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Outreach and Retention in Adult ESL Literacy Programs. ERIC Digest.

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Adults learning English as a second language (ESL) come from different cultures and countries, vary in their educational backgrounds, and have diverse reasons for learning English (Valentine, 1990). While reports of overcrowded classrooms and long waiting lists for classes might indicate that intensive outreach and retention efforts are not necessary (Chisman, Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993), many successful programs work hard to enhance outreach and ensure retention. This digest discusses outreach methods; it examines learners' reasons for enrolling in ESL classes and for leaving the classes; and it suggests ways to improve retention.

OUTREACH

A variety of methods exist to attract learners to adult ESL programs. Learners, the media, program partners, and bilingual support staff can publicize and promote the program.



LEARNERS Because satisfied, successful learners who enroll and then re-enroll for subsequent classes are the best advertisement for a program, established programs begin recruitment by talking to learners who are signing up for services to find out who they are, how they learned about the program, and why they have chosen this program. If the enrollees are returnees, they are asked why they are re-enrolling.

Adult learners can post flyers in their apartment complexes, neighborhood markets, churches, and community centers. They can represent their programs in free or low-cost booths at county fairs, engage in competitions for the number of learners that one learner can refer to the program, and give testimonials that the program can use in advertising. These learner promotion efforts can have a huge impact on enrollment. Eighty to eighty-five percent of the learners in the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Virginia say their enrollment is due to word of mouth (personal communication, S. Grant, March 1995).



PROGRAM PARTNERS Multiple partners in workplace programs, including businesses, unions, chambers of commerce, and professional organizations, can collaborate with the educational entity to offer a coherent program. Often companies have budgets to publicize programs and pay for receptions to celebrate learner progress. Regular graduation ceremonies, to which former learners, family members, and friends are invited, can serve to honor the participant and heighten the profile of the program in the community or at the workplace. Representatives from community organizations and related service agencies as well as members of the press can also be invited to these ceremonies.



THE MEDIA Radio and cable television stations can advertise the program in English and in the native language when possible.



BILINGUAL SUPPORT STAFF Support staff who can talk about the program and answer questions in the native language of the prospective learners can provide accurate information and put learners who speak little or no English at ease.

WHY LEARNERS ENROLL IN ADULT ESL CLASSES

Why do learners enroll in ESL classes? A federally-funded study of adult ESL learners in Iowa (Valentine, 1990) found seven reasons for their participation in ESL classes including improving oneself and one's personal effectiveness in U.S. society, being better able to help one's children with their schoolwork and to speak to their teachers, improving one's employability by being able to get a better job or to enter job training, functioning better with everyday uses of the language such as shopping and using the telephone, experiencing the success of knowing that one can learn the language, improving reading and writing skills in English, and being able to help people in one's native country.

WHY ADULT LEARNERS LEAVE PROGRAMS

The curricula of most programs address at least some of the goals listed above. What keeps learners from staying in these programs? Why do a third of all adult ESL learners leave their programs by the end of the second month (Development Associates, 1994)? Bean, Partanen, Wright, and Aaronson's study of attrition in urban literacy programs (Brod, 1990) categorizes personal and program factors that mitigate against retention.



1. PERSONAL FACTORS include low self-esteem coupled with lack of demonstrable progress; daily pressures from work and home problems of schedule, childcare, and transportation; lack of support of the native culture and family culture for education; and the age of the learner.



2. PROGRAM FACTORS include lack of appropriate materials for low-level learners; lack of opportunity to achieve success; lack of flexibility in class scheduling; classes so multilevel that those with no literacy skills are mixed with those quite literate (or those with very high oral skills are mixed with those with very low oral skills); lack of peer support and reinforcement; and instructional materials that are not relevant to learners' needs and lives.

ENSURING RETENTION FROM THE START

What should programs do to ensure that adult ESL learners persist long enough to meet their educational goals? Attrition often begins at enrollment. Intake that is slow, cumbersome, and impersonal, and that may include an intimidating test, can discourage learners before they begin (Brod, 1990). All staff at the learning site--testers, registrars, office personnel, teachers--need to facilitate smooth and speedy enrollment, underscore learners' abilities, and show them what the program can do for them (Silver, 1986). Bilingual intake can accurately assess learners' wants and needs, uncover impediments to attendance (e.g., transportation or childcare), and make registrants comfortable and ready to return to the learning site for classes.

SETTING REALISTIC GOALS AND REPORTING PROGRESS

Adults learn best and remain in programs longest when they participate in establishing their own educational goals (Brod, 1990). Learners with minimal English speaking ability are not likely to graduate into credit ESL or be ready to take GED classes in a few short weeks or even months. However, learners may be able to use the telephone to set up an appointment with the dentist, or may be able to ask directions to the restroom in a shopping mall (and understand the response). Programs that, at the outset, require the learner and the teacher to discuss realistic learner goals and to develop a time line for attaining these goals will be more successful in retaining learners.

After setting goals with the learner, programs need to provide regular feedback on progress so that the learner continues to perceive goal attainment as possible. Competency checklists can be used to show learners their progress. Colorado's competency-based program provides a competency verification process leading to certificates of achievement at three levels of ESL. Another indicator of progress is the awarding of certificates. For many learners, even if significant academic progress has not occurred, receiving certificates for regular attendance can bolster self-esteem.

Providing an audience for this recognition through ceremonies and potluck dinners with families and friends in attendance supports learners and makes the adult education program visible to the community. In any circumstance, measuring and reporting the outcomes of learning should be done in ways that are relevant and meaningful to the individual learner.

USING VARIED APPROACHES TO INSTRUCTION

Adult literacy programs may utilize competency-based instruction, whole language, language experience, learner writing and publishing, and Freirean or participatory approaches (Crandall & Peyton, 1993). These approaches often include peer counseling, cooperative learning, and problem-solving activities that draw upon the support of peers to foster the socialization so important to adult learners. Programs that use a variety of strategies and techniques to address the differing learning styles, previous educational experience, and multiple skill levels present in most adult ESL classes will have a greater chance of meeting the educational needs and expectations of the individual learners within the class (Shank & Terrill, in press).

Service providers face the challenges of identifying and communicating with potential learners, becoming educated about their cultures, anticipating and providing for their individual needs, and developing appropriate courses for them (Vandalov, 1994). A program receiving an influx of soldiers who had been drivers and mechanics in Iraq might include driver education as part of its basic curriculum. Similarly, a program with immigrant women from Central America might choose to include a family literacy component where participants can learn material relevant to their lives.

COLLABORATING TO PROVIDE SERVICES

For learners in adult basic education, adult secondary education, and ESL programs, research indicates that long-term persisters are likely to be those who use support services (Development Associates, 1994). Educational programs that collaborate with or refer learners to agencies that help with transportation, childcare, healthcare, employment, and tuition make attending class more realistic for adult learners. And, in workplace programs, company management and the direct supervisor can actively encourage attendance by participating in outreach efforts, scheduling workers so they can attend the classes, and reinforcing content learned in the classes (Arlington County, 1990).

However, even with a multitude of support services, a variety of approaches and activities, and frequent benchmarks for success, it is difficult for any one program to meet all the educational needs of every learner. Formalized collaboration across programs and agencies may be needed. To support this collaboration among adult ESL service providers, the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to three projects (in Massachusetts, Texas, and Virginia) to develop replicable models for transitioning

ESL adults from one service provider to another. The Virginia project created a unified system in which the adult education provider coordinated curricula and services with a community-based organization, a vocational institute, and an institution of higher education. Together they provided a wide range of educational services to learners from native language literacy, to basic survival skills, to preparation for vocational or academic study (Mansoor & Grant, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Programs employ multiple strategies to enhance outreach and ensure retention. Active collaboration among service providers, programmatic attention to the educational needs of each learner, and involvement of learners at every stage of the process are necessary in attracting learners to programs and in guaranteeing that these learners will continue to study until they have met their educational goals.

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