examined the reasons for dropout in our programs, the authors found that a lack of intrinsic motivation, feelings of low self-efficacy, and situational barriers are the major factors for student dropout. It is these factors that we address in our action research project through the use of a peer/mentor tutor in a GED classroom.

### BACKGROUND

#### Motivation

Increasingly, students are attending GED classes because they are required to get a GED in order to participate in job training programs. In many cases, these students are in the process of moving from welfare-to-work and are feeling the pressure of the mandate. Because these students are required to attend, that is, they are extrinsically motivated to attend, they are more at risk of dropping out than a student who is intrinsically motivated to attend (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). As adult educators, we must find ways to help students move from being extrinsically motivated to attend to being intrinsically motivated to persist and achieve their goals.

#### Self-efficacy

Many students voice their feelings of low self-efficacy in relation to their successful completion of the GED program. Much research exists that supports the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance and persistence (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Research also shows that self-efficacy influences motivation by determining goals

people set for themselves, how much effort they expend to reach those goals, how long they persevere in the face of difficulty, and their resilience to failures (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1993; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Schunk, 1983). As adult educators, our task is to assist students in seeing themselves as successful learners who are able to achieve their goals.

### Situational Barriers

Our students report lack of time, lack of childcare, work responsibilities, and lack of support from family and friends most frequently as barriers to their persistence. We as adult educators must assist students in ways to overcome the barriers that inhibit their persistence and goal completion.

The question is then, can we as adult educators improve retention by addressing a student's issues of extrinsic motivation, low self-efficacy, and situational barriers to persistence? Our approach to this problem was to utilize a peer tutor/mentor in the classroom as a model of success for the students. Our idea was that if students had a person in the classroom to help them that was a graduate of a GED program, who had issues with motivation, self-efficacy, and situational barriers themselves, they would see a model of persistence that was meaningful to them.

### Peer Mentor/Tutor

We chose a recent graduate of a GED program to participate in our project as a peer/mentor tutor. We explained the reasons behind the project and the required time commitment. Our peer/mentor tutor was thrilled at the prospect of being asked to participate and readily agreed. For purposes of this paper, we will refer to her as Jeanette.<sup>1</sup> We trained Jeanette for approximately six hours beginning in December of 1998. She was exposed to principles of adults as learners, and mentoring and peer tutoring activities. She joined the class in January for one night each week. (the class meets for two hours, two nights per week). She remained in class through the first week of June when the program ended for the summer. Jeanette was introduced to current and entering students (we operate on a rolling entry/exit system) as someone who was there to help them in both their studies and with details about the program, the testing process, and with graduation information. Jeanette worked one-on-one with students who had subject-matter questions while the instructor was working with other students. She also talked with them about her experience as a student who was trying to work full-time and study. She explained the testing process to them and helped ease their fears about taking the tests. She brought in her framed diploma, and pictures from the graduation ceremony to show students the excitement of finishing

their program. She provided a kind of support for the students that only a peer who had “been there” could provide.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Research was conducted on an on-going basis (as is typical of action research) via qualitative methods. Participant observation was the main data collection tool. One of the researchers was the classroom teacher and worked closely with Jeanette. The researcher/teacher kept notes of her observations of the interactions between Jeanette and the students she worked with. In addition, the researcher/teacher conducted semi-structured interviews with Jeanette, the students who worked with Jeanette, and held a telephone interview with Jeanette’s employer. This data was analyzed throughout the data collection process as to the effectiveness of the peer mentor/tutor–student relationship.

## **FINDINGS**

Of the 12 students that were in class when Jeanette joined as peer mentor/tutor, 6 graduated with a GED in June. Of the remaining 6 students, 3 continued to work toward completion and plan to return to class in the fall of 1999. Three students dropped out for unknown reasons. The researcher/teacher interviewed the 6 students who remained in class. The students were asked about the effectiveness of the peer tutor/mentor in the classroom, how she helped them during class, and the results of that relationship. Without exception, every student claimed to be positively affected by the relationship with Jeanette. They reported that it was helpful to have another person in the classroom who could help them one-on-one with their studies, who could give them information about the experience of getting a GED, who could talk to them about the testing process, and who could get them excited about graduation. Many of them felt that Jeanette helped bring a social atmosphere to class that kept them excited about coming back to class week after week. They said that she helped them see that it was “doable,” that they too could get their diploma. When asked if they felt that having Jeanette had an impact on their retention, they all responded positively.

The result of the interview with Jeanette was that the experience had a very positive effect on her self-confidence and her self-esteem. She reported feeling “great” that she had been asked to do this in the first place, that someone had enough confidence in her ability to help other people. She also reported getting great satisfaction when she was able to help a student in their studies and when she saw that they appreciated having her there. When asked if she would like to continue in the role as a peer mentor/tutor, she was hesitant at first but agreed. Her hesitance

came from the fact that she is wary of giving a student the wrong answer or not being able to help them with difficult math problems. In essence, the “tutor” part of her mentor/tutor role makes her somewhat unsure of herself. She explained that although she was hesitant, she would spend the summer studying so she would be prepared to meet the students subject-matter needs next year.

While interviewing Jeannette, it came out that her boss had praised her job performance and had commented that he noticed it had improved since she had been involved in this program. The researcher asked Jeannette if a conversation with her employer would be possible. Arrangements were made for a telephone conversation between the researcher and Jeannette’s employer. The result of that conversation was that Jeannette’s employer has noticed that she has an increased level of self-confidence that spills over into her work. He reported that she has come out of her shell” is “eager to do more on the job” and is now always “looking to do more things”. He told the researcher that recently he needed to send a company representative to Florida to take part in a court case involving fraud against the company. He was unable to attend, as was another manager, so Jeannette offered to go and handle the case. Her boss was amazed and readily agreed. He has always been pleased with Jeannette’s job performance (she has worked with him for 20+ years), but he is particularly pleased with her new level of commitment to the company. This finding was an unexpected, positive outcome of the project.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The results of this action research project have helped the researcher/teachers to see an approach to help students become intrinsically motivated to persist, achieve a higher level of self-efficacy, and see ways around the situational barriers students face. Obviously, this approach to assisting students will not work with all students, but we are encouraged that it did positively affect 80% of the students in the class under study. It should be mentioned also that another student in class, who did graduate, approached the researcher/teacher about becoming a peer tutor/mentor next year. She felt such benefit from the relationship that she wanted to become part of the program as well. This fact, combined with the positive results to the class, help the researchers see the benefit that can be derived with other students by providing them another person who can help them on a level that the instructor can not. Only someone who has “been there” can get through to many of our students. This project has been personally and professionally rewarding to the researcher/teachers and is one that they hope to continue with in the future.

**NOTE**

<sup>1</sup>Jeannette is actually Gladys Dumas, who gave this report at the final sharing session, and has given permission for it to be reproduced here:

Hi, my name is Gladys Dumas. I'd like to tell you how one year and a G.E.D. can make a big difference. Last year I decided it was time to get my G.E.D., so I went to the Arlington School and started filling out the pre-test and thought, "Oh my God. I'm 43 years old... how can I do this? What if I fail?" At this point, I know I would not be going back. That was when I got my first lesson. A caring teacher's lesson ... Kathy, to be exact. She helped me to believe in myself. I began studying in late January and finished in early May. At that time I earned my G.E.D. and was so happy. After that, things got even better. Kathy called me at work and asked me to help her with a new program and I said, "Yes." It has been so rewarding and has helped me in many ways.

I now have more confidence in myself. My boss has even told me that he has seen a big change in me. The biggest reward, however, is helping the other students and seeing the look on their faces when they get the correct answer. The reward is knowing that you were a part of it when a student thanks you for all of your help and confides personal things about themselves, or tells you why receiving their diploma is so important to them. This makes you want to help even more. There were times when Kathy would be teaching math classes and students would ask for my help. To know that they had that much confidence in me made me proud to be there. I shared with them how it felt to walk across the stage and receive your diploma which made them more interested. I brought in my diploma and pictures of my own graduation night to show them that it really does happen. I could not believe all the questions they had for me after that. Each week they had more and more questions for me about Graduation Night. Questions about the test: how hard was it, how it was set up, were you given enough time, did you think you would pass? This made me remember that these were the same questions I had when I was preparing to take the test, and yes, the teachers had all the answers. I, however, had one thing they didn't have. Experience. I had just gone through it and knew from experience how it felt.

In closing, I would just like to say that after working one on one with the students, seeing them graduate and their thank you cards to me on Graduation Night made it all worth it. I know this program has helped me in many ways and I think that I have helped the students as well as the program in some ways.

Thank you,  
Gladys Dumas

