

Study Circle Guide:

# *Adult Student Persistence*

May 2006



**National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy**

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*NCSALL Training Materials* are funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers program, Award Number R309B960002, as administered by the Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement), U.S. Department of Education, through contract to Harvard University. The content of *NCSALL Training Materials* does not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences, or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



# CONTENTS

About Study Circles.....	1
About the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle Guide.....	9
To Do Before Session One.....	19
Steps for Facilitating Session One.....	55
Steps for Facilitating Session Two.....	123
Steps for Facilitating Session Three.....	321
Note to Facilitator: Suggestions for Organizing a Follow-up Session.....	359
Tips for Facilitating a Study Circle.....	361
NCSALL Feedback Form for Study Circle Facilitators.....	385



# ABOUT STUDY CIRCLES

## Who created this study circle?

This study circle was created by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The study circle is part of NCSALL's efforts to help connect research and practice in the field of adult basic education and adult literacy. The Adult Student Persistence Study Circle is one of a series of study circles that NCSALL has developed.

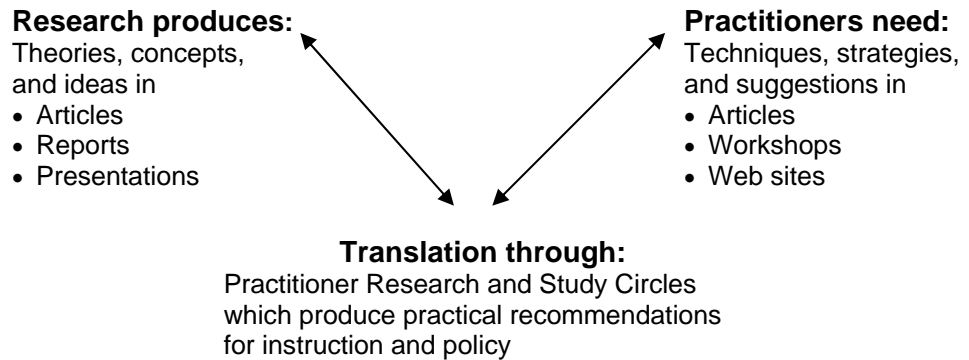
## Why was this study circle created?

The purpose of all the study circles is to help staff developers and practitioners organize and conduct professional development that helps practitioners read, discuss, and use research to improve their practice.

The goal of NCSALL is to improve the quality of practice in adult education through research (both university-based and practitioner research). We want to ensure that practitioners—teachers, counselors, program administrators, and others—have an opportunity to access, understand, judge, and use research in their work. Therefore, the goal of the NCSALL study circles is to help adult basic education practitioners, in a small group setting, learn about research findings, theories, and concepts from NCSALL's research and discuss how these can be applied to practice and policy in adult education.

When we have talked to practitioners in the field of adult literacy about research, they ask for techniques, strategies, and practical suggestions that they can use immediately. Yet, research often produces reports, articles, and other documents that provide primarily theories, concepts, ideas, and sometimes implications for practice. NCSALL feels that there should be a process that “translates” research findings into practical suggestions and that practitioners should be involved in that process. The prime vehicles for translating research into practical suggestions for practitioners are professional development activities, such as practitioner research training, and study circles, where practitioners can learn

about, discuss, and/or try out ideas from research. The following diagram depicts this process:



## What are study circles?

Study circles are professional development activities for practitioners (teachers, tutors, counselors, support staff, and program administrators) in programs that provide adult students with adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education services. Each study circle uses a similar format, depicted in the chart below:

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
<p><b>Participants will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Learn what a study circle is and is not</li><li>▪ Think about their own classroom experiences related to the topic</li><li>▪ Discuss the research they have read</li></ul>	<p><b>Participants will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Discuss the research they have read</li><li>▪ Judge the relevance of research to their own work</li><li>▪ Discuss strategies that they can use in their programs</li></ul>	<p><b>Participants will:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Discuss strategies they can use</li><li>▪ Make individual plans to try out strategies</li><li>▪ Make a group plan for next steps</li></ul>

## What should the outcomes of this study circle be?

We hope that practitioners learn more about what the research says about adult student persistence and come away with ideas and individual plans of action for how to apply what they've learned in their own classrooms and programs. If each individual participant leaves the group with a plan of action for him/herself, the study circle is a success.

## Who should participate?

The study circles are designed for any practitioners who work in adult basic education programs: teachers, program directors, counselors, volunteers, and others. Most of the study circles deal with topics that are broad enough to be of interest to ABE, ASE, and ESOL practitioners in a variety of delivery settings: community-based organizations, local educational authorities, libraries, correctional facilities, etc. The design of the study circle and the readings should be appropriate for both new and experienced practitioners; however, some of the readings have acronyms that may need to be reviewed with participants.

The study circles are designed for approximately 8 to 12 participants. We don't recommend running a study circle with fewer than 5 or more than 15 people, as discussions are harder to facilitate with too few or too many participants.

## How long is the study circle?

This study circle is designed for 10½ hours, divided into three sessions of 3½ hours each. We recommend that the sessions be scheduled no more than two weeks apart; if they are scheduled once a month, participants tend to lose the thread of the discussion and forget what they have read. If they are only one week apart, participants may not be provided with enough time to complete the readings between sessions.

If participants want follow-up meetings after the last session, they can set those up during the last session.

## **How do I recruit participants?**

NCSALL has produced a sample flyer that provides information about this NCSALL study circle, which you can find on page 7. The flyer presents an overview of the topic and a brief description about what will be covered in each of the sessions. It also includes a registration form for practitioners to mail back to you.

You are welcome to use the flyer to send out via mail or on a Web site to let practitioners know when and where the study circle will be taking place. Or, you can create your own flyer, using the NCSALL flyer as an example.

## **How do I select dates for the study circle?**

Select all three dates for the three sessions at the very beginning and advertise them in the recruitment flyer. Only people who can make all three dates will, in all likelihood, sign up to attend the study circle.

In general, it is best to have the three dates regularized (e.g., all on Tuesday nights or all on Friday mornings), as someone who is free at a certain time of the week is more likely to have that same time free every week.

## **How do I organize the first session?**

When you feel that you have solid commitments from the number of participants you are seeking, contact them to confirm their participation in the study circle. At this time, reconfirm the times, dates, and location of the study circle with the participants.

As mentioned above, the study circles have been designed for a group of practitioners to meet over three sessions, with each session lasting 3½ hours. Because three sessions' worth of time is such a limited period for a group to meet, we suggest that several short readings and a brief cover letter with information about the study circle be sent to practitioners to read before the first meeting.

After confirming their participation, send each participant the packet of information and materials to read before the first meeting (Pre-Meeting Packet of readings and handouts on pages



21–53). Participants need to receive this packet at least 10 days before the first meeting of the study circle.

You, as the facilitator, will also want to read over the packet so that you are ready for the first session and for questions that participants may have.

Be sure that you arrive early for each session in order to set up the chairs in a circle; arrange your newsprint(s); and organize handouts, pens, tape, etc. It's nice to have some sort of refreshment, such as juice, coffee, or water. Check out where the restrooms are so you can tell participants where they are located, and make sure the heating or cooling in the room is appropriate.

Always bring at least two or three extra copies of the readings for participants who forget to bring their own. You may also want to have (or start compiling during the first session) a list of participants and their telephone numbers or e-mail addresses so participants can contact one another during the course of the study circle.

## What kind of support can I expect?

For advice on facilitating a study circle, please review the “Tips for Facilitating a Study Circle” included at the back of this guide, starting on page 363. These readings are from the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut, an expert resource in conducting study circles. We thank them for their guidance in facilitating study circles.

If you want to discuss the study circle beforehand with someone from NCSALL, we'd be happy to do so. We can be reached at:

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We'd love to hear how it went so that we can improve this and other study circles we produce in the future. We welcome your feedback about how this NCSALL study circle guide worked and how it could be improved. Contact us (telephone, e-mail, or letter) and tell us how it went and what you'd do differently next time.

(SAMPLE FLYER)

**Interested in learning what the research says  
about adult student persistence?**

**Study Circle  
on  
Adult  
Student  
Persistence**

Questions about what research says about increasing student participation in adult education programs are particularly relevant as programs and teachers struggle to increase student persistence long enough for students to reap substantial learning gains. **[Insert name of your organization]** is sponsoring a study circle to engage adult education practitioners in discussing research, theories, and concepts related to adult student persistence.

In this study circle, you will read short articles on the research on adult student persistence. You, together with 8 to 12 other practitioners, will meet three times to:

- Discuss the research on adult student persistence and what it means for practitioners and programs.
- Consider how you might apply the research in your own classroom or program.
- Make a plan for trying a new research-based strategy for increasing persistence.

The study circle is organized into three sessions of 3½ hours each. You will be asked to read two to four short articles before each session for discussion during the study circle. All readings will be provided by the facilitator of the study circle. We ask that you attend all three sessions.

**Session One:** Think about and share your own perspective on adult student persistence, and discuss the research on motivation, retention, and persistence.

**Session Two:** Look more in-depth at the research on student persistence and what implications the research might have for adult education programs.

**Session Three:** Consider instructional and programmatic strategies for increasing adult student persistence. Develop an action plan for using what you have learned in your own context.

The study circle is a staff development activity. Continuing Education Credits (CEUs) or Professional Development Points (PDPs) may be available.

The dates and locations of the three study circle sessions are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_ (snow date if applicable)

If you would like to join the study circle, please complete this form and send it to: **[insert facilitator’s name]**, **[insert facilitator’s address]** by **[insert deadline]**. I can also be reached at **[insert facilitator’s telephone number]** and **[insert facilitator’s email]**.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Home address: \_\_\_\_\_

Home telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_



# ABOUT THE ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE STUDY CIRCLE GUIDE

## What is a study circle guide?

This guide includes all of the information and materials you will need to conduct the study circle, including:

- A page listing the preparations you need to make before the session. This includes the newsprints to be made, the handouts and readings to photocopy, and the materials to bring.
- A step-by-step guide to the activities for the sessions and the approximate time for each activity, as well as facilitator notes and other ideas for conducting the activities. Handouts and readings, ready for photocopying, are included at the end of each session.

Each session includes discussions of the readings and how ideas generated from the readings can be applied to the program contexts of group members. The direction of the discussions will vary with the concerns of each group. It is important that discussions and activities meet the needs of all the group members. As the facilitator, you need to be flexible and may need to modify some activities to fit the needs and learning styles of study circle participants. This study circle guide should be used as a *guide*, not a rigid script.




## How is this guide organized?

There are four main sections in this guide:

1. The introduction *About Study Circles* and *About the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle Guide*
2. *Steps for Facilitating the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle*, which include:
  - *To Do Before Session One*

- *Steps for Facilitating Session One, Handouts for Session One, and Readings Assigned for Session Two*
- *Steps for Facilitating Session Two, Handouts for Session Two, and Readings Assigned for Session Three*
- *Steps for Facilitating Session Three and Handouts for Session Three*

The steps include how-to instructions for conducting all the activities in each session and:

- the newsprints that need to be prepared beforehand, denoted by the icon  and their titles are always indicated in the steps by being underlined
- the handouts that need to be photocopied beforehand, denoted by the icon  and their titles are always indicated in the steps by being *italicized*
- the readings to be photocopied and handed out to read before the next session, denoted by the icon  and their titles are always indicated in the steps by being **bolded**

***All handouts for each session and readings for the following session can be found at the end of the “Steps for Facilitating...” that session. For example, the readings to be discussed in Session Two are provided at the end of the “Steps for Facilitating Session One.”***

Every session includes an evaluation activity to conduct at the end to get feedback from the participants about what was useful and what could be improved.

At the end of each session, there is a “Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating...” each session, which you can pull out of the notebook and take to the session as an easy reference guide for conducting each activity in that session. It looks like this:

Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session One	
1. Welcome and Introductions	10 mins., WHOLE GROUP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone introduces themselves.</li> <li>• Housekeeping and logistics.</li> </ul>	

3. “Note to Facilitator: Suggestions for Organizing a Follow-up Session,” which includes discussion activities and organizing strategies for conducting a follow-up session one month or more after the third and final session, *if* participants decide they want to come back together.
4. “Tips for Facilitating a Study Circle,” which includes articles with helpful strategies for conducting a study circle from the Study Circles Resource Center.

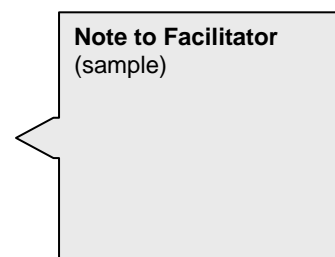
## What if I want to change the activities listed in the guide?

This guide is intended to help first-time facilitators who want a lot of guidance. It is, however, not intended to be a script that must be followed. If you have a different idea for how to do an activity, you should use it. To help you, throughout the steps, we have included the following features:

- **Another Idea** for several of the activities, which look like the sample at right when you see them in the steps
- **Note to Facilitator**, which look like the sample box at right when you see them in the steps
- **Questions** to prompt discussion are provided for you throughout the guide, and they look like this when you see them in the steps:

? *How would you...?*

**Another Idea**  
(sample)



## What's the focus of the *Adult Student Persistence Study Circle*?

This 10½-hour NCSALL study circle is based on recent research and resources about adult student persistence. The research and related resources include:

- A review of NCSALL research on adult student persistence conducted by John Comings and others, summarized in an article entitled "Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students"
- Other studies on student motivation and retention
- Articles, resources, and action research reports to help practitioners consider strategies for increasing adult student persistence



## How are the three sessions in this study circle organized?

**In Session One**, study circle members share information about their own interest and experience with barriers to adult student persistence. Participants examine the research on persistence, retention, and motivation. Study circle members review four suggested supports for adult student persistence and examine the forces that support and hinder student persistence.

The **objectives** for the first session state that, by the end of Session One, participants will be able to:

- Compare the perspectives from four reviews of literature on participation, retention, and persistence that are specific to adult basic education.
- Distinguish amongst three types of barriers to persistence and outline ways to overcome those barriers.
- Summarize the positive and negative forces that support or hinder student persistence.
- Explain four supports to persistence suggested from the NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study.
- List practical ideas for supporting the persistence of adult students.

The **main activities in Session One** include:

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Purpose and Overview of the Study Circle, Session One Objectives, and Agenda
3. Participant Expectations and Group Guidelines
4. Discussion of First Reading
5. Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers
6. Negative and Positive Forces
7. Four Supports for Adult Student Persistence

8. Evaluation of Session One and Assignment for Session Two

**In Session Two**, participants gain a deeper understanding of the findings from the research on adult student persistence and discuss program strategies for increasing persistence. Participants review the five pathways for program participation that are determined by students' personal and environmental factors.

The **objectives for the second session** state that, by the end of Session Two, 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.

The **main activities in Session Two** include:

1. Welcome, Session Two Objectives, and Agenda
2. Strategies for Improving Student Persistence
3. Increasing Persistence: Discussing Strategies from the Research
4. Reading Discussion – Five Pathways
5. A Closer Look at the Five Pathways
6. Evaluation of Session Two and Assignment for Session Three

**In Session Three**, participants consider specific ways programs and practitioners addressed persistence in their situations and plan for what they might do to address student persistence in their own programs or classes. Participants will

receive handouts with strategies and resources for addressing adult student persistence, motivation, and retention.

The **objectives** for the third session state that, by the end of Session Three, participants will be able to:

- Analyze evidence-based strategies for addressing student persistence.
- Propose a list of practical ideas for addressing adult student persistence, motivation, and retention.
- Create a plan for addressing adult student persistence in their classrooms/programs.

The **main activities in Session Three** include:

1. Welcome, Session Three Objectives, and Agenda
2. Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student Persistence
3. Jigsaw on Readings
4. Making Connections
5. Action Planning
6. Final Evaluation

