**Study Circle Guide:**

# *Adult Student Persistence*

**May 2006**

# NCSALL

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

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# 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.
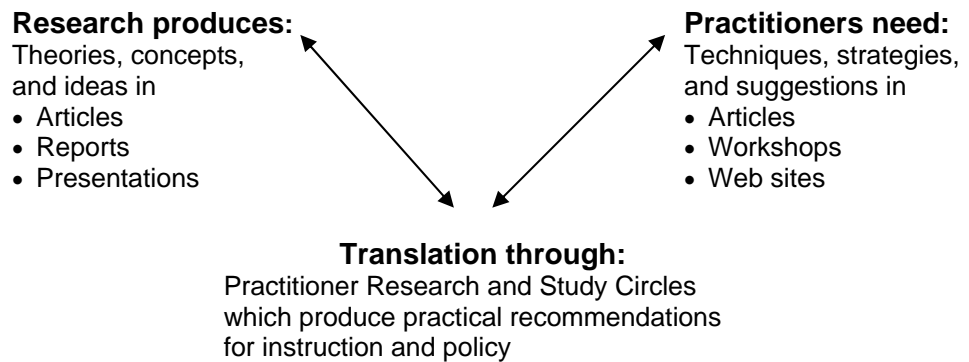
## Why was this study circle created?

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:

**Research produces:**
Theories, concepts, and ideas in
- Articles
- Reports
- Presentations

**Practitioners need:**
Techniques, strategies, and suggestions in
- Articles
- Workshops
- Web sites

**Translation through:**
Practitioner Research and Study Circles which produce practical recommendations for instruction and policy

## 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 |
|---|---|---|
| **Participants will:** | **Participants will:** | **Participants will:** |
| ▪ Learn what a study circle is and is not | ▪ Discuss the research they have read | ▪ Discuss strategies they can use |
| ▪ Think about their own classroom experiences related to the topic | ▪ Judge the relevance of research to their own work | ▪ Make individual plans to try out strategies |
| ▪ Discuss the research they have read | ▪ Discuss strategies that they can use in their programs | ▪ Make a group plan for next steps |

## 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)**

# Study Circle

# on

# Adult

# Student

# Persistence

## Interested in learning what the research says about 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 <u>underlined</u>

- 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 │
├──────────────────────────────────┴──────────────────────┤
│ •  Everyone introduces themselves.                        │
│ •  Housekeeping and logistics.                            │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

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**
(sample)

- **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

**Note to Facilitator**
(sample)

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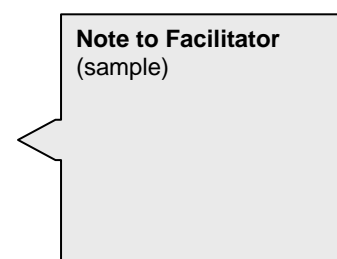
## What's the focus of the *Adult Student Persistence Study Circle?*

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

# Steps for Facilitating the Study Circle: Adult Student Persistence

# TO DO BEFORE SESSION ONE

Send out the Pre-Meeting Packet to confirmed participants two weeks before the first session. It's also a good idea to call participants one week before the first session to confirm that they received the packet.

The Pre-Meeting Packet for the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle should include the seven items listed below, all of which follow and are ready for photocopying.

We suggest that you organize the handouts and readings for participants in two-sided pocket folders and distribute a folder of materials to each participant.

**A reminder about the cover letter:** You will need to write in the place, date, and time of the first meeting and your telephone number and e-mail address into the letter and sign it before you make copies.

Contents of Pre-Meeting Packet

- Information about the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle (cover letter)

- What Is a Study Circle?

- What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison

- The Role of the Participant

- Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students

- Supports and Hindrances: A Force-Field Analysis

- Participants' To-Do Form

# Information about the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle

Date:

Dear Participant:

Thank you for registering to participate in the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle. I really look forward to meeting with you. This study circle was developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL).

We will meet three times, and each meeting will be 3½ hours in length for a total of 10½ hours. The first meeting is at **[*insert* location]** on **[*insert* month, day, year]** at **[*insert* time]**.

At each session, we will be discussing readings about research on adult student persistence. Some of these have been produced by NCSALL and some are from other sources. I will be providing you with copies of all the readings.

Before the first meeting, please look at the Participants' To-Do Form and read all the materials before the first session as suggested. We will be discussing these handouts and readings at the first meeting.

I have enclosed a folder for you to keep all of the materials for this study circle. Please bring this folder and all the materials with you to each of our meetings.

If you have any questions about the study circle in general or about what to do before our first meeting, please call me at **[*insert* facilitator's telephone number]** or send me an e-mail at **[*insert* facilitator's e-mail address]**.

I'm looking forward to some great discussions with all of you.

Sincerely,

**[*Insert* facilitator's name and title]**

# What is a study circle?*

A study circle:

- is a process for small-group deliberation that is voluntary and participatory;

- is a small group, usually 8 to 12 participants;

- is led by a facilitator who is impartial, who helps manage the deliberation process, but is not an "expert" or "teacher" in the traditional sense;

- considers many perspectives, rather than advocating a particular point of view;

- uses ground rules to set the tone for a respectful, productive discussion;

- is rooted in dialogue and deliberation, not debate;

- has multiple sessions which move from personal experience of the issue, to considering multiple viewpoints, to strategies for action;

- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concern;

- provides an opportunity for citizens to work together to improve their community.

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# ◈ What study circles are, and are not: A comparison*

## A study circle IS:

- **a small-group discussion** involving deliberation and problem solving, in which an issue is examined from many perspectives; it is enriched by the members' knowledge and experience, and often informed by expert information and discussion materials; it is aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

## A study circle is NOT the same as:

- **conflict resolution,** a set of principles and techniques used in resolving conflict between individuals or groups. (Study circle facilitators and participants sometimes use these techniques in study circles.)

- **mediation,** a process used to settle disputes that relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement. (Mediators often make excellent study circle facilitators, and have many skills in common.)

- **a focus group,** a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Respondents (who are sometimes paid) are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.

- **traditional education with teachers and pupils,** where the teacher or an expert imparts knowledge to the students.

- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome,** such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. A study circle begins with a shared interest among its members, and unfolds as the process progresses.

- **a town meeting,** a large-group meeting which is held to get public input on an issue, or to make a decision on a community policy.

- **a public hearing,** a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

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# The role of the participant

The following points are intended to help you, the participant, make the most of your study circle experience, and to suggest ways in which you can help the group.

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.

- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.

- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.

- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.

- Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion. Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.

- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he or she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

# Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students

Comings, J. & Cuban, S. (2003) DRAFT—NOT FOR CITATION.

## ABSTRACT

Teachers in adult basic education programs hope that their students will persist in learning until they reach their educational goals. However, most students drop out after less than 100 hours of instruction. Unlike children, who persist in learning because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces that identify schooling as the proper work of childhood, adults must make an active decision to participate in each learning session and often must overcome significant barriers in order to attend program services. If adult students are to achieve their goals, adult basic education programs must help them persist much longer in their studies.

This chapter describes persistence and reviews the research and practice literature about ways to support it. The chapter also draws on research that the authors have just completed with a team from Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The chapter concludes by suggesting that a quality program must have a persistence support component and describing a set of persistence interventions that have research evidence to support the contention that they would have an impact.

## INTRODUCTION

A key difference in learning between adults and children is that adults choose to participate in educational programs while children participate because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces. Adults must make an active decision to participate in each class or tutoring session and often must overcome significant barriers in order to participate in educational services. Although some adults come to adult basic education[3] programs with very limited goals, most come with goals that require hundreds if not thousands of hours of instruction to achieve. Every adult basic education program, therefore, should help its students persist in their learning so that they can reach their educational goals.

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[3] The term, adult basic education, includes English for speakers of other language, adult literacy, high school equivalence, and basic skills programs for adults.

Adult basic education programs usually refer to persistence as retention and measure it by recording participation in formal classes or tutoring sessions. Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999) proposed the term persistence after they found that adults often persist in learning through self-study or distance education after they stop attending adult education program services and sometimes return to a program (not necessarily the one they dropped out of) after a lapse in attendance. The term retention defines this phenomenon from a program's point of view; the program wants to retain its students. Comings, et al. (1999) preferred the term persistence because it defines this phenomenon from the point of view of students who persist in learning inside and outside of a program until they have achieved their goals. This chapter will define persistence as:

> *Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services, and returning to program services as soon as the demands of their lives allow.*

Persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until an adult student meets his or her educational goals.

## RESEARCH ON PERSISTENCE

Much of the literature on adult student persistence draws on research with adults who have sufficient literacy skills, speak English, and have high school diplomas. Though this research is informative, it may not be directly applicable to adult basic education students, who have low literacy and math skills, do not speak English, or do not have a high school diploma. In addition, most adult education persistence research takes place in short-term courses with defined, limited goals, such as vocational classes and certificate programs. In contrast, adult basic education students usually face a long-term commitment that may involve many different goals that change over time. Finally, most studies look at participation, the decision to join a program, rather than persistence, the decision to continue in a program. These two decisions are similar, and so the participation literature is useful to understanding persistence. In addition, most studies help define the problem but do not necessarily provide insights into how to help adult basic education students persist in learning.

This chapter will first summarize the findings of four literature reviews and then describe the lessons learned in two connected studies. These sources serve as evidence that supports a set of program interventions set forward in the conclusion. The

implications section suggests ways that policy, practice and research could build on this foundation

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

Four literature reviews analyze the participation, retention, and persistence literature from different perspectives (Beder, 1991; Wikelund, et al., 1992; Tracy-Mumford, 1994; and Quigley, 1997). All of these reviews have authors who have experience with adult basic education programs, and this experience helps them adapt research on other populations to adult basic education students.

**Beder** (1991) first explores motivation as the force that helps adults overcome barriers to participation and then focuses more closely on those barriers. Beder suggests that adult education programs must change their recruitment and instruction practices to be congruent with the motivations and life contexts of adult students. If they did, more adults would enter programs, and they would persist longer.

Beder then builds on two studies that look at the barriers to participation from the point of view of actual and potential participants. He notes that Hayes (1988) identified five factors that discourage participation: Low self-confidence, social disapproval by friends and family, negative attitudes towards adult literacy, and low personal priority. He also notes that Beder (1990) identified four factors: low perception of need, perceived effort, dislike for school, and situational barriers. Together, these studies point to perceptions by some adults that they may not benefit from participation, may not be able to learn, do not like participating in formal learning programs, and are unwilling to overcome the many barriers to participation that exist in their lives. Finally, Beder suggests that adults are weighing the perceived benefits and costs of participation and making decisions based on that analysis. In many cases a decision to drop out may be justified if the costs outweigh the benefits.

The Beder review concludes by making suggestions for dealing with nonparticipation and dropout. He opens by acknowledging that the system, at this time, probably only has enough resources to serve those who are eager to enter classes. This position, he notes, does not pay attention to the social costs of an undereducated population and the socialization process that leads many of these adults to be uninterested in further education. Though education can never be easy, this review suggests that the effort could be more manageable for students if programs had the resources to fit instruction to the needs and learning

styles of adults and if programs looked less like school and more like an activity in which adults would want to participate.

**Wikelund, et al.** (1992) draw from the same sources as Beder, but they critique the reductionist tendencies of research and suggest that a useful theory of participation would incorporate the complexity of this phenomenon. The paper calls for broadening the definition of participation to acknowledge that adults engage in education in many ways that are not limited to participation in formal classes.

The Wikelund, et al. review criticizes the concept of "non-participant" because it implies that every adult who has low literacy skills needs to enter a program, a situation that might not be true. After reviewing several of the studies quoted in Beder (1991), the review ends with a later Beder (1992) article that identifies three categories of non-participants. The first group is the demand population, who are motivated to participate and who have no significant barriers to that participation. The second group is motivated but constrained and includes people who are motivated but who have external barriers, such as a lack of childcare, keeping them from attendance. The third group is resisters who are not motivated to attend.

The review ends with the conclusion that research and theory, as well as practice, should break out of the framework of schooling. A new definition of participation would acknowledge that learning, even improvements in literacy skills, could take place outside of formal programs. With this new definition, programs could increase persistence by continuing to support learning at times when students cannot attend classes or participate in other formal arrangements.

**Tracy-Mumford** (1994) calls for programs to develop a commitment to and a plan for increasing persistence, which she suggests would send a strong message to students that the program is there to help them reach their goals. Since student goals can change, the program must be willing to make changes to accommodate new goals as they arise. For the commitment to be meaningful, the program should have a set of criteria for measuring persistence and a set of strategies that reduce dropout, increase student hours of attendance, improve achievement, increase personal goal attainment, and improve completion rates.

Tracy-Mumford defines an effective persistence plan as one that both provides support to students and improves instruction. The review summarizes the findings of a large number of studies and descriptions of practice to provide a list of the elements of a student persistence plan that

weaves persistence strategies into all aspects of the program structure. This advice is:

- Recruitment should provide enough information so that potential students can make an informed decision about enrolling.

- Intake and orientation should help students understand the program, set realistic expectations, build a working relationship with program staff, and establish learning goals.

- Initial assessment should provide students and teachers with information on both cognitive and affective needs, should be integrated with instruction, and should form the foundation for measuring progress.

- Programs and teachers should recognize student achievement.

- Counseling should identify students at risk of dropping out early.

- Referral services should coordinate with social service agencies to ensure that all students are connected to the support services they need.

- A system for contact and follow up with students who drop out that helps them return to the program and provides information on ways to improve program services.

- Non-instructional activities should help form a bond between the program and its students and their families.

- Program evaluation should involve students in assessing, and offering advice on, each aspect of the program.

- Childcare and transportation assistance should be provided.

- Instruction and instructional staff should be of sufficient quality to support effective learning.

- A student persistence team should coordinate dropout prevention activities, collect data on student persistence, and involve students and teachers in addressing this issue.

Tracy-Mumford's list is comprehensive, and it is useful to program staff because it translates theory into practical advice. Unfortunately, most adult basic education programs lack the funding required to follow all of this advice, but following some of the advice would probably contribute to increased persistence.

**Quigley** (1997) views persistence as significantly affected by the negative schooling experiences adult students had when they were younger and suggests the need to change programs to be different from those schools. Quigley sees three major constellations of factors that contribute to dropout, which he refers to as situational (influences of the adult's circumstances), institutional (influences of systems), and dispositional (influences of experience). He suggests that situational influences are largely beyond the control of adult education programs, though they receive most of the attention in the literature on dropouts. Institutional factors are areas that practitioners could affect and should work on continuously. However, he suggests that dispositional factors provide a focus for program reform that might affect persistence.

Quigley focuses his attention on adults who drop out in the first few weeks of a program and to the dispositional factors that he believes cause such early dropout. He suggests that adults have overcome situational barriers before they arrive at a program, and though those arrangements may fall apart, they have little effect in the first few weeks. Institutional barriers, too, have been overcome and, if they still exist, will have an effect later as they cause problems that build up over time.

Concluding that at least one-third of incoming students are at risk of dropping out in the first three weeks of instruction, Quigley reports findings from two studies of incoming students he undertook. In these studies, Quigley tried three interventions: intensive support by a team of teachers and counselors, smaller classes, and one-on-one tutoring. The small class approach produced the highest persistence, followed by the team approach, and then one-on-one tutoring. All three had higher persistence than the comparison group, which attended the regular large class program. This may indicate that one of these three approaches might be supportive for some students while another approach would be supportive of others.

Quigley suggests that the intake and orientation processes in the first three weeks are critical to improving persistence. He suggests that intake should begin with goal setting and planning for success. Students then need to be matched to classes and teachers that can meet their goals and learning needs. Since students are adults, they can take charge of this process, but they may need help in the form of careful questions and the provision of useful information for making these decisions. Quigley concludes by reiterating his belief that the prior history of negative experiences with school is an important factor that needs to be addressed during this critical first three weeks of instruction.

## PERSISTENCE STUDY

In 1996, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) began a three-phase study of the factors that support and inhibit persistence. The first phase interviewed and tracked the persistence of 150 adults in Pre-GED classes (Comings, Parella, and Soricone, 1999). The Second phase studied the efforts of five library literacy programs as they attempted to increase student persistence over a three-year period (Comings, et al., 2004). The third phase will undertake an experiment to test whether a model of persistence support developed during the first two phases does, in fact, have an impact on persistence in programs. This section summarizes what has been learned in the first two phases of this research.

**First Phase.** The first phase of the study employed a force-field analysis, which places an individual in a field of forces that are supporting or inhibiting action along a particular path (Gilbert, Fisk, & Lindzey, 1998; Lewin, 1999), as its theoretical model. This model expands the motivation/barriers and cost/benefit models to include a large number of forces on each side of the persistence equation. Understanding the forces, identifying which are strongest, and deciding which are most amenable to manipulation provides an indication of how to help someone move in a desired direction, such as reaching an educational goal.

In the case of adult students, positive forces, such as the desire for a higher income, help support persistence in an adult education program. Negative forces, such as a lack of free time to study, push adults to drop out. From the time adults enter programs to the time when they either achieve their goals or drop out, both positive and negative forces are acting on them. When adult students are passive, the forces push them in one direction, which might be away from their goal. If adult students were aware of the forces, they could take action to manage them so that these forces helped to propel them toward their goal. Any intervention by an adult basic education program meant to increase persistence must help adults strengthen the positive forces and lessen the negative forces.

The terms positive and negative do not indicate a value for individual forces; they indicate the direction towards or away from the student's goal. Positive forces are those that are supportive of persistence, while negative forces are those pushing an adult toward dropping out. The individual forces may be viewed differently or even as benign outside of this context. For example, the demands of parenthood may be a negative force working against persistence in a literacy program, but parenthood and its demands are, for most people, positive experiences.

The force-field analysis looks at barriers and supports as existing at many levels of importance, from those that have a weak influence on persistence to those that have a strong influence on persistence. The force-field analysis suggests that strengthening or weakening a force that can be influenced might offset the effects of another force that cannot be influenced. Thus, an adult with a strong need for education to gain better employment might overcome a transportation barrier, while transportation assistance might help a less strongly motivated student to persist in an adult basic education program.

This study found that the many ways in which we can classify adult students (by gender, ethnicity, employment status, number of children, and educational background of parents or guardians) do not have a strong influence on persistence. The study does suggest that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children are more likely to persist than others in the study. The greater likelihood of persistence by immigrant students in ESOL classes is well documented (Young et al., 1994a), and the findings of this study suggest that this effect continues as immigrants learn English and move on to pre-GED programs. Grown children might encourage their parents to join and persist in a program. On the other hand, adults who are over 30 are more likely to have teenage or grown children than those under 30. These findings might point to older students persisting longer because they benefit from the maturity that comes with age, and they no longer have the responsibilities of caring for small children.

The study found that previous school experience (among U.S.-schooled students) does not appear to be associated with persistence. Of course, those potential students who are significantly affected by negative school experience may never enter a program or may have dropped out before the research team arrived. However, many of the study's subjects did describe negative school experiences, with most of the comments centered on high school. Respondents reported being ridiculed and even struck by teachers, bullied or intimidated by other students, told that they were stupid, and asked to leave school by administrators. Issues of class, race, and sexual orientation contributed to the negative school experience for some. Entering an adult basic education program may signal that a student has overcome any negative school experience and is ready to restart his or her education.

Prior non-school learning experiences, particularly self-study focused on improving basic skills or studying for the GED may be related to persistence. Prior attempts at self-study may be an indication of strong motivation, or some people may need several attempts at

learning before they are ready to persist. Research that explores these attempts might uncover factors that lead to later persistence or to permanent non-participation. Another line of inquiry might look at making self-study outside of class a part of instruction so that adult dropouts are ready to continue their learning when they do leave class. This self-study might make a return to classes more likely and the development of ways to document that self-study could provide a more realistic account of persistence.

Students mentioned four types of positive forces: relationships, goals, teacher and students, and self-determination. Relationships incorporate the support noted by subjects derived from their families, friends or colleagues, God or their church community, support groups, community workers, mentors or bosses, and their children. Goals included helping one's children, getting a better job, bettering one's self, moving ahead in life, attending college or some other academic goal, proving someone wrong, or obtaining citizenship. Teacher and students indicated the support provided by the people involved in their class. Self-determination included comments such as "it's me," "myself," or "my determination."

Students mentioned three types of negative forces: life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination. Life demands comprised conditions at home, special child care needs, work demands, transportation, the student's own or his or her family's health, age, lack of time, fatigue, weather, welfare and other official rules, unfavorable conditions at home, moving, and lack of income. Relationships included family members, friends, colleagues, community or welfare workers, and religious beliefs that were not supportive to persistence, as well as fears about letting other people down by failing in a program. Poor self-determination included comments such as "thinking negative thoughts," "my own laziness," and statements indicating a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed.

How adults describe the positive and negative forces that affect them did not predict persistence, but this information is still valuable in that it gives practitioners input from adult students on what might be important. Adults in this study had much more to say about positive forces than about negative forces. Adding this information to the finding that negative school experience was not associated with persistence points to a conclusion that building positive supports may be more critical to increasing persistence than is the removal of barriers. If this is so, then understanding which positive forces are most important is essential to a model that supports persistence.

The study team summarized its findings as advice that suggested four supports to persistence:

- *The first support to persistence is the establishment of a goal by the student.* The process of goal development begins before an adult enters a program. An adult who could be classified as a potential ABE student experiences an event in his or her life that causes him or her to enter an educational program. That event might be something dramatic; for example, a well-paid worker might lose his or her job and find that he or she does not have the basic skills needed to qualify for a new job at a similar pay scale. That event might be less dramatic; for example, a parent may decide he or she needs more education when a first child begins school. That event might be subtle; for example, a school dropout might have always felt the desire to study for the GED but when his or her children are older and need less attention, there is finally some free time available for education. This event provides potential adult students with goals they hope to accomplish by entering an ABE program. The staff of the educational program should help the potential adult student articulate his or her goal and understand the many instructional objectives that must be accomplished on the road to meeting that goal. Teachers should then use those student goals as the context for instruction. This effort must continue as instruction proceeds because goals may change.

- *The second support is self-efficacy.* The self-determination mentioned by students must build on a foundation of self-efficacy, a feeling that they can reach their goals. The term self-confidence is quite often used in adult education literature, but self-efficacy has a different definition. Self-confidence is a global feeling of being able to accomplish most tasks. Self-efficacy is focused on a specific set of tasks and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that set of tasks.

- *The third support is management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence.* Programs should help students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence. Building on that understanding, each student could make plans to manage these forces so that persistence is more likely. The plans that come out of such an exercise should include strategies for persistence when the forces that affect peoples' lives cause them to drop out. These plans must be revised as adults persist in their studies and these forces change.

- *The fourth support is progress toward reaching a goal.* If the goal is important, then adult students must make progress toward reaching that goal, and they must be able to measure that progress. Programs should provide services of sufficient quality that students make progress, and programs need assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress.

**Phase 2.** The second phase of the project observed ten library literacy programs in California, New York, and North Carolina that were attempting to increase student persistence and interviewed thirty of their students in depth about their history of participation and supports and barriers to persistence. The study found that the persistence of most students was affected by factors that were personal (related to the student) or environmental (related to the student's life situation). Adult basic education programs do not have the resources to address these personal and environmental factors. This study identified five pathways for program participation that are determined by these personal and environmental factors and ways that programs might support students on each pathway. The five pathways are: Long-term, Mandatory, Short-term, Try-out, and Intermittent.

*Long-term students* participate regularly over a long period. Long-term students usually do not express specific goals, but, rather, talk of education as an end in itself. Long-term students have managed the personal and environmental factors that support and inhibit their persistence. Presumably, they will persist in a program that is helping them meet their needs, is convenient for them, and that provides an enjoyable experience. In fact, this is the story told to the study team by long-term students. Most long-term students viewed their program as a comfortable and supportive community and talked about it as a family, a club, or a home base for learning. They referred to the program staff as friends or family members. Long-term students expressed a strong personal commitment to their programs and to their goal of becoming more educated.

Most of the long-term students identified through interviews were over the age of 30. Adults over the age of 30 may no longer have childcare responsibilities and may have a stable income, housing situation, and set of relationships, while the younger students may not have reached this stage of life. The long-term persistence of older students may appear to be supported by their emotional maturity, but, in fact, it may be supported by stable personal and environmental factors related to children, partners, and employment.

For students who are able to travel the long-term pathway, an intake and orientation process that clearly sets out steps, with measurable objectives, along the path to reaching their, often ambitious, goals might help support their persistence. This study found that improving formal instruction (classes and tutoring) and offering many different types of informal instruction appeared to increase hours of instruction for these students. The students on the other four pathways may need changes in program design, and even in the definition of persistence, in addition to these programmatic improvements.

*Mandatory students* must attend a program because they are required to do so by a public assistance or law enforcement agency. Their participation is usually regular and long term, and their goals are often those of the agency that is mandating their attendance. They look like long-term students while they are under the requirement to participate but usually leave abruptly once attendance is no longer mandatory and sometimes even while it still is a requirement.

Mandatory students overcome personal and environmental factors that constrain their persistence because they are required to do so. Since, factors outside the program support their participation, programmatic improvements may not help these students to stay longer. However, if the program changes its services (making them more convenient, more useful, or more enjoyable), mandatory students might choose to participate for more hours. Counseling, during intake and orientation and throughout instruction that focuses on helping mandatory students commit to learning as a way to improve their lives, understand how they learn best, find ways to enjoy learning, and build a support system to sustain their learning might help mandatory students persist after the mandate has ended. Additional hours of participation and persistence after legal mandates for participation have ended are probably good measures of impact for innovations meant to address the needs of mandatory students.

For students who are on the mandatory pathway, program intake and orientation must help students move past the required goals of attendance and begin to see learning as something they choose to do. This building of motivation probably requires goals that are personal and an instructional process that helps students see that they can learn and that learning can be enjoyable. Literacy learning focused on family, work, personal interests, or even the problems that led to their legal or social service status might be a focus of instruction that supports persistence for adults on this pathway. An instructional process that involves discussions among a group of adults might provide a social network that supports

persistence for mandatory students, and referral to support services (such as counseling, daycare, and employment) might be necessary for these students to persist, even while they are under a mandate.

*Short-term students* enroll in a program and participate intensively for a short period in order to accomplish a specific goal. For some of these students, the short-term participation in a library literacy program meets their needs, but for some this participation leads to enrolment in a more suitable program. Though students on a short-term pathway may leave their programs after only a few weeks of instruction, some may persist in another program that more closely meets their needs. Since personal goals determine their length of participation, programmatic innovations may have little impact on the persistence of students on a short-term pathway. Transition into another program and accomplishment of a specific, limited goal are probably good measures of the impact of innovations meant to address the needs of short-term students.

For students who are on the short-term pathway, programs should be careful during intake and orientation to identify their specific goal. When transfer to another program is appropriate for reaching that goal, the program might be able to provide some learning opportunities that prepare these students to be successful in a more appropriate program. When new students have a specific goal, programs should try to focus on it, possibly with an individual tutor, or make that goal the focus of their instruction in a more general learning environment.

*Try-out students* have barriers to persistence that are insurmountable and have goals that are not yet clear enough to sustain their motivation. These students end an episode of program participation quickly with neither goal achievement nor transfer to another program. Students on the try-out pathway are motivated to learn, and their decision to join program services is a positive step. However, they are not ready to be successful.

Program staff members believe that every new student can succeed and are usually opposed to counseling students to defer participation. However, admitting students who are likely to fail, particularly since most of these students have failed in education before, is probably not helpful to the student. Students on the try-out pathway who leave a program with a plan on how to address the personal and environmental barriers constraining their participation so that they can return at sometime in the future is probably a good measure of impact for innovations meant to address the needs of try-out students.

Helping try-out students during intake could improve program persistence rates by both lowing the number of students who drop out after very little participation and by providing more program resources to students who are on a different pathway. To do this, programs would have to design intake processes that identify try-out students, counsel them to delay entry, and help them design a program that would lead to successful participation some time in the future.

*Intermittent students* move in and out of program services. During the time that they are not attending program services, intermittent students may stay in contact with their programs, and their episodes of participation and nonparticipation may reoccur several times and take place in more than one program. Belzer (1998) found that students identified as dropouts in adult education programs often see themselves as still connected but temporarily unable to attend.

These students may have broad goals (such as improving language or basic skills ability) or specific (such as passing a citizenship test), but their goals require a long period of engagement to achieve. However, personal and environmental factors are limiting their ability to attend on a regular basis. Programmatic changes probably cannot have an impact on the persistence of these students unless program services change to fit a pattern of episodes of participation over a long period.

These program changes would redefine participation as connection to the program rather than hours of attendance in program services. This connection would have to be meaningful, not just a name in a database. An example of a meaningful connection could be monthly discussions between a program staff member and a student in which they review progress on a self-study plan. Programs would define any form of learning activity that serves the goals of the program and the student as participation. These activities would include classroom instruction or tutoring but might also include guided self-study at home or at the program venue. Length of continuous connection to the program and cumulative hours of engagement in learning might be good measures of impact for innovations meant to address the needs of intermittent students.

The intermittent pathway may be the only one open to most students. Personal and environmental factors are always going to present barriers to long-term persistence, and most students have goals that require a good deal of study to achieve. Programs should accept this reality and look at ways to redesign their services to provide connected episodes of participation that use a multiplicity of learning resources.

Program staff also need ways to help students maintain contact with the program and to continue to think of themselves as students.

*These five pathways* provide a way to think about the kinds of program changes that might be useful to different types of students. However, any one student might begin a program on one pathway and change to another. In addition, these pathways might be arbitrary points on a continuum. These pathways, therefore, are guidelines that can help programs broaden the ways they help students persist rather than student types that could allow programs to identify the specific needs of an individual student. Program staff knows that a single pathway will not work for all students, but they do not have the resources to provide an individual pathway for each student. Programs can provide five pathways and help students identify which is the path to success for them.

## CONCLUSIONS

The literature reviews defined persistence as supported by motivation and constrained by barriers. The NCSALL persistence study broadened this equation to include a wide range of supports and barriers, but it also identified the limits on how much programs could do to address the barriers that students bring to programs. Programs can make their services more convenient, enjoyable, and useful, but they do not have sufficient resources to directly address the personal and environmental factors that constrain persistence. Even with this limitation, programs should be able to help students persist in learning.

The reviews and the NCSALL persistence study offer suggestions on how programs could help students address their barriers to persistence, even with limited resources. All of these suggestions depend on some form of counseling, which could be formal or informal and individual or in a group. This counseling should help students identify the supports and barriers to their persistence and seek help from local social service agencies, as well as from friends and family.

The reviews and the research also suggest that the schooling model, in which students and teachers meet in one place at scheduled times to pursue a single curriculum, is not sufficient. Programs must offer a range of learning opportunities and help students mange their learning experiences in a way that builds on what they have learned before and moves them toward achievement of a personal goal. The first step in this process is acknowledging that students follow at least five different pathways through program services.

Once this is acknowledged, funding agencies would have to change their accountability standards to allow five different positive outcomes. Practitioners would then feel supported to develop and implement services that helped adults reach those outcomes. The second phase of the NCSALL study makes suggestions for three chronological phases of program participation: Entrance into Services, Participation in Services, and Reengagement in Learning.

**Entrance into Services** includes recruitment, intake and orientation. This is the time when programs prepare students to be successful in learning. Rather than trying to identify a student's pathway when he or she enters a program, program staff might just assume that all students are intermittent. That is, that students are prepared to participate in an episode of learning that, if it is short, might lead to additional episodes of learning that continue until they reach their goal.

The first step in this process might be to help students express a clear goal or a limited set of goals that represent their motivation for participation. The second step would be to develop a learning plan that includes both instruction and the support services a student needs to persist in learning to reach those goals. For try-out students, this process would lead to their postponement of participation, but they would leave the program with a plan on how to prepare to enter services later. The program would identify this student as successful, since the program provided the student with the best possible outcome. For other students, intake and orientation would lead to a plan for participation in the program. That plan should assume that students would engage in episodes of participation that lead to accomplishment of a specific goal, transfer to another program, or departure from the program followed by another episode of participation. Of course, students on a long-term pathway may only have a single long episode of participation.

**Participation in Program Services** includes both instruction and support services. General improvements in instruction and expansion of support services probably help support learning and persistence, but most students need more than just good services. They need instruction that fits their patterns of participation and support services that help them address their particular persistence needs.

A multiplicity of instructional modes (such as classes, tutoring, peer learning groups, technology, and print and media materials) provides students with ways to participate that do not always demand adherence to a regular schedule. However, these different modes would be more effective if they fit into a plan that is followed by both the

student and the tutor or teacher. Helping students and instructional staff follow a plan that uses several modes of instruction and that builds toward the attainment of specific goals is not easy. This chapter can only point out this problem, not provide a solution.

The individual plan would allow a student, who must stop instruction, to continue learning (either at home or at the library) through self-study. When that student is ready to return to regular attendance, any tutor or teacher should be able to look at how far the student has been able to progress on his or her plan and start instruction there. Program services should include regular counseling that helps students meet their own needs for support services and identify the times when they will not be able to meet the instructional schedule and so begin the self-study part of their plan.

**Reengagement in Learning.** Most students do not tell their program or tutor that they are stopping participation. Most just stop attending. Interviews with students uncovered that many of them believe that once they stop attending they cannot return (Comings, et al. 2003). Programs should have a procedure for staying in contact with students who are not attending and for reengaging them in services, and this procedure should be explained during orientation. Former or even current students might be the best people to play this role, since they have addressed the same personal and environmental factors as the students who have dropped out. These new procedures require resources that are now being used to support instruction. However, if these procedures were successful, program services would improve as students who have had a single episode of instruction return to continue learning.

**Building on this Foundation.** The literature reviewed in this chapter sets out a course for programs to support the persistence of their students. Though the course set out here is based on empirical studies, no research has tested whether or not this advice would have an impact on persistence and help more students reach their learning goals. Further study into the nature of persistence and the forces that support and inhibit it would add valuable knowledge, now may be the time to test program models that incorporate the existing research. If these models prove to be sound, practitioners and policy makers could feel comfortable following this advice and further research could begin to build on this foundation.

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# Supports and Hindrances: A Force–Field Analysis

Hager, A. (2000) Supports and hindrances: A force-field analysis. *Focus on Basics*, 4(A), 19

*The following activity guides a group of students in thinking about the forces that hinder and help them to achieve their goals. For beginning English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students, you might need to explain or demonstrate vocabulary.*

**Step 1:** Ask the students to think about what it takes for them to continue to pursue their educational goals.

**Step 2:** Write "Pursuing Educational Goals" at the top of a large sheet of paper on the wall. Then, draw a vertical line down the middle of the paper, and write "+" (plus sign) over the left-hand column and "-" (minus sign) over the right-hand column.

**Step 3:** Ask the students to brainstorm all of the things that make it hard for them to stay in the program and continue to pursue their educational goals. As they brainstorm forces, write them, one by one, on the right side of the paper, under the minus sign. Use the question: Who or what gets in the way of (hinders you from) continuing to come to this program?

**Step 4:** Ask the students to brainstorm the things that help them to attend class or to continue to pursue their education goals. Write these on the left side of the paper, under the plus sign. Use the question: Who or what helps you (supports you) to continue to stay in this program?

**Step 5:** Ask the students to look at the lists and talk about what they see. Are there more negative than positive forces? Where do the forces come from (the class, family, work, etc.)?

**Step 6:** Give each student an index card or a blank piece of paper and ask each to write down the answer to this question: What two forces from the list do you most want us to work on in class? Point out that they can take their forces either from the positive "+" force list (forces they would want to work on strengthening), from the negative "-" force list (forces they would want to work on weakening), or from a combination of the two.

**Step 7:** Have the students get into pairs and discuss the forces they have written down. They must reduce the number of forces from four (two each) to the two they feel are most important to work on in class. One person in each pair should write the new list of two forces on a piece of paper.

**Step 8:** Have sets of pairs join to form small groups of four. Each pair shares its list of two items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two forces on which all four agree. They write their new list of two forces, which represents their "consensus," on a large piece of paper.

**Step 9:** Ask a member from each group to post the paper with their two forces written on it, reading the forces aloud as they do so. Then ask the whole class to look at the papers for similarities: Are there any forces that appear on all the lists? If so, write them on a fresh sheet of paper. These represent the consensus of the class.

**Step 10:** Continue looking for forces that appear on more than one list until all the forces listed on more than one sheet are on the "consensus" list. Ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original lists are important enough to include on the fresh list. The fresh list represents the forces that the class wants to work on in the coming term.

**Step 11:** If only two forces are listed on the "consensus" sheet, skip to step 12. If there are more than two forces, have the students vote for the two forces they see as the highest priority.

**Step 12:** The class has now determined the two forces that they most want to work on. The next step is to brainstorm the various ways in which you can work together as a class to address these forces by strengthening the positive and weakening the negative.

**Continuing the Process:** This is just one way you can help students understand what is helping them achieve their goals and what is hindering them from doing so. You, of course, will be learning at the same time. Try to set aside some time each week to work, as a class, on strengthening the supporting forces and weakening the hindering forces. You and the students can assess what effect these activities are having. The forces that the students want to work on may change over time. To capture these changes, repeat the force-field activity with the class or with individuals throughout the semester.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Andrea Parrella* worked for two years on the NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study.

# Participants' To-Do Form

| Session | Date | What to Do Before Session |
|---------|------|---------------------------|
| One | | Read the documents and articles you received in the Pre-Meeting Packet. <br><br> • Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students – Read pages 29-39. <br><br> • Supports and Hindrances: A Force-Field Analysis – Read the entire two-page article. <br><br> Highlight interesting points and jot down any questions that come to mind. |
| Two | | *You will receive these readings during Session One.* <br> Readings Assigned for Session Two: <br><br> • **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students** – This article was in the Pre-Meeting Packet. Read the rest of the article, pp. 39-45. <br><br> • **Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out** – Read the entire five-page article. <br><br> • "One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief – Read the entire 11-page article. <br><br> Think about how the concepts presented in each reading might apply to the adult students with whom you work. |

## Participants' To–Do Form (continued)

| Session | Date | What to Do Before Session |
|---------|------|---------------------------|
| Three | | *You will receive readings on a selected topic during Session Two.*<br><br>Reading Assigned for Session Three – Read all four articles on the selected topic:<br><br>*Goals*<br>**Building the Desire, Building the Ability**<br>**ODWIN: A Program Rooted in History**<br>**Look Before You Leap: Helping Prospective Learners Make Informed Educational Choices**<br>**The Effects of Continuing Goal-Setting on Persistence in a Math Classroom**<br><br>*Sponsors*<br>**Sponsors and Sponsorship**<br>**Reflections on the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project**<br>**The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups**<br>**Powerful Motivation: The Long-time Tutor is Motivated by Helping Learners**<br><br>*Instruction*<br>**Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting to the Needs of All Learners**<br>**A Conversation with FOB…The Best of Both Worlds: Using Individualized and Group Instruction**<br>**The Community High School of Vermont: An Uncommon High School in an Uncommon Setting**<br>**Separate Yet Happy** |

| Session | Date | What to Do Before Session |
|---------|------|---------------------------|
|  |  | *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** |
|  |  | Jot down your impressions and questions as you read these sections. |
|  |  | Review any notes you have (or have been typed up from group discussions) from the previous sessions. |
|  |  | Spend time reflecting on the specific strategies suggested by the research, and begin to think of what you might like to do next in your classroom or program to implement what you have learned. |

# STEPS FOR FACILITATING SESSION ONE

**Objectives:** By the end of this first session, 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.

**Time:** 3½ hours

**Preparation:**

⬜ NEWSPRINTS (Prepare ahead of time: <u>Underlined</u> in the steps)

___ Our Obstacles

___ Purpose of the NCSALL Study Circles

___ Session One Objectives

___ Session One Agenda

___ What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle

___ Discussion Questions

___ Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence

___ Situational

___ Institutional

___ Dispositional

___ Discussion Questions (NOTE: The questions listed in this newsprint can also be adapted for the alternative activity involving the Persistence Among Adult Education Students video.)

___ Definition of Persistence

___ Four Supports for Student Persistence

___ Discussing Supports for Student Persistence

___ Useful / How to Improve

For Use with Supplemental Handouts

___ Goal: Continuing to Pursue Our Educational Goals

___ What Brings You Here?

___ Most Important Forces That…

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

___ Overview of Study Circle

___ Sample Ground Rules

___ Negative Forces

___ Positive Forces

Supplemental Handouts for Session One

___ Brainstorming and Prioritizing

___ Acting It Out

___ Classroom Discussion

___ Snowball Consensus

___ Affinity Diagramming

___ Student-to-Student Interviews

Handout Assigned for Session Two

___ Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction

(Make a few extra copies of the Pre-Meeting Packet handouts for participants who forget to bring them.)

   📖       **READINGS ASSIGNED FOR SESSION TWO** (Photocopy ahead of time: **Bolded** in the steps)

    ___     Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students (Make a few extra copies for participants who have misplaced their Pre-Meeting Packet.)

    ___     Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

    ___     "One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief

    **MATERIALS**

    ___     blank newsprint sheets

    ___     newsprint easel

    ___     markers, pens, tape

    ___     the Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video

## Steps:

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**1.   WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**             (15 MINUTES)

---

- **Welcome participants** to the first meeting of the study circle.

- **Introduce yourself** and state your role as facilitator of the study circle. Explain how you came to facilitate this study circle and who is sponsoring it.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Our Obstacles</u>.

<div style="border:1px solid #000; padding:40px; background:#e8e8e8;">

**Our Obstacles**

</div>
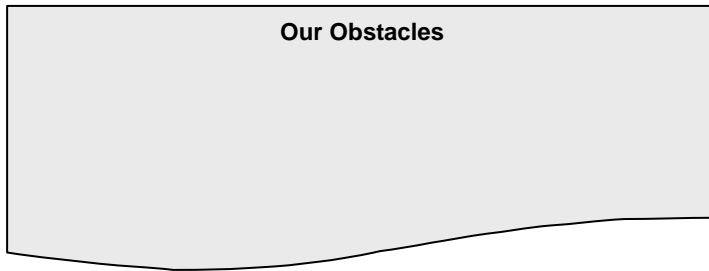
- **Ask participants to introduce themselves briefly** (name, program, role) and to say whether they have ever taken

> **Note to Facilitator**
> Since time is very tight, it's important to move participants along gently but firmly if they are exceeding the time limit for introductions.

part in a study circle. Ask them to **briefly describe one obstacle** they had to overcome to be here today. Summarize the responses on the newsprint and post it.

- **Make sure that participants know** where bathrooms are located, when the session will end, when the break will be, and any other "housekeeping" information.

## 2. PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY CIRCLE, SESSION ONE OBJECTIVES, AND AGENDA (10 MINUTES)

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Purpose of the NCSALL Study Circles</u> and review the purpose with participants.

> **Purpose of the NCSALL Study Circles**
> 1. To help practitioners read, discuss, and use research to improve their practice.
> 2. To generate recommendations and practical suggestions for other practitioners or policymakers about how to translate research into practice.

- 🗋 **Distribute the handout** *Overview of Study Circle.* Give participants a minute to read the handout, then provide a brief overview of the three sessions.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Session One Objectives</u> **and review the objectives** briefly with the group.

> **Session One Objectives**
>
> By the end of this session, you 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.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Session One Agenda</u> **and describe each activity briefly.** Ask if people have questions about the agenda.
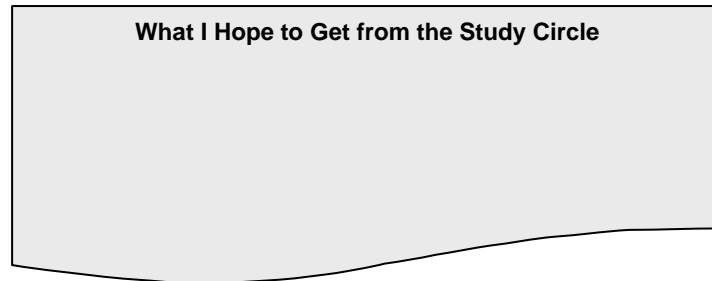
> **Session One Agenda**
>
> - Welcome and Introductions (Done!)
>
> - Purpose and Overview of the Study Circle, Session One Objectives, and Agenda (Doing)
>
> - Participant Expectations and Group Guidelines
>
> - Discussion of First Reading
>
>   BREAK
>
> - Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers
>
> - Negative and Positive Forces
>
> - Four Supports for Adult Student Persistence
>
> - Evaluation of Session One and Assignment for Session Two

## 3.  PARTICIPANT EXPECTATIONS AND GROUP GUIDELINES    (20 MINUTES)

- ☐  **Direct attention to handout** *The Role of the Participant,* which was included in the Pre-Meeting Packet. Ask participants if they agree with this role and whether they

would like to add or change anything about their role in this study circle.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle</u>.

> **What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle**

**Ask each person to make a short statement in response to this question.** Write their statement on the newsprint as they say it. (If someone begins to talk about his or her teaching situation, etc., point to the <u>Session One Agenda</u> newsprint and remind them that there will be a chance to talk about that a little later in the meeting.)

- **After everyone has made a statement, summarize what you heard.** Refer to the handout *Overview of Study Circle* and talk about how and where in the three-session study circle their needs will be met. Also, be clear with participants about learning expectations they may have stated that are not part of the study circle. For example, the study circle is *not a training* that will provide them with handouts or demonstrations on teaching techniques or materials for teaching. This study circle will, however, cue them into the instructional and programmatic areas that research has shown to be important and effective in increasing student persistence. Hopefully this research will guide them as they make decisions about how best to address student persistence.

- ☐ **Refer participants to the handout** *What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison,* which was also included in their Pre-Meeting Packet. Explain that the study circle is for discussing:

- theories and concepts from the research

- their context and experiences in relation to the topic

- their ideas about the implications of the theories and research for their own and other practitioners' practice and policy

Ask if there are any questions about what a study circle is or is not, or about the design of this one.

- **Next, explain that one of the things that helps study circles to run smoothly** is an agreement among participants about the ground rules to follow during the meetings and discussions.

- ⬭ **Distribute the handout** *Sample Ground Rules.* After giving participants a few minutes to review it, ask if there are any ground rules they would like to add to or delete from the list. Write these on newsprint as they are mentioned.

- **Ask if everyone agrees with these ground rules.** Use the "I can live with that one" criterion, i.e., you might not be crazy about one or more of these but you can "live with it" and agree to abide by it. The discussion should be only around those ground rules that participants find objectionable and "can't live by." Let participants know that it is your job, as facilitator, to remind them of these ground rules if you see them being broken.

## 4. DISCUSSION OF FIRST READING                    (50 MINUTES)

- 📖 **Explain that in this next activity** participants will reflect on the first reading for today's meeting, **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students.** *If you want the group to view the Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video instead of doing the small group discussion activity, this is the time to do so. See Another Idea.* ➡

**Another Idea**

Invite participants to set the ground rules to be followed for the study circle. Write ground rules on newsprint as participants say them.

After five minutes or so, distribute the handout *Sample Ground Rules* and ask participants if there are any ground rules on this handout that they would like to add to their list. Add these to the newsprint.

**Another Idea**

Instead of dividing into small groups to discuss the research, show the NCSALL/NIFL Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video (on DVD) to the whole group. You will need a television and DVD player *or* a computer that can play DVDs and a projector. The video takes about 25 minutes. At the end of the video, use the questions in this activity to lead a whole group discussion about the Adult Student Persistence Study.

[Note to facilitator: The article 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.]

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Discussion Questions</u>. Ask participants to form small groups of three to four people to explore the following questions. Ask the groups to also note questions that arise during their discussions that they would like to discuss with the whole group.

> **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
>
> - What did you see as the key points of this article?
>
> - Which of the findings or practices did you find surprising or intriguing? Why?
>
> - The article summarizes the findings of four literature reviews and describes the first phase of the Persistence Study. What did you find as commonalities across the studies? What did you see as the differences?
>
> - What characteristics of adult students seemed to support persistence? Which characteristics did not appear to be associated with persistence?
>
> - 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 discussions. After each group presents, there should be time allotted for questions and comments from other groups. (This should be encouraged by the facilitator.).

## BREAK (15 minutes)

## 5.   SITUATIONAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

(30 MINUTES)

- **Post the newsprint** Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence.

> **Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence**
>
> **Situational or Influences of the Adult's Circumstances:** These barriers include transportation, family responsibilities, financial obligations, and related issues that impede students' abilities to enroll and stay in classes.
>
> **Institutional or Influences of Systems:** These barriers include program fees, "red tape," scheduling problems, and other roadblocks inherent in institutional structures.
>
> **Dispositional or Influences of Experience:** These barriers include students' attitudes, negative experience with schooling, values, and perceptions about schooling that Quigley suggests affect students' motivation to enroll in and stay in school.

- **Explain to participants that** many researchers refer to a framework outlined by B. Allan Quigley in which he identified three categories of barriers to student persistence. Those barriers are summarized on this newsprint.

- **Briefly review these summaries** and ask participants to refer to these summaries as they reflect on their own experiences.  Ask participants to list the barriers that their students have had in persisting in adult education long enough to meet their goals.

- **Post the newsprints** Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional.

> **Note to Facilitator**
>
> If participants would like to read more about Quigley's categories of barriers to student enrollment and persistence, refer them to the following article:
> B. Allan Quigley, "The first three weeks: A critical time for motivation," *Focus on Basics,* Vol. 2, Issue A, March 1998.

> **Situational**
>
> Barriers | Ways to address

| Institutional | |
|---|---|
| Barriers | Ways to address |

| Dispositional | |
|---|---|
| Barriers | Ways to address |
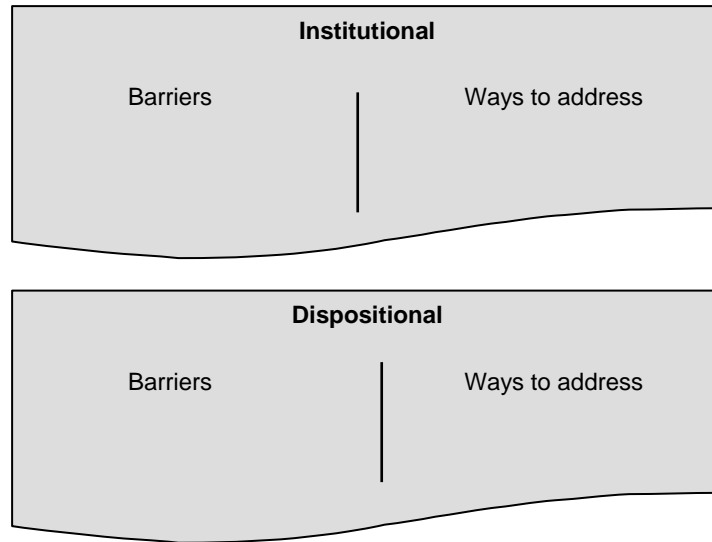
- **Ask participants to form three small groups** and assign one type of barrier—situational, institutional, or dispositional—to each group. Ask groups to brainstorm examples for the type of barrier that could negatively effect student persistence and record these ideas on the left hand column of the newsprint. Then ask participants to think of ways to address these examples and record them on the right column. Encourage participants to draw from their own experiences. Give the groups 15 minutes to work.

- **Ask groups to post the newsprints** and **ask participants to take 10 minutes to walk around** and read the newsprints. [Note to facilitator: Save the newsprints for Session 3.]

- **Reconvene the large group** and ask participants to compare the obstacles they had to overcome to be here today (see posted newsprint from Introductions activity) with the examples of barriers they just read. Ask two or three participants for their responses.

- **Then ask participants** which types of barriers might be feasible for adult education programs and staff to address.

- **Explain to participants** that later in this session, they will be discussing recent research about forces and barriers that affect adult student persistence, motivation, and retention in adult basic education.

## 6.   NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FORCES                    (30 MINUTES)

- 📖  **Explain that, in this next activity,** participants will review the results that NCSALL got in using the force-field analysis during the study on adult student persistence with 150 students in pre-GED classes throughout New England. Remind participants that they read an article for today's session where the author describes a process designed to guide groups of students through an examination of the forces that hinder and support their efforts to achieve educational goals.

- 📄  **Distribute the handout** *Negative Forces* and the handout *Positive Forces.* Ask participants to spend five minutes reading over the forces in the tables from the NCSALL study. Point out that the students were able to articulate many positive forces; however, many students did not articulate negative forces.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Discussion Questions.</u>

> **Discussion Questions**
> - What are your general impressions of the forces listed in these two tables? What do you see as the critical forces?
> - In what ways are the students' positive forces similar to the ways to address the barriers that you brainstormed? In what ways are they different?  What might account for the differences between your perceptions and those of the group of students?
> - What forces, if any, do you think are absent from the NCSALL research or from your brainstorming? What might account for those absences?
> - What are some possible reasons for the researchers' finding that students did not name negative forces? What might be the implications of this for program practice?

**Note to Facilitator**
If participants would like to review other activities for hearing from students on negative and positive forces, make the following handouts available:
- *Brainstorming and Prioritizing*
- *Acting It Out*
- *Classroom Discussion*
- *Snowball Consensus*
- *Affinity Diagramming*
- *Student-to-Student Interviews*

- **Facilitate a 25-minute discussion** using the questions as a guide. Make the point that the authors of the Adult Student Persistence Study wrote about the importance of hearing from students about their supports and barriers to

persistence and then of coming up with a plan, together with those students, to manage those forces over time.

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**7.   FOUR SUPPORTS FOR ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE**      (25 MINUTES)

- 📖  Point out that, in the reading **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students,** the authors identify four supports for persistence, based on their own research and on other research about this issue.

- **Make the following points** about the NCSALL Adult Persistence Study:

  - The study asked students who were currently enrolled in programs not only about their barriers but also about their *supports* to persistence.

  - The report describes what the students identified as their most important supports and barriers to persistence.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Definition of Persistence.</u>

> **Definition of Persistence**
>
> Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow.

- 📖 **Review the** Adult Student Persistence Study's **definition of persistence.** Ask participants to comment on the ways this definition of persistence is similar to or different than the ones they use.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Four Supports for Student Persistence.</u>

> **Four Supports for Student Persistence**
> - Management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence
> - Establishment of a goal by the student
> - Self efficacy
> - Progress toward reaching a goal

- **Point out that one support**—management of the positive and negative forces—was addressed in the last activity. In this next activity, the study circle group will discuss the remaining three supports.

- &#128214; **Divide participants into three small groups (or do as a whole group if your group is small)**. Instruct Group One to review and discuss self-efficacy, Group Two, establishment of a goal, and Group Three, progress toward reaching a goal. Ask each group to review the description of their assigned support on pages 38-39 of the reading.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Discussing Supports for Student Persistence</u> and allow 10 minutes for the groups to discuss the questions and summarize their discussions on newsprint.

> **Discussing Supports for Student Persistence**
> - What is your opinion about the importance of this support for student persistence?
> - How would you help students achieve a sense of self-efficacy?
> 
> *OR*
> - How would you help a student establish a meaningful goal?
> 
> *OR*
> - How do you help students see their own progress in ways that are meaningful to them?

- **After 10 minutes, reconvene the whole group**. Give each group a few minutes to report back a summary of their

discussion. Then facilitate a seven-minute discussion, continuing to use the newsprint as a guide for the whole group. [Note to facilitator: Save the newsprints for Session 3.]

## 8. EVALUATION OF SESSION ONE AND ASSIGNMENT FOR SESSION TWO (15 MINUTES)

- **Explain to participants** that, in the time left, you would like to get feedback from them about this first session. You will use this feedback in shaping the next two sessions of the study circle.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Useful/How to Improve</u>.

| Useful | How to Improve |
|---|---|
| | |

**Note to Facilitator**

Save this newsprint and copy participants' comments onto the Feedback Form you submit to NCSALL. This form can be found at the end of the study circle guide.

Ask participants first to tell you what was useful or helpful to them about the design of this first session of the study circle. Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under "Useful."

- **Then ask participants for suggestions on how to improve this design.** Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under "How to Improve."  If anyone makes a negative comment that's not in the form of a suggestion, ask the person to rephrase it as a suggestion for improvement, and then write the suggestion on the newsprint.

- **Do not make any response to participants' comments during this evaluation.** It is *very* important that you do not defend or justify anything you have done in the study circle or anything about the design, as this will discourage

further suggestions. If anyone makes a suggestion you don't agree with, just nod your head. If you feel some response is needed, rephrase their concern: "So you feel that what we should do instead of the small group discussion is …? Is that right?"

-   📖  **Distribute Readings Assigned for Session Two:**

  **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students.** Tell participants that they should read the rest of the article, pp. 39-45.

  **Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out.** Tell participants that they should read the entire article.

  **"One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief.** Tell participants that they should read the entire article.

-   📄  **Distribute Handout Assigned for Session Two:** *Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction.* Tell participants that they should use their program's most recent, end-of-year data to complete the handout.

-   📄  **Refer participants again to the handout** *Participants' To-Do Form.* Go over the instructions for what they are to do to prepare for Session Two. To the best of your ability, make sure that participants are clear about what they are required to read before the next meeting. Find out if they have any questions about what they are to do before the next session. Thank them for the preparation they did for this first session.

- **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.

# Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session One

| 1. Welcome and Introductions | 15 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Everyone introduces themselves.
- Housekeeping and logistics.

| 2. Purpose and Overview of the Study Circle, Session One Objectives, and Agenda | 10 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Post newsprints; pass out handout *Overview of Study Circle*; review.

| 3. Participant Expectations and Group Guidelines | 20 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Review handout *The Role of the Participant*, post newsprint <u>What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle.</u>
- List responses to <u>What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle</u>.
- Summarize against *Overview of Study Circle*.
- Refer to *What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison.*
- Pass around handout *Sample Group Rules*; add rules; discuss.

| 4. Discussion of First Reading | 50 mins., SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP 50 mins., WHOLE GROUP (if video) |
|---|---|

- Form small groups; post newsprint for groups to discuss (25 minutes in groups).
- Reconvene whole group; representative from each small group shares observations, questions, and issues; questions and comments from other groups.

**OR**

- Show Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video (25 minutes); whole group discussion adapting questions on newsprint and in guide for this activity.

### 15–Minute Break

# Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session One

| 5. Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers | 30 mins., SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Post newsprint <u>Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence</u>; review barriers.
- Post newsprints: <u>Situational, Institutional, Dispositional</u>; form three small groups to brainstorm and list kinds of barriers students have to participation and possible ways to address these barriers.
- Reconvene whole group; conduct gallery walk.
- Whole group discussion to compare the barriers participants' had in being here today and these lists and to identify which types of barriers adult education programs might be able to address.

| 6. Negative and Positive Forces | 30 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Review *Negative Forces* and *Positive Forces* handouts.
- Whole group discussion using newsprint questions.

| 7. Four Supports for Adult Student Persistence | 25 mins., WHOLE GROUP, then SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Post newsprint <u>Definition of Persistence</u>; review.
- Post newsprint <u>Four Supports for Student Persistence</u>; review.
- Form three small groups to discuss one of the assigned supports, using question(s) on newsprint <u>Discussing Supports for Student Persistence</u>.
- Reconvene whole group; representative from each small group summarizes their discussion; continue discussion using newsprint as guide.

| 8. Evaluation of Session One and Assignment for Session Two | 15 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Post newsprint <u>Useful/How to Improve</u>.
- Distribute **Readings Assigned for Session Two** and **Handout Assigned for Session Two**; refer to *Participants' To-Do Form.*
- Remind participants of next session date, time, and location.

# Materials to Hand Out in Session One

## CONTENTS

Handouts for Session One

Handout 　:　 *Overview of Study Circle*

Handout 　:　 *Sample Ground Rules*

Handout 　:　 *Negative Forces*

Handout 　:　 *Positive Forces*

Supplemental Handouts for Session One

Handout 　:　 *Brainstorming and Prioritizing*

Handout 　:　 *Acting It Out*

Handout 　:　 *Classroom Discussion*

Handout 　:　 *Snowball Consensus*

Handout 　:　 *Affinity Diagramming*

Handout 　:　 *Student-to-Student Interviews*

Readings Assigned for Session Two

Reading 　:　 **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students** (Pre-Meeting Packet)

Reading 　:　 **Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out**

Reading 　:　 **"One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief**

Handout Assigned for Session Two

Handout ⬜:   *Program Data on Duration and Intensity
of Instruction*

# Overview of Study Circle

### SESSION ONE

Get introduced to study circles; share information about your interest and experience with barriers to adult student persistence; examine the research on persistence, retention, and motivation; review four suggested supports for persistence; and examine the forces that support and hinder student persistence.

### SESSION TWO

Look in more depth at the research on adult student persistence, discuss program strategies for increasing persistence, and review the five pathways for program participation that are determined by students' personal and environmental factors.

### SESSION THREE

Consider specific ways programs and practitioners address persistence in their situations and plan for what you might do to improve student persistence in your own programs or classes.

## Sample Ground Rules*

The Study Circles Resource Center

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

- Share "air time."

- If you are offended, say so, and say why.

- You can disagree, but don't personalize it; stick to the issues. No name-calling or stereotyping.

- Speak for yourself, not for others.

- One person speaks at a time.

- What is said in the group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that rule.

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# Negative Forces
## That Hinder Persistence, Identified by Students*

N=150 (There were 150 students total)

| Force | Description of force | Percentage of students who named force as a top 3 hindrance to persistence |
|---|---|---|
| Life Demands | Conditions at home<br>Special child care needs<br>Work demands<br>Transportation<br>Own/family's health<br>Lack of time/being fatigued<br>Welfare and other official rules<br>Age<br>Weather<br>Moving<br>Lack of income | 48.7% (N=73) |
| Relationships | Unsupportive family members, friends, or colleagues<br>Unsupportive community or welfare workers<br>Religious beliefs<br>Fears about letting other people down by failing in a program | 16.7% (N=25) |
| Negative Self | Thinking negative thoughts<br>Own laziness<br>Lack of own confidence in their ability to succeed | 11.3% (N=17) |
| Learning Process | | 8% (N=12) |
| Instructional Factors | | 6.7% (N=10) |
| Teacher | | 2% (N=3) |
| Program Factors | | 1.3% (N=2) |

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* From Comings, J., Parrella, & Soricone, L. (1999) Persistence among adult basic education students in pre–GED classes. (Report #12) Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

# Positive Forces
## That Support Persistence, Identified by Students*

N=150 (There were 150 students total)

| Force | Description of force | Percentage of students who named force as a top 3 support for persistence |
|---|---|---|
| Relationships | Friends, families or colleagues<br>God or their church<br>Community groups and<br>    community workers<br>Support groups<br>Mentors or bosses<br>Their own children | 63.3% (N=95) |
| Goals | Helping one's children<br>Getting a better job<br>Bettering one's self<br>Moving ahead in life<br>Attending college/some other<br>    academic goal<br>Proving someone wrong<br>Obtaining citizenship | 57.3% (N=86) |
| Teacher/ Students | Individual teacher (81%)<br>Fellow students (9%)<br>Combination of the two (10%) | 50.7% (N=76) |
| Positive Self | Me<br>My determination | 44% (N=66) |
| Process Orientation | Enjoyment of learning<br>Skill achievement<br>Routine/structure of learning in a program | 8.7% (N=12) |
| Life Supports | Child Care<br>Conditions at home<br>Mandatory participation in a program<br>Work schedules<br>Pleasure in being in the United States<br>Students' own investment in class | 7.3% (N=11) |
| Program Supports | Facilities and structure of program<br>Overall program quality<br>Program counselors | 8% (N=12) |
| Instruction | Curriculum and methods<br>Particular subjects<br>Access to computers | 63.3% (N=95) |

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* From Comings, J., Parrella, & Soricone, L. (1999) Persistence among adult basic education students in pre–GED classes. (Report #12) Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

# Brainstorming and Prioritizing

This activity is helpful in guiding a group to think about the forces that hinder and help them to achieve a goal.

(Note: To adapt for use with an individual, skip Steps 7-12.)

**Step 1:** Ask the group to think about the goal of continuing to pursue their educational goals.

**Step 2:** Write the goal on the top of a sheet of newsprint. Then, draw a vertical line down the middle of the newsprint, with a + (positive sign) over the left-hand column and a – (negative sign) over the right hand column, as shown below:

> **Goal: Continuing to Pursue Our Educational Goals**
>
> +                                                        -
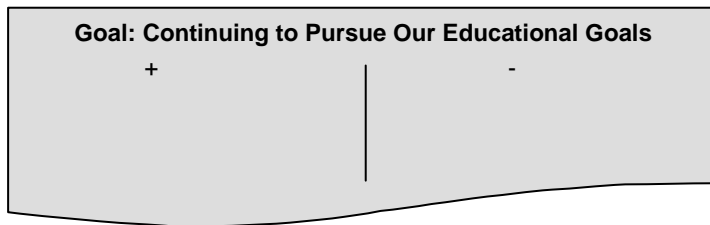
**Step 3:** Ask students to first brainstorm all the things that make it hard for them to continue to pursue their educational goals. Write them on the right side of the newsprint. Use the question: *Who or what gets in the way of continuing to come to these classes?*

**Step 4:** Then ask students to brainstorm all the things that help them to attend class or to continue to pursue their education goals. Use the question: *Who or what helps or supports you to continue to stay in these classes?* Write these responses on the left side of the newsprint.

**Step 5:** Ask the students to look at the newsprint and talk about what they see. For example, *are there more negative than positive forces? Where do the forces come from* (e.g., from the class, from your life, etc.)?

**Step 6:** Give each student an index card or a blank piece of paper. Ask each student to write down the answer to this question: *What two forces from the list do you most want us to work on in class?* Point out that they can take their forces from the positive force list (forces they would want to work on strengthening/increasing), from the negative force list (forces they would want to work on weakening/decreasing), or from a combination of the two.

**Step 7:** Ask students to get into pairs and discuss their two forces, coming to agreement about the two forces they feel are most important to work on in class. One person in each pair should write their new list of two forces on another piece of paper or card.

**Step 8:** Have two pairs join to form a group of four. Have each pair shares its list of two items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two forces upon which all four can agree. Ask a volunteer to write their new list of two forces, representing their "consensus," on a piece of newsprint to hang in front of the class.

**Step 9:** Then ask a member from each group to post their newsprint and read the two forces the group listed. Instruct the whole class to examine the newsprints, looking for similarities, and ask: *Are there any forces that appear on everyone's list?* If so, write these on a fresh sheet of newsprint (which will represent the whole class consensus).

**Step 10:** Continue until all of the items listed on more than one newsprint are rewritten on the fresh newsprint. Then ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original newsprints are important enough to include on the fresh newsprint. When completed, the fresh newsprint represents a list of all the forces that the class wants to work on in the coming semester or year.

**Step 11:** If, at this point, there are only two forces listed on the "consensus newsprint," skip to Step 12. If there are more

than two forces, give out two dot stickers to each student. Ask each student to come up to the newsprint and place his/her two dots on the forces that s/he feels are the most important to work on in class.

**Step 12:** The class has now whittled their forces down to the two which they most want to work on and address in class. The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces.

## Acting It Out

This activity is a way to bring students' experiences with a particular issue to life and set the stage to analyze those experiences.

(Note: The acting out portion of this activity is better suited for use in a class of four or more students rather than for a one-on-one teaching situation.)

**Step 1:** Ask the group to think about the goal of continuing to pursue their educational goals.

**Step 2:** Write the goal on the top of a sheet of newsprint. Then, draw a vertical line down the middle of the newsprint, with a + (positive sign) over the left-hand column and a – (negative sign) over the right hand column, as shown below:

**Goal: Continuing to Pursue Our Educational Goals**

    **+**                              **-**
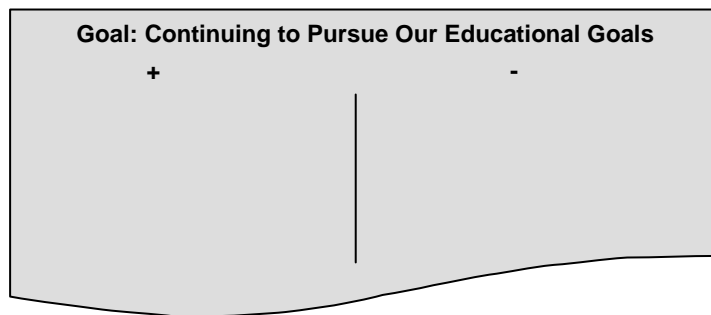
**Step 3:** Ask students to first brainstorm all the things that make it hard for them to continue to pursue their educational goals, to stay in the program. Write them on the right side of the newsprint. Use the question: *Who or what gets in the way of continuing to come to these classes?*

**Step 4:** Then ask students to brainstorm all the things that help them to attend class or to continue to pursue their education goals. Use the question: *Who or what helps or supports you to continue to stay in these classes?* Write these responses on the left side of the newsprint.

**Step 5:** Ask each student to copy one of the forces on an individual strip of paper with positive forces on one color and negative forces on another color. Spread out the strips with the positive forces along one side of a table and the strips with negative forces along the other side.

**Step 6:** Then explain what will happen during the activity and the roles that people will need to fill.

- Students will act out the forces they have just generated.
- One person will play the role of the representative student and this person will listen quietly.
- The rest of the group will divide into two smaller groups: the positives and the negatives.
- Each person can choose which group s/he would like to be in, but the final two groups should have approximately the same number of people as the number of strips of paper representing positive or negative forces.
- The "positives" go to the side of the table with the positive forces, and the "negatives" go to the side with the negative forces.
- The representative student sits at the head of the table.

**Step 7:** Once everyone is in the right place, ask students to choose the strips of paper with the forces that stand out for them, trying to evenly distribute all the forces among the students until all the paper strips are taken.

**Step 8:** Ask students to spontaneously act out one force at a time, going back and forth between positive and negative forces, trying to build on what was said before them, until all the forces are voiced. The representative student's job is to sit quietly and listen to all the forces as if they are voices within him or herself.

Explain that they are all acting out roles, and that what they say does not necessarily represent their own views. They are to try to understand and bring to life the forces

they have chosen and should feel free to add words and feeling to their role.

**Step 9:** Once all the forces have been acted out, ask the representative student what comments or reactions s/he has and what s/he feels. Be sure to give this student the opportunity to speak first about his/her experience; then ask the rest of the group what it was like to act out the forces.

**Step 10:** Then facilitate a discussion with the whole group, asking guiding questions that encourage the students to reflect on: (1) insights they gained about the issue, and (2) questions they now have.

**Step 11:** Give each student an index card or a blank piece of paper. Ask each student to write down the answer to this question: *What two forces from the list do you most want us to work on in class?* Point out that they can take their forces from the positive force list (forces they would want to work on strengthening/increasing), from the negative force list (forces they would want to work on weakening/decreasing), or from a combination of the two.

**Step 12:** Ask students to get into pairs and discuss their two forces, coming to agreement about the two forces they feel are most important to work on in class. One person in each pair should write their new list of two forces on another piece of paper or card.

**Step 13:** Have two pairs join to form a group of four. Have each pair share its list of two items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two forces upon which all four can agree. Ask a volunteer to write their new list of two forces, representing their "consensus," on a piece of newsprint to hang in front of the class.

**Step 14:** Then ask a member from each group to post their newsprint and read the two forces the group listed. Instruct the whole class to examine the newsprints, looking for similarities, and ask: *Are there any forces that*

*appear on everyone's list?* If so, write these on a fresh sheet of newsprint (which will represent the whole class consensus).

**Step 15:** Continue until all of the items listed on more than one newsprint are rewritten on the fresh newsprint. Then ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original newsprints are important enough to include on the fresh newsprint. When completed, the fresh newsprint represents a list of all the forces that the class wants to work on in the coming semester or year.

**Step 16:** If at this point, there are only two forces listed on the "consensus newsprint," skip to Step 17. If there are more than two forces, give out two dot stickers to each student. Ask each student to come up to the newsprint and place his/her two dots on the forces s/he feels are the most important to work on in class.

**Step 17:** The class has now whittled their forces down to the two which they most want to work on and address in class. The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces.

# Classroom Discussion

This activity is one way to organize a discussion and then use the fruits of that discussion as a way to address persistence.

(Note: To adapt this activity to a one-on-one teaching situation, pose the questions in Step 1 to a student in a dialogue journal. Then respond to the student's answers to these questions in the journal. Together, you and the student can explore ways to help increase persistence that fit that student's particular context.)

**Step 1:** Use the following questions addressing student motivation, retention, and persistence to guide the discussion. Write the questions on newsprint to hang at the front of the room.

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**What Brings You Here?**

- What makes it easy for you to come to this program?

- What makes it hard for you to come to this program?

- What keeps you interested while you are here?

- What would make it more interesting?

- Imagine that for some reason you decide to stop coming to this program. How do you think you would feel?

- Do you think you would return to this or another program at some point? Why or why not?

- What, if anything, would help you to return?

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**Step 2:** Set ground rules as a group if these have not already been done. Ask students what they need to feel safe talking in pairs or a group. Write down the ground rules and post them.

**Step 3:** Ask students to work in pairs. Give each student a handout with questions that mirror those on the newsprint. Ask that one student in each pair be the

recorder who will later report back to the whole group key points in their discussion.

**Step 4:** Give the pairs 15 minutes to discuss the questions and record their answers. For classes with very low literacy skills, students can simply discuss the questions and not record their thoughts.

**Step 5:** After 15 minutes, ask the recorder in each pair to report their discussion to the whole group. Record on newsprint their responses to the questions: *What makes it easy for you to come to this program? What makes it hard for you to come to this program? What keeps you interested while you are here? What would make it more interesting?* This will be your record of the conversation.

**Step 6:** After hearing from all the pairs, open up the discussion to the group at large. Ask them such questions as: *Are there other things that people would want to add? What similarities and differences do you see? Are there things that surprise you? What questions do you now have?*

**Step 7:** Then ask students to look at the issues raised on each of the newsprints. Point out that they have written about forces that both help them to continue coming to class and forces that hinder them or get in the way of their coming to class. Ask them the question: *Of all the points written on these newsprints, which two points do you want to work on in class*? (Some possible answers would name something that the class could work on to strengthen or increase the positive forces, something the class could work on to weaken or decrease the negative forces, or an idea for how to make the class more interesting.)

**Step 8:** Put up a fresh piece of newsprint. Ask each student to come up and write two forces from the discussion that they most want the class to work on together. Tell them that if someone else has already written a point that they agree with, they can simply make a check mark next to that point on the newsprint. Continue until each student has written his/her two forces on the newsprint.

**Step 9:**    Give each student two dot stickers. Ask each student to read through the list on the newsprint and decide which two areas s/he would like the class to work on together. Tell them to place their dots next to those items.

**Step 10:**    The class has now whittled their forces down to the two which they most want to work on and address in class. The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces (strengthen the positive; weaken the negative).

# Snowball Consensus

This activity guides a group to develop a list of ideas or course of action with which all can agree.

**Step 1:** Pose a question to the whole group related to the ideas wanted: *What are the two forces that most help you in continuing to pursue your educational goals, and what are the two forces that most hinder you?* (It's best to give people a specific number of ideas to state, e.g., what *two* forces...)

**Step 2:** Have students get into pairs and discuss these questions, coming to agreement about the two helping and two hindering forces that affect both of their lives. Have one of them write these four forces on a piece of paper.

**Step 3:** Have two pairs join to form a group of four. Have each pair share its list of four items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two helping and two hindering forces upon which all four can agree. One of them should now write their new list of four forces, representing their consensus, on a sheet of newsprint, divided like this:

|  Most Important Forces That . . . | |
| --- | --- |
| Help us continue: | Make it hard to continue: |
| 1. | 1. |
| 2. | 2. |

**Step 4:** Have groups post their newsprints on the wall and take turns reading aloud the helping and hindering forces listed on their newsprint. Then ask the whole class to look at the newsprints for similarities, asking: *Are there any helping or hindering forces that appear on everyone's list?* If so, then write these on a fresh newsprint sheet (which will represent the whole class consensus).

**Step 5:**    Continue until all of the items listed on more than one newsprint are rewritten on the fresh newsprint. Then ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original newsprints are important enough to include on the fresh newsprint. When completed, the fresh newsprint represents the whole group's consensus about the most important forces, supporting and hindering, that affect students continuing their learning.

**Step 6:**    The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces (strengthen the positive, weaken the negative).

# Affinity Diagramming

This activity guides a group to develop a list of categories or key ideas.

(Note: This activity works well with smaller groups of up to six in size.)

**Step 1:** Give each individual in the class a number of small (3" x 3") sticky notes. People can either work individually or in pairs (especially if reading skills are low). Ask each individual or pair to list a number of forces that help them or hinder them in continuing to pursue their educational goals, writing each force separately on a sticky note. They should indicate with a + (positive sign) those forces that help and a - (negative sign) those forces that make it harder.

**Step 2:** Divide people into small groups of four to six. For each group, place a large sheet of newsprint in the middle of the table or on the wall. Ask the members of each group to stick their sticky notes on their newsprint, in no particular order.

**Step 3:** When all sticky notes are on the newsprint, ask each small group to take 10 minutes to read the sticky notes and rearrange them according to ones that are similar. (Note: Sticky notes can be read aloud by one member of the group to others with less reading skill.) At first, they could clump all the positives together and all the negatives together. Then they could try to find sticky notes that go together by content (e.g., all the sticky notes that have to do with transportation). They can do this by simply pulling up and re-placing the sticky note near others that are similar in nature. Duplicate sticky notes can be pasted on top of one another.

**Step 4:** After the sticky notes have been placed near each other in several bunches, ask students to draw a line around each

set of sticky notes so that the separate bunches of sticky notes that are alike are clearly outlined. Then ask each group to choose a name or title for each bunch of like sticky notes and label the categories on their newsprint.

**Step 5:** Ask each small group to put up their newsprint on the wall so that everyone can see the newsprints from all the groups. Ask a reporter from each group to read aloud the category names from his/her newsprint. Ask the whole class what categories they see that are similar across all the newsprints. Facilitate a discussion about what this means to the students: *Do these categories represent the forces that help or hinder them in continuing to pursue their educational goals? What does this mean to them?*

**Step 6:** Ask each student to think about which two categories s/he would most want to work on together as a class in order to make it easier to continue to come to class. Give each student two dot stickers. Ask them to come up to the newsprints and "vote" on the two categories they would most want the class to address together.

**Step 7:** In future classes, use the two prioritized categories as guides to the curriculum. Brainstorm with students ways the class can address these categories as a group in order to increase student persistence (strengthen the positive, weaken the negative).

# Student–to–Student Interviews

This activity is helpful for gathering information with and from students, especially those who are uncomfortable talking in a large group. It may take some practice and guidance for students to be able to interview each other.

**Step 1:** Explain that you will model an interview with a volunteer from the class. You will be the interviewer and the student will be the one interviewed. The questions which you model should be the same ones the students will be given when they do interviews with each other.

Use the following questions that address student motivation, retention, and persistence. (Note: If students are new to the program, these questions can be modified to ask about prior learning experiences.)

- *What made it easy for you to come to this program?*
- *What made it hard for you to come to this program?*
- *What keeps you interested while you are here?*
- *What would make it more interesting?*
- *Imagine that for some reason you decide to stop coming to this program. How do you think you would feel?*
- *Do you think you would return to this or another program at some point? Why or why not?*
- *What, if anything, would help you to return?*

**Step 2:** Conduct the interview, being careful to use good interview techniques (see the list below). Ask students to take notes or remember what they observe.

**Step 3:** Process the activity. Ask students what they observed and what questions they have about interviewing. Pose the question: *What makes a good interview?*

**Step 4:** Record students' responses on a newsprint titled, "Tips for Good Interviewing." Following are some tips to include if they don't come up during the discussion.

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**Tips for Good Interviewing**

- Listen carefully.

- Take notes to help you remember what the other person says. (If the class is at a low writing level, ask them to report on what they remember.)

- Allow the person being interviewed plenty of time to speak.

- Don't share your own ideas and experience. An interview is not a discussion.

- Both the interviewer and interviewee will have a time to speak.

- Encourage the other person to talk by asking him/her to explain things s/he says.

- Repeat what the other person says to be sure you understood it correctly. This will also help you remember what s/he said.

- Show that you are interested. Make eye contact.

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**Step 5:** Give each pair one set of the interview questions. Allow 20 minutes for the interviews, ten minutes for each person. Monitor the time to let the first interviewer know that in just a few minutes it will be the other person's turn.

**Step 6:** Ask each pair to report out. Each person will report on what was learned from the person s/he interviewed. As the learners report out, the teacher should record the responses to the following questions on newsprint: *What made it easy for you to come to this program?  What made it hard for you to come to this program?* The newsprint will represent the entire group's responses.

**Step 7:** Talk about both the process of interviewing and the questions themselves.

*Were there any surprises in the interview process?*

*Which role – interviewer or interviewee – did people enjoy more? Why?*

*What similarities and differences do you see in each other's responses?*

*What questions do you now have?*

*What would you like to know more about?*

**Step 8:** Then, together look at the answers on the newsprint questions*: What made it easy for you to come to this program*? *What made it hard for you to come to this program*? *What keeps you interested? What would make it more interesting? What*

*would help you return?* Ask each learner to think about which two items on the newsprints they want the class to work on in order to increase their chances of staying in the program. Point out that they can choose one answer from each of the questions, or they can choose both of their answers from one of the questions. Give learners two dot stickers and ask them to come up to the newsprints and place their dots next to the two they have chosen. After everyone has "voted," count up to see which ones receive the most votes.

**Step 9:** Brainstorm with learners possible next steps for addressing the issues that received the most votes.

# Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

Belzer, A. (1998). Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), 15-17.

## STUDENTS AND TEACHERS MAY PERCEIVE WITHDRAWING FROM A PROGRAM DIFFERENTLY

*To plan this issue, I read many research studies, some quantitative, some qualitative, some teacher research, others done by academics. Alisa Belzer's examination of the process that learners go through in deciding to stay or leave a program and the many factors that influence them presented many findings worthy of discussion, but one in particular intrigued me. She found that some students who were defined as "drop outs" by their literacy programs did not consider themselves as such. This difference in perception can have strong implications for the services we deliver. I asked Alisa to share this aspect of her research with us.* — Barbara Garner

When I was teaching and students stopped coming to class or to tutoring sessions, I never really knew quite what to think. Sometimes I blamed myself: "If only I were a better teacher." Sometimes I felt angry at the student, "If only she could get her life together." And sometimes I offered myself a structural interpretation related to the challenges that learners face: "No wonder she can't keep coming, look at what she is contending with...." In fact, I really couldn't explain it.

In 1991, I had the opportunity to lead a systematic exploration of the issue.[1] Although I did not conduct the study in my own classroom, the questions I asked and methods I used grew out of my experiences as a teacher and coordinator as well as those of my colleagues in a large, urban literacy program.

It seemed unlikely to me that a learner left or stayed in a program based on any one factor. It seemed more likely that a feeling or attitude about leaving the program developed and a decision got made over time. I designed a study aimed at understanding this complex process better. I was particularly interested in the interaction between the expectations learners brought to a program, their life experiences, and what the program had to offer. I gathered data on the expectations the learners brought, obstacles they and their teachers and tutors encountered, ways in which learners and teachers perceived staying in or leaving a program,

and the strategies teachers and tutors employed to promote retention in the program.

One of the assumptions I had, which this article will focus on, was that if students feel badly about leaving a program, it may be difficult for them to return at a later date. This raised the question: How do students feel about leaving? In gathering and analyzing data, I focused in on this issue.

## SAMPLE

To carry out the study, I used qualitative research methods to gain multiple perspectives on the process of participation in an adult literacy program from the point of view of learners, staff, and tutors over time. Four educators—two teachers and two volunteer tutor coordinators—randomly recruited two to three learners each to participate in the study. The only criteria for selection that they used were that the learners have phones and be willing to be interviewed. The group of students consisted of five individuals participating in three different classes and five individuals receiving tutoring in two different areas of the city. Beyond stratifying for type of learning context, the sample was one of convenience.

## PROCESS

The study followed ten students from entry into the program for up to four months or until they dropped out. A former staff member and I gathered the data. We planned periodic contact in the form of face-to-face or telephone interviews with students, as well as with their teachers for those in classes, and with the tutors and coordinators of those receiving tutoring, conducting a total of 102 interviews. The ten students were interviewed 47 times, the four volunteer tutors—one tutor became inactive almost immediately after the study began—were interviewed 19 times, and teachers and coordinators were interviewed 36 times. One tutor remained active in the program only briefly and did not make himself available for an interview. Of the ten adult learners who participated in the study, five of them were still participating regularly in the program at the end of the study.

## PERCEPTIONS OF STOPPING

When students stop coming to a program, how do they perceive this action? This was one of the questions in which I was interested. 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. While they had stopped coming, their intentions to participate had not ended. 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.

This raises questions for educators who work hard to help learners avoid a feeling of failure. For the most part, the learners we interviewed who stopped coming neither felt they had failed, nor did they feel the program had failed. Instead, they communicated a feeling that the circumstances of their lives had made it impossible to continue.

The learners' sense that they have little or no control over circumstances seems in some ways destructive. It implies to me a certain sense of powerlessness and suggests that these learners, at least, may feel unable to get around obstacles not necessarily insurmountable to others. It is also, however, a protective stance. It means that students can leave a program without feeling bad about themselves for being "drop-outs." This, in turn, seems to leave the door open for a return to the program in the future. The fact that nine out of the ten adults in the study had participated in some kind of adult education at least once before and chosen to begin anew seems to bear this assumption out.

Students expressed the belief that they have not "completed" the program until they reached their goals. Yet, stopping periodically was not viewed as quitting. Most focused on what they had been able to accomplish during their time in the program, however brief. For example, one student, who had stopped for health reasons, reported that after her time in the program, she was doing more reading and comprehending better. "I feel good about myself...I'm accomplishing something," she said. Another student who remained in the program throughout the study stated that had she been forced to drop out, she would not have felt like a failure. Rather, she would feel good about the fact that she had made the effort and "I would just go to class the next year or to some other class." A student who was re-entering the program for the third time when the study began explained that she had never felt like a failure when she left in the past because she always knew that she would return. She believed that this in-and-out pattern of participation would serve her until she is able to reach her goals. Two students did admit that if they quit, they would feel unhappy. One said, "If I quit, I wouldn't like myself.

This time I'd rather finish all the way." The other said that if she dropped out she "would feel blue for a while." Fortunately both of these students persisted despite severe obstacles."

## IMPLICATIONS

If one agrees with the study participants' 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? Teachers and tutors could make sure that students have materials they can work on outside of class or tutoring; they should also ensure that learners know how to use those materials. Program staff could emphasize life-long learning skills, such as encouraging the habit of reading and writing every day, so that students continue practicing their literacy skills when they are unable to attend. In addition, programs might want to consider printing and distributing class lists for students to encourage contact between students outside of class. On a broader scale, teachers and program managers should plan their program structures, curricula, and assessment procedures on the assumption that even under the best of circumstances, students will come and go, and, hopefully, come again.

Many of the other findings from this study, not detailed here, affirm the notion that attempts to increase retention based on a cause and effect explanation, to frame the issue in terms of single differentiated obstacles, or to assume that decisions around dropping out come at a single point in time, are missing out on much of the complexity of the issue. The question of how to improve student retention cannot be solved with simple or single answers. The same obstacles or supports can create different outcomes for different students. Since often many complicated and interrelated factors are involved in the decision to continue participation in a program, a simple or single solution may make no difference. It is, however, still useful to try to identify potential obstacles, whether they arise during the recruitment and enrollment phase or as a student participates in a program, and to seek strategies that can help retention.

The sample size of this study was small and the time for data collection was relatively short. As with all qualitative studies, the findings here are not necessarily generalizable to an entire population. Rather, they are meant to be suggestive and provocative. I am hoping that this study can help practitioners reconsider a familiar problem in a new way and that it can help clarify understandings of a complex issue through learning about the perspectives of a small group of students and the

literacy practitioners with whom they worked. It can neither provide the field with definitive answers of how to cure retention problems nor suggest how to motivate all students. It can help us to think hard about how we formulate programs, curricula, and learning contexts that best respond to the realities of adult learners' lives.

## OTHER QUESTIONS

Many retention questions remain to be investigated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Although this study has strongly suggested that no single answers to improving retention exist, data on various program factors would certainly aid programs in their efforts. Here are some of the questions in which I am interested. Is there a relationship between tutor or teacher retention and student retention? Do students participating in classes, on average, have retention rates different than those who participate in one-to-one tutoring? What happens to students when they leave the program? Do they go to other programs? How often do they return? How long do they stay away? How do the retention rates of open-entry open-exit programs compare with programs that use semester systems, and what does that suggest?

Programs might develop their own questions about retention and use their investigations as a way to help them develop retention strategies and set policy. They should also think about how to best structure themselves to address reality: some students will always be coming and going.

## ENDNOTE

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alisa Belzer is project director of the Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network (PALPIN) and a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. She has worked as an ABE/GED teacher, tutor, volunteer coordinator, and trainer.

## "One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs[*]

Porter, K., Cuban, S. & Comings, J. (2005). "One day I will make it" A study of adult student persistence in library literacy programs. NCSALL Research Brief.

| KEY FINDINGS |
| --- |
| • The length and intensity of library literacy program students' participation in services fell short of the amount needed to make substantial improvements in literacy levels and there were no substantial changes in the duration or intensity of program participation over the study period.<br>• Improving student persistence requires that personal barriers to persistence be addressed, but most of the LILAA programs were reluctant to develop a social service capacity. When social services were offered, implementation proved difficult.<br>• Participants in the LILAA programs followed five different "pathways" through literacy education: Short-Term, Tryout, Intermittent, Long-Term, and Mandatory. The programs cannot determine which path a student will follow when the student enrolls. |

Whether in the context of work, parenting, or civic responsibility, strong literacy and communication skills are more essential than ever to realizing one's full potential in America. Many people who did not acquire these skills while growing up look to adult education programs for instruction in literacy, English language fluency, or other types of basic skills. Research shows, however, that adult students often do not participate in such programs long enough to reap substantial learning gains.[1] Many quickly drop out or attend education activities only sporadically, making little learning progress. Research suggests that students in adult literacy programs participate an average of 70 hours in a 12-month period;[2] yet 100 to 150 hours of participation are required to improve literacy by one grade level.[3] In recent years, concerns about low levels of persistence in adult education have become a major policy and program issue as federal funding has been made increasingly contingent on programs' abilities to demonstrate improvements in their students' achievement.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Identify and offer the social support services appropriate to the capacity and mission of libraries, and develop a system for referring students to other social service and education providers. Provide support and referrals early and often.
- Teach staff about the different types of pathways traveled by literacy students; enable staff to help students develop plans to continue to learn or sustain their gains during periods when they do not attend the library program.
- Modify existing educational services and add new ones that cater to the variety of pathways traveled by literacy students.
- Consider adapting or adding programmatic improvements in light of the LILAA experiences, including expansions of off-site instruction and drop-in classes, sponsorship programs, and the explicit use of learning plans to support persistence.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

- How can libraries effectively offer support services that are appropriate for both the students' needs and the libraries' missions and capacities?
- Which changes in educational programming lead to more sustained participation on the part of students?
- How can libraries most effectively support students' continued learning when they are not participating in the program?
- What impact do policies have that acknowledge the five student pathways?

Public libraries have long been important providers of adult education. As familiar community institutions, libraries tend to offer welcoming and accessible environments for local residents seeking to improve their literacy skills. Through a range of services that include one-on-one tutoring, classes, and small-group instruction, as well as computer-assisted learning, library literacy programs provide valuable learning opportunities for students who may have no other education options because of their low literacy skills. Like other adult education providers, library literacy programs struggle to help students participate in learning activities long enough to improve their skills. And because students in library literacy programs have particularly low skill levels, they typically need many hours—often years—of instruction.

The Wallace Foundation launched the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative in 1996 with the goal of helping public libraries around the country develop new ways to increase adult students' persistence. The Wallace Foundation also contracted with MDRC and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) to document the libraries' experiences and to examine whether the new strategies led to longer, more intense program participation and improvements in literacy and language skills. In the study, the planning and implementation of strategies to improve student persistence were investigated in well-established library literacy programs in nine branches of five libraries (described in Table 1 on page 107) over the course of four years, from 2000 through 2003.

Three previous reports defined the problem of adult student persistence and recorded early progress in enhancing library literacy program services.[4] This final report from the LILAA persistence study offers lessons on the challenge of addressing factors that undermine persistence. Although a formal impact study was not conducted, this report's findings illustrate the difficulties library literacy programs face in increasing student participation. The analyses presented here break new ground in several respects. First, thorough documentation of students' participation and achievement over the course of the LILAA initiative allowed for a detailed examination of persistence levels and patterns and of achievement trends. In general, participation was not intense enough to make substantial differences in literacy (as confirmed by achievement tests), and the average duration of participation did not systematically improve over the years studied, though the average hours in months when students did attend increased slightly. Secondly, the implementation research suggests why improving student persistence is so difficult and reveals the kinds of supports that adult students need in order to persist. Overall, the report provides a framework for understanding the challenges of putting in place various persistence strategies, and it concludes with recommendations for what library literacy programs and other adult education providers may want to try next.

## KEY FINDINGS

### THE STUDENTS IN THE LILAA PROGRAMS

- *Adults who participated in the LILAA programs shared a desire to improve their low literacy skills, but otherwise they were a diverse group.*

The clientele of the LILAA programs reflected the characteristics of their communities. The programs attracted more women than men (approximately 60 percent of the students were women), and students' ages ranged broadly. Most participants were people of color (less than 5 percent were white), with each site drawing a third or more of its students from a single racial or ethnic group. Many students were recent immigrants who wanted to learn English, while others were native English speakers who wanted to improve their literacy and basic skills.

- *Overall, the literacy levels of students in the LILAA programs were low, and native English speakers showed lower average levels of achievement than did students who were learning English.*

Toward the beginning of the study, 242 students at five of the programs took a battery of tests measuring various literacy competencies. Scores ranged from approximately the third-grade level on assessments of

reading, phonetic decoding, and comprehension to the fifth-grade level on a test of vocabulary. Students who were learning English scored higher than native English speakers on two of the three literacy tests, perhaps in part because they had stronger literacy skills in their native language. The low overall levels of literacy at the outset of the study suggest that the students needed to participate in literacy learning activities for many hours in order to achieve their literacy goals.

## PATTERNS OF PERSISTENCE AMONG LILAA PARTICIPANTS

- *Overall, the length and intensity of students' participation in services fell short of the amount needed to make substantial improvements in literacy levels.*

Almost two thirds of entering LILAA students stopped participating within six months of enrolling in library literacy activities. In the months during which students did participate, they spent an average of 8.5 hours in literacy learning activities, or a little more than 2 hours per week. Overall, students spent an average of 58 hours in literacy activities at a LILAA program (before leaving for a period of at least three months)—far fewer than the 100 to 150 hours needed to increase literacy by a grade level.

- *Over the life of the LILAA initiative, overall participation remained low. For all demographic groups, there were no substantial changes in the duration or intensity of program participation over the study period.*

Based on a comparison of two cohorts of students who entered the LILAA programs—one early in the initiative and the other late, after most program improvements had been implemented—there was little change in students' participation patterns over time. About 80 percent of both cohorts stopped participating in program activities within a year after entering, although those in the later cohort stopped participating somewhat sooner. This slight drop in the duration of participation may be attributable to administrative changes aimed at casting a wider net for students (leading to unintended increases in enrollment of students for whom the programs were not appropriate) or to new enrollment processes or expectations that may have deterred some students. The intensity of participation increased slightly between cohorts, from 8.3 hours per month for the earlier cohort to 9.0 hours per month for the later cohort. This slight increase in the intensity of participation is attributable to students' spending more time in the computer lab, probably to take advantage of the expansion and upgrade of computer facilities at all the programs during the LILAA initiative. At the same time, the average number of hours in tutoring declined from the earlier to the later cohort.

Older students tended to participate in the programs longer than younger students, but—across all subgroups defined by gender, race, and primary learning activity—there were no significant differences in persistence or in trends in persistence.

- *Although the LILAA programs faced similar challenges in improving student persistence, the severity of the problems varied across programs.*

The levels of student persistence varied considerably across the nine LILAA programs. For example, exit rates one month after program entry ranged from 4 percent to 42 percent, and exit rates six months after program entry ranged from 44 percent to 84 percent. These wide ranges likely reflect differences in types of students, recruitment and intake procedures, or strategies for raising student engagement.

The intensity of students' participation in the LILAA programs during the months in which they were active also varied substantially by program, ranging from 6.4 hours to 11.4 hours per month in active months. The differences in intensity could reflect different capacities to help students dedicate substantial amounts of time to literacy activities. Alternatively, the differences could reflect different priorities regarding what kinds of students to serve and the types and frequency of instruction to offer.

## TRENDS IN ACHIEVEMENT AMONG LILAA PARTICIPANTS

- *There were modest improvements in student achievement as measured by standardized tests.*

A sample of students took achievement tests at the beginning of the study, and about two thirds took the same battery of tests approximately one year later. For these students, there were small but meaningful average gains (enough to exhibit improved skills) on the tests that measured overall reading comprehension but little or no improvement on other tests measuring phonemic decoding and vocabulary. No subgroups of students defined by gender, age, or race were more likely or less likely to experience improvement. Also, there was no relationship between the number of hours of participation and achievement gains. Students who participated for more hours between the two waves of tests were no more likely to show higher achievement after one year than were students who participated fewer hours. This finding suggests that students with higher participation levels did not spend enough time in learning activities to improve the literacy skills captured by standardized tests.

## THE CHALLENGE OF IMPROVING PERSISTENCE

- *The students in the LILAA programs faced a variety of difficulties that hampered their efforts to participate steadily and intensively in literacy learning.*

Most of the students were from low-income households, and many worked long, unstable hours. Many also had health problems or histories of substance abuse that prevented them from keeping steady employment. Program staff believed that many native-English-speaking students had undiagnosed learning disabilities that hampered them in their education and in other areas of their lives. Some students were in abusive relationships and lacked emotional support to improve their literacy skills. Finally, some of the students who were learning English were recent immigrants struggling to acclimate to their new environments. All these personal difficulties can be serious barriers to persistence in literacy services.

- *Improving student persistence requires that personal barriers to persistence be addressed, but most of the LILAA programs were reluctant to develop a social service capacity. When social services were offered, implementation proved difficult.*

Six of the LILAA programs did not attempt to implement such support services as child care and transportation assistance. Program staff felt that social service supports would distract them from their core mission of improving literacy. Others worried that such services would conflict with key pillars of the U.S. library system: the privacy and equal treatment of all patrons. Capacity constraints were also a key consideration. Of the three programs that attempted to provide an in-house social service—which in each case consisted of on-site child care or transportation vouchers—only one succeeded in meeting students' needs. The services offered by the other two programs were mismatched with students' needs or could not be sustained. Given that few approaches to addressing students' personal barriers were implemented successfully, it is not surprising that persistence did not improve over the course of the study.

- *The LILAA programs were more successful in making programmatic improvements than in offering social services. The programmatic changes were of degree rather than kind, and they had less potential than social supports to improve student persistence.*

The LILAA programs implemented a variety of strategies that strengthened their core services. Some strategies (such as off-site instruction, drop-in classes, and expanded self-paced computer-assisted

instruction) made literacy services more accessible; some (such as improved tutor training and faster entry into instructional services) were designed to make students feel more welcome and more comfortable; and other strategies (such as diagnostic testing, interventions for students with learning disabilities, and goal-setting activities) focused on students' educational needs and goals. Programmatic strategies were easier to implement than social service strategies, because the former are more in line with libraries' core mission of improving literacy. However, most of the strategies that the LILAA programs put in place represented small improvements on existing practices. Combined with the limited potential of these strategies to affect participation, this finding may also explain why there was no improvement in student persistence over the course of the LILAA study.

## ADULT STUDENTS USE LIBRARY LITERACY PROGRAMS IN DIFFERENT WAYS

- *Participants in the LILAA programs followed different "pathways" through literacy education.*

The LILAA study uncovered five main persistence pathways among adult literacy students at the LILAA programs. Students on the long-term pathway participated on a steady, prolonged basis. They typically had few or no barriers to persistence and found program participation enjoyable. However, many students on the *long-term* pathway lacked clear goals and may not have concentrated enough on their literacy education to make meaningful improvements in their literacy skills. Other students' program participation was required as part of an agreement with a public assistance or law enforcement agency. Students on this *mandatory* pathway typically faced several barriers to participation, but, with the support of their agency, they were often able to persist.

Students on the three most common pathways tended to have clear literacy goals but had barriers to persistence that affected their participation in different ways. Those with the most or highest barriers often followed the *tryout* pathway, leaving the program soon after entering it. They often needed to address personal difficulties before making a commitment to literacy learning. Students on the *intermittent* pathway also faced considerable barriers to participation, but they dropped in and out of the program for months at a time. Their continuing contact with the program indicates a desire to participate, but the frequent interruptions in their attendance interfered with progress toward achievement goals. Students on the *short-term* pathway may or may not

have had high barriers to persistence, but they had targeted, short-term goals that they were able to reach quickly before leaving the program.

- *Libraries cannot determine in advance which pathway any individual literacy student will take, but they can do more to acknowledge, accommodate, and improve the persistence of students on all pathways.*

Given the large numbers of students, their diverse needs, and the complicated nature of barriers to persistence, addressing the individual needs of all students is beyond the capacity of most library literacy programs. The LILAA programs tended to respond to this reality by developing strategies that could be applied to all students, but persistence levels remained low. The long-term pathway may seem to be the most promising route to literacy learning, but it is not feasible for all students. If students feel that this is the only pathway available, they may be less likely to persist or even to enroll in a literacy program. Although all the LILAA programs offered a warm, welcoming environment, some students seemed not to realize that other persistence pathways were also available, acceptable, and valuable.

## WHAT LIBRARY LITERACY PROGRAMS MIGHT TRY NEXT

- *Offer realistic social support services.*

Legitimate concerns about equity, privacy, and capacity may limit the extent to which public libraries can offer services beyond literacy instruction. Nonetheless, because boosting student persistence sometimes requires that personal and environmental difficulties be addressed, some library-based social services seem to warrant further exploration. One of the LILAA programs showed that on-site child care, for example, can be part of a library-based literacy program. Although the LILAA programs' attempts to provide transportation assistance were unsuccessful, further experimentation may reveal more successful approaches to implementation. And other types of services, such as some forms of counseling, may also show promise.

- *Develop a system for referring students to other social service and education providers.*

Providing referrals fits well with a library's role as an information resource in the community. Library literacy programs could offer information about local social service and education providers more proactively by formalizing and institutionalizing their referral processes. Rather than relying on staff to offer advice when a student reveals a difficulty or a need that they cannot address, for example, they could

develop ways to make sure that students have access to referral information at any time. Library programs could also develop relationships with other community service providers in order to better understand locally available services and to make sure that their students actually receive the services they need after they are referred. This information could then be regularly distributed among program staff, so that all staff have accurate, up-to-date information to share with students who seek assistance.

- *Adapt and add programmatic improvements.*

The programmatic improvements that were observed in the LILAA persistence study—though only minor enhancements of what the nine well-established programs were already doing—might serve as models for library literacy programs that have not yet implemented any strategies along these lines. Moreover, even programs that are already implementing the programmatic strategies in some form might wish to alter them in light of the LILAA experiences. For example, off-site instruction and drop-in classes, which the LILAA programs implemented on a limited basis to make instruction more accessible to students who had transportation difficulties or scheduling conflicts, could be expanded according to student demand. Similarly, programs might try adapting the drop-in approach, which the LILAA programs offered solely in the form of an English-language conversation class, to other types of instruction. Also, evaluating and addressing learning disabilities—a key barrier to persistence for many adult literacy students—might also warrant introduction or expansion.

The study's findings also point to two new strategies for library literacy programs to consider. First, staff could implement sponsorship programs in which students are matched with individuals who can support their persistence and learning. The 2003 LILAA report notes that students who had a sponsor attributed their ability to persist to that person.[5] Library literacy programs could foster sponsorship by helping students identify sponsors, by involving sponsors in program activities, and by educating sponsors about how to support students. Second, programs could use learning plans as a way to support persistence. By incorporating not only tutoring and classes but also homework and other activities—as well as any participation in social service or other education programs—learning plans could serve as a path toward literacy goals that guide students both in and out of the program and as a way to link different periods of participation.

- *Modify existing services, and design new services to help students on all pathways.*

The pathway perspective that emerges from the LILAA study provides a new way for libraries to think about the implementation and goals of their literacy programs. In applying the pathway perspective to the recommendations that come out of the LILAA experience, the study suggests that programs should put less emphasis on group learning activities—in which one can easily fall behind—in favor of offering more one-on-one, computer-based, and self-directed activities that allow students to dip in and out as their ability to participate fluctuates. This perspective also highlights the importance of providing referrals to social service and education providers in a timely, systematic fashion.

The pathway perspective might also guide the content of learning plans. For example, programs could incorporate self-study plans to accommodate the intermittent pathway, additional education choices to accommodate the short-term pathway, and benchmarks met through a variety of activities to accommodate the long-term pathway.

Finally, library literacy programs could take steps to heighten awareness of the variability and unpredictability of students' journeys on the persistence pathways. The goals would be to create a program atmosphere in which there is no stigma associated with participating irregularly or with returning to the program after a hiatus; to give students information up front about how to continue learning during periods when their participation is intermittent or nil; and to follow up systematically when participation becomes erratic.

## NOTES

1. See M. Young, H. Fleischman, M. Fitzgerald, and N. Morgan, *National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs: Patterns and Predictors of Client Attendance* (Arlington, VA: Development Associates, 1994).

2. This estimate comes from an official in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

3. See T. Sticht, *Evaluation of the Reading Potential Concept for Marginally Illiterate Adults* (Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization, 1982); G. Darkenwald, Adult Literacy Education: A Review of the Research and Priorities for Future Inquiry (New York: Literacy Assistance Center, 1986); and J. Comings, A. Sum, and J. Uvin, *New Skills for a New Economy: Adult Education's Key Role in Sustaining Economic Growth and Expanding Opportunity*(Boston: Mass Inc., 2000).

4. See J. Comings and S. Cuban, *"So I Made Up My Mind": Introducing a Study of Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs* (New York: MDRC, 2000); J. Comings, S. Cuban, J. Bos, and C. Taylor, *"I Did It for Myself": Studying Efforts to Increase Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs* (New York: MDRC, 2001); and J. Comings, S. Cuban, J. Bos, and K. Porter, *"As Long As It Takes": Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs* (New York: MDRC, 2003).

5. Comings, Cuban, Bos, and Porter, 2003.

## TABLE 1: THE FIVE LIBRARIES PARTICIPATING IN THE LILAA PERSISTENCE STUDY

| Library | Number of Branches | Where Program Is Housed | Program Features |
|---|---|---|---|
| Greensboro (NC) Public Library | 9 | Chavis and Glenwood branches[*] | Chavis offers afternoon and evening GED classes and a computer lab. Glenwood offers small-group instruction in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), one-on-one tutoring, and a computer lab. |
| New York Public Library | 85 | Fordham (Bronx), Wakefield (Bronx), and Seward Park(Manhattan) branches | Fordham serves 150 students with individual tutorials and in small groups and offers a computer lab for independent literacy self-instruction. Wakefield serves about 100 students, mostly of Afro-Caribbean origin, in small groups and computer self-study; offers job search resources. Seward Park serves a diverse group of 80 students in small-group tutoring. |
| Oakland (CA) Public Library | 19 | Downtown office building near the library | Founded in 1984, the program offers classes and one-on-one tutoring through a mix of 150 volunteers in addition to professional staff; with 20 computers, offers computer-assisted instruction. |
| Queens Borough (NY) Public Library | 62 | Central (Jamaica), Flushing, and Rochdale Village branches | Founded in 1977, the program enrolls over 2,500 adults per year, offering ESOL and basic literacy instruction. |
| Redwood City (CA) Public Library | 3 | Redwood City Public Library, with services in other community organizations, including schools, a jail, and a halfway house | More than 180 volunteers tutor approximately 200 adults one-on-one and in small groups; the program includes a learning disabilities component. Three quarters of adult students are Hispanic. |

[*] *NOTE: Quantitative data were collected only from the Glenwood program.

## Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction

Review your program data to figure out what your retention rates are by using exit rates after one session, before 12 contact hours, and after one month, three months, six months, and so on. Finally, determine how many students stay through completion of their goals and/or the program year.

Also, record the number of mandatory and short-term students. Figure the "intensity" of students' participation by number of hours per week, month, and year. Complete the following table, and reflect on how it measures retention and persistence.

| | |
|---|---|
| Total number of students | _____ |
| Number of mandated students | _____ |
| Number of short-term students (< 30 hours) with goal attainment | _____ |

| Students who exited the program… | Number exited | Percentage exited (number exited/total number) |
|---|---|---|
| After 1 session | _____ | _____ |
| Before 12 contact hours | _____ | _____ |
| With 12 or more contact hours, but less than 1 month | _____ | _____ |
| 1 to 3 months | _____ | _____ |
| 4 to 6 months | _____ | _____ |
| 7-9 months | _____ | _____ |
| 10-12 months | _____ | _____ |
| Completed 1 year without exiting | _____ | _____ |

| | |
|---|---|
| Average total weeks of attendance | _____ |
| Average total hours attended | _____ |

# 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: <u>Underlined</u> 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:

<u>1.   WELCOME, SESSION TWO OBJECTIVES, AND AGENDA</u>        (10 MINUTES)

- **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** <u>Session Two Objectives</u>. 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** <u>Session Two Agenda</u>. 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 newsprint <u>Discussion Questions: Strategies</u>.** Use these questions to facilitate a discussion of participants' experiences with student persistence.

**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.

**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?

- **Post the newsprint <u>Strategies for Improving Student Persistence</u>.** Summarize participants' responses on this newsprint 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)

- ⬜ **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

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.*

### BREAK (15 minutes)

**Another idea**

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?

### 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 newsprint** 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.

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**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** <u>Five Pathways for Program Participation.</u>

> **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** <u>Ways Programs Might Support Students</u> 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 <u>Session Two Agenda</u>, 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.

# Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session Two

| 1. Welcome, Session Two Objectives, and Agenda | 10 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Post newsprints; review.

| 2. Strategies for Improving Student Persistence | 30 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Whole group discussion using newsprint questions.
- List strategies on newsprint <u>Strategies for Improving Student Persistence.</u>

| 3. Increasing Persistence: Discussing Strategies from the Research | 50 mins., SMALLGROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Form two groups to discuss reactions to key concepts on handout (15 minutes in groups).
- Reconvene group; representative from each group summarizes reactions.
- Post signs; participants stand near sign that corresponds to how they feel about statement; stand-up discussion of three statements.

### 15–Minute Break

| 4. Reading Discussion—Five Pathways | 45 mins., SMALLGROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Form small groups; post newsprint for groups to discuss (25 minutes in groups).
- Reconvene group; representative from each group shares observations, questions, and issues; questions and comments from other groups.

# 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 <u>Five Pathways for Program Participation</u>.
- Small groups discuss questions on newsprint <u>Ways Programs Might Support Students</u>.
- 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 <u>Session Two Agenda</u>; 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

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                            Adult Education Project

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                            Collaborative Groups

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

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Needs of All Learners

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Group Instruction

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Uncommon Setting

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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), 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 shiningly 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

Meader, 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.

Barriers to Persistence in Math Class
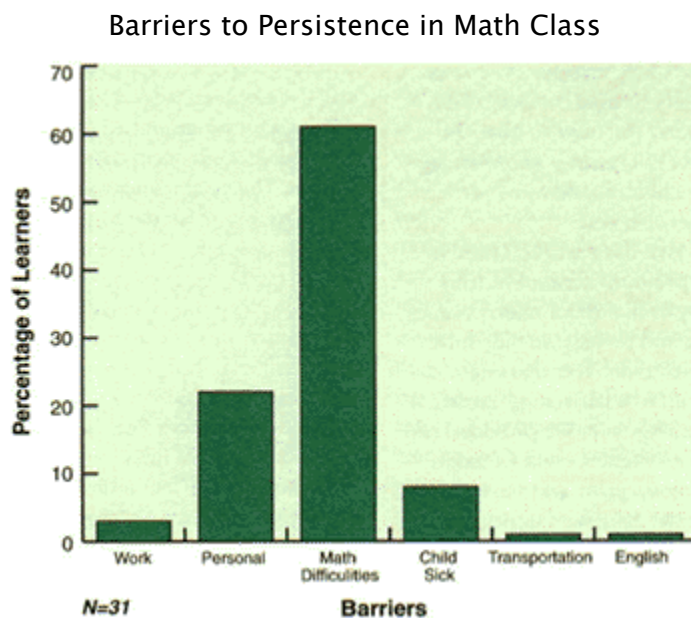
The "fear of failure" appeared in many responses; frustration with mathematics and embarrassment at not knowing a particular concept also were evident. As seen in the bar graph on page 29 math difficulties were the barrier that students perceived as keeping them from finishing a class. Study strategies 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
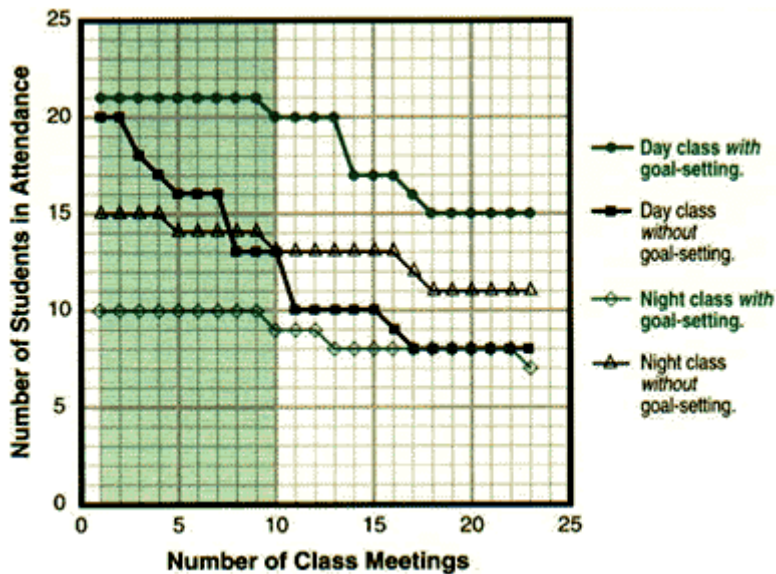


## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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.

# 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.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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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 & Griffth 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 | Helped them obtain the "right skills, right answers, and facts" they needed to know.<br><br>Provided information and concrete help.<br><br>Was valued because they "made us" keep coming, "wouldn't let us quit," "made us do our work."<br><br>Became informational resource. | "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." |
| Socializing Knowers | Supported them by providing a comfortable and save place to express themselves.<br><br>"Knew them" as persons, knowing how they felt and thought.<br><br>Accepted them, enabling them to ask questions and risk making mistakes. Was source of own self-confidence.<br><br>Helped them evaluate their academic learning. | "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." |
| Self-Authoring Knowers<br><br>*Table compiled by Eleanor Drago-Severson* | Provided a place of joining together in collaboration and learning from that process.<br><br>Helped them to discover their own capabilities.<br><br>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. | "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." |

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

| Way of Knowing | The Cohort… | Sample Quotations |
|---|---|---|
| Instrumental Knowers | Embodied a community of concern (e.g., when a student missed a day of class, others inquired about the student's wellbeing).<br><br>Provided more concrete form of support (e.g., help with homework). | "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?" |
| Socializing Knowers | Increased their sense of belonging and decreased feelings of isolation.<br><br>Eased the pressures of managing various responsibilities in their multiple roles and in their transition into US culture.<br><br>Knew them, recognized and appreciated them.<br><br>Encouraged them and enabled them to give encouragement to others. | "Everybody here cares so much for each other and I think that's so good…they become like part of your family."<br><br>"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.'"<br><br>"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.'" |
| Self-Authoring Knowers<br><br>*Table compiled by Eleanor Drago-Severson* | Provided opportunities to share their goals and to learn about others' goals and feelings.<br><br>Provided positive feelings from friendships with cohort learners; however, their commentary centered mostly on the connections the group created to a shared social status.<br><br>Had a goal of group harmony not as an end to itself but as a means toward some greater end. | "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."<br><br>"They are there for me so the fact…makes it even easier for me to push yourself."<br><br>"Everybody's learning is different." |

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. | "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."<br><br>"If you have some idea you can share, you can share something good they can take, we discuss, because everybody has children, too." |
| Socializing Knowers | Served as a safe haven for learning about other people's experiences, ideas, perspectives, and expertise.<br><br>Provided a context in which they could broaden their perspectives by learning from "friends."<br><br>Made differences okay because everyone was still connected and basically the same, which preserved the relationships.<br><br>Relied upon lack of conflict. | "Everybody has different discussion, different ideas and you can learn from them and they learn from you."<br><br>"We share a lot of experiences; we get a lot of advice."<br><br>"They are friendly. They talk with me if I couldn't understand something they help me, they explain to me."<br><br>"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." |
| Self-Authoring Knowers<br><br><br><br><br><br>*Table compiled by Eleanor Drago-Severson* | Provided information and ideas, which they used in service of self-understanding and self-expression.<br><br>Provided suggestions from others, which they could evaluate and integrate with their ideas.<br><br>Could withstand conflict as a part of working with and learning from others. | "Like I was getting other people's ideas, and then I was trying to put my ideas, I was getting more ideas."<br><br>"I…listen to other peoples' opinions and ideas, but compare their ideas and my ideas [and] think about it, see what happen." |

## 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 commonalties 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 do to 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 commonalties 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 ser vices. 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 per son. 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 l earners are making progress? With Betty, for example, and with Tim?**

**Will:** I test my learners every other month using the SORT pro vided by Reading Link. We keep track o f 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. [1]

**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

[1] 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 l earning 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.

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### Techniques for Differentiating Instruction

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

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- 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

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

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

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

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

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

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# 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*[1] 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*[2] 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 s kills 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 comfort able 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 over whelmed; 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, inter mediate, 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 c lass 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 t he 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.

*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

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

[2]Kruidenier, J. (2002). *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction.* Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.
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# 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
*Tom Woods* is member of the faculty of the Community High School of Vermont, where he works as a corrections instructor and special education instructor at the Caledonia Community Work Camp, a minimum security correctional facility in St. Johnsbury. Tom also serves on the school's Curriculum Policy and Practices Committee.

# 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

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# 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:

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| 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

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# 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.

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**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.

Jun He

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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.

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### 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

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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 we 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.

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### 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!

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> 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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# 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.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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**

| Class 1 | Program count | LSAL count |
|---|---|---|
| Hours | — | 4 hours per week |
| Weeks | — | 2 weeks |
| Total time in class 1 | — | 8 hours |
| **Class 2** | | |
| Hours | 4 hrs per week | 4 hrs per week |
| Weeks | 8 weeks | 8 weeks |
| Total time in class 2 | 32 hours | 32 hours |
| **Total participation time counted** | 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,[1]

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.[2] 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**
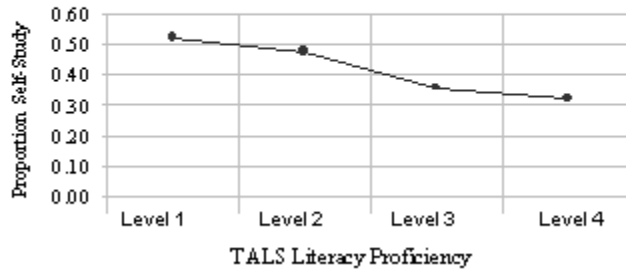
## PROGRAM PARTICIPATION AND LITERACY PROFICIENCY

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. [2]

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,3 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.

[1]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.

[2]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.

[3]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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# 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 ÃD.

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

## THE DOCUMENTATION TOOLS:

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

## THE RESULTS OF THE INTERVENTION:

As previously noted, student response to learning within groups was, for the most part, favorable. Surveys completed during the fifth and eleventh classes (of the twelve class sessions) both revealed that students favored cooperative learning. Of the eight second surveys returned, only one student stated that learning in student groups was not effective in learning new material. Fifty percent of the students responding to the second survey "often" received encouragement from peers, and 50% of this group said that they "sometimes" received encouragement from their peers. (In retrospect, a pertinent question to include in the survey would have been, "Does working with other students help your classroom attendance?")   While students seemed to note benefits of cooperative learning, teacher/peers rated student self-esteem from very low to

satisfactory. When asked if students tended to work together, again responses varied. The math instructor stated "no," while the program coordinator said, "Seems like they do, especially math class."

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

### REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVENTION

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

A second phase of this project would address problems and/or questions that arose in the project's first phase. Future intervention might include more student commitment, perhaps in the form of an informal agreement among students to regular attendance when at all possible. Utilizing this group-centered learning in other areas of G.E.D. instruction–might further reinforce student commitment to the program.

Furthermore, I feel that an opportunity for student socialization prior to the initial use of student groups might lessen the stress and reluctance that I first sensed among students. This might be achieved through informal, non-competitive games or perhaps a pre-class party. Finally, it would only be logical to follow the class to its completion to reassess retention rates rather than assess halfway through the program. It might prove to be beneficial to interview the students more frequently about their progress and assessments of the intervention.

Successful student retention is key to successful G.E.D. graduates. To retain these students in our G.E.D. programs, motivation is necessary. It appears, based on this study, that cooperative learning might be one means of motivating and consequently retaining a higher percentage of students in the G.E.D. classroom. Creating more student commitment to the program through more extensive use of cooperative learning, utilizing more student involvement in constructing and assessing a cooperative learning structure, and incorporating a study to include data throughout the program's duration might prove beneficial in a second phase of this project.

## APPENDIX

### Student Survey #1

- 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
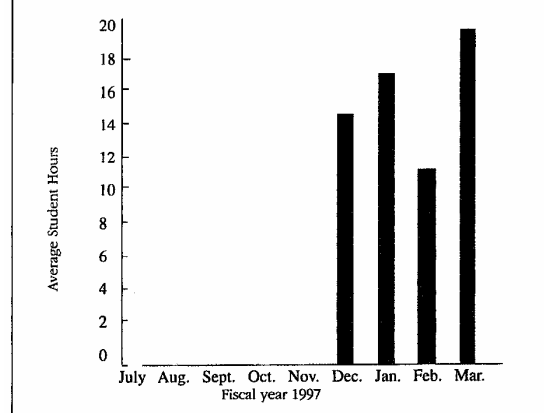
the discussion groups generate energy and enthusiasm in the students, which leads to greater participation and time spent in the program. Participation, especially in the discussion groups, is open to all students, making the classes multi-level. This exposes many of the learners to ideas and subject 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



**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-mandated ABE students only.

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.

## References

Valentine, T. and Sandlin, J. (eds.) (1997), *Beyond Basic Skills*, Vol. 1, No. 3.

## 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.

# 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

## 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.[1] 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 Jeannette, and held a telephone interview with Jeannette'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 Jeannette 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

[1]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 Karthy 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

# STEPS FOR FACILITATING SESSION THREE

**Objectives:** By the end of this session, 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.

- List advice that they would give other adult education practitioners and programs on persistence, motivation, and retention.

**Time:** 3½ hours

**Preparation:**

⬜ **NEWSPRINTS** (Prepare ahead of time: <u>Underlined</u> in the steps)

    ___ Session Three Objectives

    ___ Session Three Agenda

    ___ Analysis Questions

    ___ Making Connections

    ___ Next Steps

    ___ Sharing Learning with Others

    Newsprints from Session One and Session Two:

    ___ Supports for Persistence

    ___ Ways Programs Might Support Students

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

    ___ Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student Persistence

___ Six Strategies for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence

___ A Program Framework for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence

___ Program Practices for Addressing Adult Student Persistence

### MATERIALS

___ blank newsprint sheets

___ newsprint easel

___ markers, pens, tape

___ sticky dots,

## Steps:

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

- **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 and share the "good news" of the day.

- 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** <u>Session Three Objectives</u>. Go over the objectives briefly with the group.

*Session Three Steps*

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**Session Three Objectives**

By the end of this session, you 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 your classroom/program.

</div>

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Session Three Agenda</u>. Describe each activity briefly. Ask if people have any questions about the agenda.

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**Session Three Agenda**

- Welcome, Session Three Objectives, and Agenda  (Doing)

- Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student  Persistence

- Jigsaw on Readings

- Making Connections

- Action Planning

- Final Evaluation

</div>

## 2. STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES FOR ADDRESSING ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE (20 MINUTES)

- **Remind participants that during the first session,** the discussion focused on the forces that hinder and support persistence and ways individuals might be supported— establishment of a goal by the student, self-efficacy, management of positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence, and progress toward reaching a goal.

  **During the second session the focus shifted to groups of students** and ways programs might support student persistence according to pathways. Explain that this session will focus on what the participants, as individual adult

education practitioners or as part of their programs, might do to encourage the students in their programs to persist.

**Explain to participants that in this activity, participants will review the conclusions and suggestions** the researchers made as a result of their findings. These suggestions are framed in three phases of program participation—Entrance into Services, Participation in Program Services, and Reengagement in Learning.

- **Ask participants to form two small groups by role—** program administrator/counselor or teacher/tutor.

- **Distribute the two handouts** *Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student Persistence* and *Six Strategies for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence* to the teacher/tutor group and distribute the two handouts *A Program Framework for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence* and *Program Practices for Addressing Adult Student Persistence* to the program administrator/counselor group.

- **Explain that, in this next activity, participants will review** a list of strategies they can use to address issues in the area of adult student persistence. This list is meant as an additional resource. Participants can modify it as they see fit based on their own experiences and newly acquired knowledge.

- **Give participants about 10 minutes to review** the materials, discussing with the group what they might add to the lists of strategies. Tell participants they may want to try out some of these strategies to address persistence.

- **Suggest to participants that they take the handouts home and look through them**. They will be most useful to them after they have heard from students in their own programs about forces that affect their persistence. Suggest to participants that they then use the strategies listed to identify activities or program structures that will help students increase their persistence

| 3. | JIGSAW ON READINGS | (105 MINUTES) |
|---|---|---|

- **Explain that, in this next activity,** participants will reflect on the readings for today's meeting. Ask participants to form small groups by areas of interest.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Analysis Questions</u>. Explain that the groups will use these analysis questions to discuss the readings. They will have 15 minutes to spend on each article. Indicate that each group should be prepared to share the results of their discussions.

> **Analysis Questions**
>
> - What did the author of the article do to increase adult student persistence?
>
> - What impact did implementing this strategy have on student motivation and persistence? Discuss possible reasons for this impact.

- **After 15 minutes, prompt participants** to begin discussing the second article. Again, provide time for participants to review the article if necessary. After another 15 minutes, prompt participants to begin discussing the third article.

- **After 15 minutes, reconvene the whole group.** Ask one member of each group to give a five-minute summary of his or her group's discussion. Then facilitate a 20-minute discussion, using the following questions as a guide:

  **?** *Why did the authors choose the strategies they did to improve student persistence or motivation (for example, on the basis of attendance patterns, on what students said)?*

  **?** *How has your program chosen strategies for improving student persistence? What were the results?*

  **?** *What do you think are effective ways of choosing?*

**Another Idea**

Ask participants if they have seen other material about the topic. Encourage them to share copies of other articles with the Study Circle group by bringing them to the next session.

## BREAK (15 minutes)

### 4.   MAKING CONNECTIONS                                      (15 MINUTES)

**Another Idea**

Conduct a brainstorming session with the entire group to generate this list of action steps.

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Making Connections</u>. **Explain to participants that this is a time to reflect on the study circle discussions** and begin to think about what it means for their own practice. Break participants up into pairs and have them discuss for about ten minutes the following questions.

> **Making Connections**
> - How might the discussions relate to your practice?
> - How have the discussions contributed to the way you think about student persistence?

- Once the groups come back together, take about five minutes to share some of the thoughts and opinions from the group. The facilitator should **record these on newsprint**.

### 5.   ACTION PLANNING                                        (30 MINUTES)

- **Post the newsprint** <u>Next Steps</u>.

> **Next Steps**

**Another Idea**

Conduct a brainstorming activity with the whole group to generate this list.

- **Tell participants** that in this next activity they will be working towards developing a list of the next steps they would like to take for addressing adult student persistence in their classrooms and/or programs.

  Explain that for some people the next step may be just to think more about alternative program structures or intake procedures. For others, it may include continuing to learn more about persistence, retention, and motivation. Or, it may be to have a discussion with other staff in their program about how to start. Some participants may have specific ideas about activities, techniques, or strategies they could begin to use in their classes or programs.

- **Divide the group into pairs or groups,** preferably pairing those who work in a similar context (e.g., two ESOL teachers, two GED teachers, two program administrators, etc.) or the same program whenever possible.

- **Explain that they will** have 10 minutes, working with their partner/group, to **make a plan** for the next steps or actions they will take to rethink instruction and participation in their work. Groups should make notes on paper. Remind them that they will be asked to share things from their plan with the other participants.

- **Post the newsprints saved** from Session One (<u>Supports for Persistence</u>) and Session Two (<u>Ways Programs Might Support Students</u>), as these lists may help participants reflect on the previous sessions.

- **After 10 minutes, reconvene the group.** Explain that you will go around from group to group collecting ideas one or two at a time. Ask the first pair/group to read aloud one of their ideas for next steps and write it on newsprint. (It may be necessary to paraphrase the ideas for the newsprint.) Ask the next pair/group to read aloud one of their ideas and add it to the newsprint list.

  Continue around the group, going back to every pair until a list of all the ideas has been written on the newsprint.

- Have participants, as a whole group, **consider the help they may need to implement these next steps,** for example, materials, resources, contact with other teachers, etc. Encourage discussion about ways to get the supports they will need.

## 6.   FINAL EVALUATION                                        (10 MINUTES)

- **Ask each person individually to comment** on the most useful idea or concept they will walk away with from this study circle.

- **Ask the following questions** to the group as a whole:

**?** *As a result of your involvement in this study circle, what suggestions or questions do you have for researchers?*

**?** *What additional research would be helpful to you as practitioners in adult education?*

- **Then ask if participants have suggestions** for improving the study circle. These suggestions may be related to:

  - *Process* (e.g., the activities, the way readings were organized, etc.)

  - *Content* (e.g., the specific readings chosen, the clarity or richness of the readings or handouts, the focus of the discussions, etc.)

- **Take notes** as people talk so that you can adapt or adjust the next study circle. Feel free to add your own suggestions.

- **Refer participants to** the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy's Web site (www.ncsall.net) for further information. Point out that most NCSALL publications may be downloaded for free from the Web site. Print versions can be ordered by contacting NCSALL at World Education: ncsall@worlded.org.

- **Thank everyone** for coming and participating in this study circle.

# Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session Three

| 1. Welcome, Session Three Objectives, and Agenda | 10 mins., WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Post newsprints; review.

| 2. Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student Persistence | 25 mins., SMALL GROUPS |
|---|---|

- Form two small groups by role; distribute handouts by role; small groups discuss what they might add to the lists.

| 3. Jigsaw on Readings | 105 mins., SMALL GROUPS then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Form small groups by topics chosen for readings; discuss each article using questions on newsprint as a guide (15 minutes for each article).
- Whole group discussion:
    - **?** *Why did the authors choose the strategies they did to improve student persistence or motivation (for example, on the basis of attendance patterns, on what students said)?*

    - **?** *How has your program chosen strategies for improving student persistence? What were the results?*

    - **?** *What do you think are effective ways of choosing?*

## 15–Minute Break

| 4. Making Connections | 15 mins., PAIRS, then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Form pairs to discuss questions on newsprint.
- Reconvene whole group to share thoughts and opinions.

| 5. Action Planning | 30 mins., SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP |
|---|---|

- Form pairs or small groups by context and role/program to make a plan for next steps or actions for rethinking instruction and participation; post the saved newsprints from Sessions One and Two as reminders (10 minutes in groups).
- Reconvene the group; ask groups in round robin fashion to name one idea; write on newsprint; consider what help they may need to implement steps.

| Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session Three | |
| --- | --- |
| **6. Final Evaluation** | *10 mins., WHOLE GROUP* |

- Ask each individual to comment on most useful concept they got from study circle.
- Ask for suggestions (process, content) for improving study circle.
- Remind them of NCSALL Web site (www.ncsall.net); thank them for participating.

# Materials to Hand Out in Session Three

## CONTENTS

<u>Handouts for Session Three</u>

Handout ☐: *Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student Persistence*

Handout ☐: *Six Strategies for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence*

Handout ☐: A *Program Framework for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence*

Handout ☐: *Program Practices for Addressing Adult Student Persistence*

# Strategies and Resources for Addressing Adult Student Persistence

## SAFETY

An environment in which students feel that it is OK to make mistakes, they are respected for what they know, and they are equally valued in the program, regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc.

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
| --- | --- |
| **Dialogue Journals**: Using a process for students to share their concerns in a private way and for you to respond to those concerns | Greater communication about possibly unspoken barriers to participation that may exist and need to be addressed |
| **Learning Histories**: Using a technique for you and students to reflect on and discuss your educational experiences | Greater understanding of what students have faced in the past, or how this influences their present learning situation, and of the possible difference between your view of education and theirs |
| **Affirming Diversity**: Developing a plan of action, including staff training and possibly classroom activities, for addressing racism and other forms of oppression in the program | Greater respect for all students' needs and greater appreciation for the commonalities and differences among people in the program |
| **Orientation to the Program:** Developing a thoughtful, formal process for helping students understand what the program and class are all about | Greater understanding among students of what the program can and cannot do for them, their responsibilities, and the structure of the program and class |
| **Policies and Protocols for Ensuring Physical Safety**: Establishing clear rules and policies for ensuring privacy and a safe environment in which students can participate and learn | Greater comfort and assurance that students' concerns about privacy and physical safety will be respected and met |

## COMMUNITY

An environment among students, staff, and the larger community in which students feel that they are not alone, that they are needed by others, and that they can work together to solve problems.

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Out-of-Class Activities**: Organizing orientations, potluck, field trips, extracurricular activities that bring students together in different ways | Greater understanding among students about each other and greater comfort when working together |
| **Project-Based Learning**: Implementing a curriculum that helps students as a group identify and address community issues that are of concern to them (see "Accessibility" and "Quality of Service" for additional examples) | Greater cohesiveness among students working together towards a common goal and enhanced belief among students that they can work together to solve problems |
| **Student-Run Activities**: Providing opportunities for students to work together to lead activities inside and outside of the classroom | Greater cohesiveness among students working together towards a common goal |
| **Small Group Instruction**: Organizing class activities so that students work together rather than alone | Greater sense of being needed by others and of having something worthwhile to share and contribute |
| **Ground Rules**: Providing opportunities for students together to set the rules for the class | Greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities for participating in class and in having a voice to improve the class |
| **Affirming Diversity**: Developing a plan of action, including staff training and possibly classroom activities, for addressing racism and other forms of oppression in the program (see "Safety" for a description of activity) | Greater feeling of community and inclusion for all people in the program |

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Student-to-Student Dialogue Journals**: Pairing students to write and share thoughts, feelings, and/or accomplishments with each other (see "Safety" for a description of activity) | Greater communication between students |
| **Creative Writing**: Using teaching techniques that allow students to express themselves | Greater communication and understanding among students |
| **Buddy System**: Establishing a process whereby students can work in pairs to help each other address issues of concern to them, possibly between new and returning students | Greater bonding between students and greater connection to the program |
| **Student Address Lists**: Developing a contact list (with students' permission) and encouraging students to contact each other if one of them has "stopped out" to follow up and provide help | Greater likelihood that students stopping out will feel a connection to the program and return at some future date |

## SELF EFFICACY

A belief by students that they can be successful when attempting
new activities as students, workers, family members, and members
of their communities.

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Student Leadership**: Providing opportunities for students to take a leadership role through conducting peer orientations, peer teaching, serving on program board, advocating in the community, etc. | Greater commitment among students to the program and a greater feeling that their participation is needed by the program and community |
| **Learning Histories**: Using a technique for you and students to reflect on and discuss your educational experiences (see "Safety" for a description of activity) | Greater understanding by students of how their educational history affects them and of what they have already achieved |
| **Assessment**: Changing assessment strategies to involve students more e.g., portfolio assessment, conferencing, goal-setting activities, etc.; (see "Clarity of Purpose" for a description of activity) | Greater understanding among students about their progress |
| **Dialogue Journals**: Using a process for students to share thoughts and feelings about their accomplishments and setbacks with you, and for you to provide encouragement | Greater understanding among students of the natural process of learning through reflection about their achievements and difficulties and a greater appreciation for their strengths and future possibilities |
| **Recognition**: Establishing formal mechanisms for students to be recognized for their achievements (e.g., graduation ceremonies, end-of-the-month class celebrations, etc.) | Greater feeling of accomplishment by being recognized for their achievements |

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Student-Generated Materials**: Using a technique for students to write and publish their learning histories or to read other students' writings about their educational progress | Greater understanding of their own and others' path toward reaching their educational goals |
| **Adult Multiple Intelligences**: Applying the theory of multiple intelligences in your classroom using alternative techniques (e.g., learning through music, art, movement, etc.) that help students capitalize on their strengths (see "Quality of Instruction" for a description of activity) | Greater feeling of their strengths and accomplishments |

## QUALITY OF SERVICE

High-quality instructional and program practices and structures that are driven by the needs of the students and that are engaging, supportive, and relevant to their daily lives.

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Mail Activities for Students**: Developing a system for sending fun and challenging activities to students after "stopping out" | Greater likelihood that students will remain involved in learning and re-enter the program |
| **Small Group Instruction***:* Using an approach to instruction that supports students to teach each other and not learn in isolation | Greater feeling of belonging and assistance from peers |
| **Follow-up**: Developing a system for contacting students after they have "stopped-out" or dropped out to see if the program can help them resolve issues that might have lead to them dropping out | Greater feeling of belonging by students to the program and greater likelihood that students may be able to return |
| **Relevance of Instruction***:* Using curriculum that corresponds closely to the lives, needs, and goals of the students in your classroom (not just the generic student) | Greater sense by students that the costs of attending the program are worthwhile in helping them meet their short- and long-term needs |
| **Counseling Services**: Providing chances to all students to receive support and advice on careers, lives, and further learning | Greater likelihood that students will articulate, focus on, and be able to reach their goals |
| **Enrollment and Attendance Policies**: Instituting policies that are both flexible to students' needs and encourage students to commit to attending the program on a regular basis | Greater consistency in the classroom and better understanding by students that what is expected of them is realistic |

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Teacher Evaluation**: Developing a system whereby teachers receive clear and constructive feedback from all stakeholders (e.g., supervisors, students, other teachers, etc.) | Greater opportunities for improvement in curriculum, instruction, and support to students |
| **Professional Development**: Participating in activities that help teachers and other staff to question their assumptions and adopt new attitudes and new practices | Greater ability of staff to deliver high-quality, relevant instruction and services to students |
| **Program Development Process**: Adopting and following an on-going, inclusive process of defining annual priorities and goals for program improvement and working as a program towards such goals | Greater quality of service across the board and greater likelihood that program will meet students' needs |

## ACCESSIBILITY

A program structure and system that ensures that all the services students need (e.g., flexibly-scheduled classes, day care, transportation, etc.) are available.

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Project-Based Learning**: Implementing a curriculum that helps students address both life and societal barriers that keep them from attending class (e.g., day care, transportation, changes in welfare policies, etc.) while they work to affect personal and community change (see "Community" and "Quality of Service" for additional examples) | Greater ability of students to attend class if project-based learning results in successfully addressing the particular accessibility barrier |
| **Intake Process**: Using a mechanism for finding out what potential hindering forces may be and providing assistance (directly or through referral) for students to address those forces | Greater consistency in helping students access program and other services that reduce hindrances to attendance |
| **Support Services**: Changing program structure to include resources for day care, transportation, etc. and network with community agencies to provide needed services for students which the program is not able to offer. | Greater possibility of meeting students' needs so they can attend class |
| **Enrollment and Attendance Policies**: Changing policies to reduce chaos in the classroom resulting from constant entering and exiting of students | Greater consistency of attendance and sense of community, stability, and routine in the classroom |

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Flexible Schedulin***g*: Changing class schedules to accommodate students' needs | Greater likelihood that students will be able to attend when it is most convenient for them (e.g., Saturdays) |
| **Advocacy**: Engaging in actions that promote adult literacy funding | Greater resources for providing direct services to students (e.g., day care, transportation, etc.) that increase the accessibility of the program |

## CLARITY OF PURPOSE

The realistic and meaningful goals students have set for themselves and an understanding of how education will help them achieve such goals.

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Goals in Envelopes**: Asking students to state their goals and thoughts at the beginning of cycle, in order to present them again at end of cycle for them to reflect on their progress | Greater feeling of accomplishment by seeing how they have progressed towards the goals they set for themselves |
| **Fears and Hopes**: Using an activity to help students articulate their fears and expectations related to learning | Greater ability among students to talk about internal barriers that may be preventing them from reaching their goals, and greater likelihood that you may be able to reduce their fears and meet their expectations |
| **Goal Setting through Metaphors**: Using a classroom technique for students together to articulate their individual goals and the steps needed (including education) for reaching them | Greater clarity of goals students have and increased ability to set up a plan for reaching goals |
| **Assessment Strategies**: Using a variety of assessment strategies to inform teachers and students of the progress students are making | Greater feedback to students about their real progress towards the goals they have set |
| **Conferencing**: Establishing a process for you and individual students to meet periodically to discuss goals and progress | Greater likelihood that students will be able to set realistic goals based on the progress they are making |
| **Dialogue Journals**: Using a process for students to share their accomplishments and setbacks in a private way and for you to provide encouragement | Greater understanding by you of the sense of purpose students have and of what you can do to help them believe that they are able to set and reach their goals |

| SAMPLE ACTIVITY | EXPECTED RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Intake Process**: Developing a comprehensive process for finding out what students' goals, skills and needs are as they enter the program | Greater ability by staff to understand how to help students set clear goals |
| **Learning Histories**: Using a technique for you and students to reflect on and discuss your educational experiences | Greater ability of students to articulate goals for further education based on an understanding of their past |
| **Student Mentors/Testimonials**: Establishing a process for more experienced students to talk with new students about their educational path | Greater sharing among peers about the different options available as a result of acquiring further education |
| **Equipped for the Future**: Using the EFF framework to help guide students in clarifying their goals as workers, family members, and community members | Greater match between curriculum and what students identify as their goals (what they want to know and be able to do) |
| **Creative Writing**: Using teaching techniques that allow students to express themselves | Greater communication and understanding of their accomplishments and challenges |
| **Bridge to Next Steps**: Providing opportunities for students to become familiar with options for further education or work (e.g., field trip to community college, intern program with local company, etc.) | Greater likelihood that students will clarify long-term goals by understanding the options available to them |

# Six Strategies for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence

**SAFETY**

An environment in which students feel that it is OK to make mistakes, they are respected for what they know, and they are equally valued in the program regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.

**COMMUNITY**

An environment among students, staff, and the larger community in which students feel that they are not alone, that they are needed by others, and that they can work

**ACCESSIBILITY**

A program structure and system that ensures that all the services students need (e.g. flexibility-scheduled classes, day care, transportation, etc.) are available.

**SELF EFFICACY**

A belief by students that they can be successful when attempting new activities as students, workers, family members, and members of their communities.

**QUALITY OF SERVICE**

High-quality instruction, program practices, and structures that are driven by the needs of students and that are engaging, supportive, and relevant to their daily lives.

**CLARITY OF PURPOSE**

The realistic and meaningful goals students have set for themselves and an understanding of how education will help them achieve such goals.

# A Program Framework for Addressing Student Motivation, Retention, and Persistence

## PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY OF STUDENT PERSISTENCE

A message to students that the program and staff are committed to student success and that student persistence is an important measure in program accountability, which means a…

## …PROGRAM DESIGN

That develops and implements services that help adults persist in their learning and reach their goals. Three critical phases are…

### Entrance into Services

Time when programs prepare students to be successful in learning; includes recruitment, intake, and orientation

### Participation in Program Services

Instruction that fits students' patterns of participation and support services that help students address their particular persistence needs

### Reengagement in Services

Procedure for staying in contact with students who are not attending and for reengaging them in services
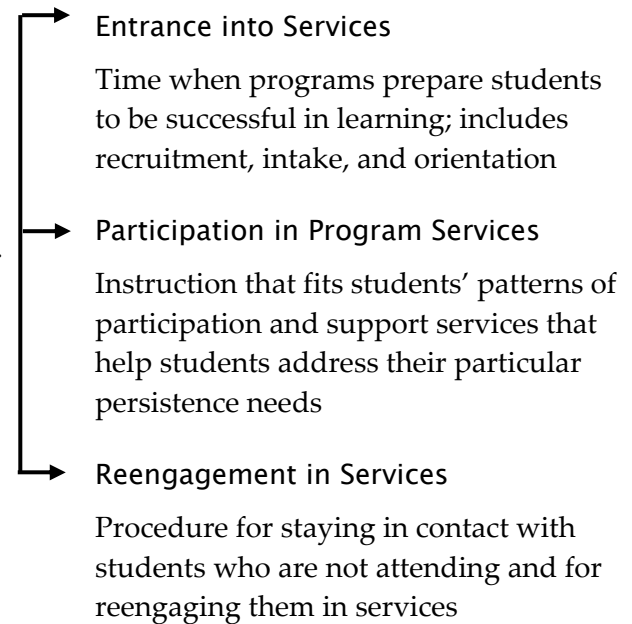
# Program Practices for Addressing Adult Student Persistence

## Create a Vision for Student Persistence…

A message to students that the program and staff are committed to student success and that student persistence is an important measure in program accountability

Consider:

- Committing to student success

- Committing to support students to attain program completion

- Stating the value of student persistence

- Supporting students who are currently not attending (or are "stopping out")

- Stating that the program and staff value student persistence

- Adopting policies aimed at supporting student participation and persistence

- Measuring student persistence (not retention)

- Defining program completion (outcomes) for those students who don't fit the GED/ diploma mold

Ask:

- What other considerations might be added?

- What are the implications for policies and/or procedures?

- What might be the associated needs for professional development?

- Addressing student needs at the individual level

- Organizing and operating the program to achieve better student persistence

- Forming student persistence teams whose purpose is to plan and implement the program's student persistence vision

- Gathering information from students on what helps them to persist

- Establishing a system for monitoring student persistence

- Analyzing program data on persistence and using that information for continuous program improvement

## Design a program ...

That develops and implements services that help adults persist in their learning and reach their goals. Three critical phases are entrance into services, participation in program services, and reengagement in learning.

### FOR ENTRANCE INTO SERVICES

The time when programs prepare students to be successful in learning (recruitment, intake, and orientation)

Consider:

- Assuming that all students are in the intermittent pathway and planning for "stopping out"

- Making sure that every student determines a clear learning goal, or a limited set of learning goals

- Constructing a learning plan with each student that addresses instructional and support services

- Planning for transitions to other programs

- Helping students plan for managing the positive and negative forces that will support or hinder their participation

- Assisting students in identifying and/or building sponsors—family, friends, teachers/tutors, caseworkers, and so on

> Ask:
>
> • What other considerations might be added?
>
> • What are the implications for policies, procedures, and/or practices?
>
> • What might be the associated needs for professional development?
>
> • What might need to be changed in the program for this phase?

- Referring students to agencies/services for assistance with non-academic needs

- Counseling "try-out" students in eliminating critical barriers to participation before placement in instructional services

- Screening students for learning disabilities or other special needs, and making referrals as appropriate

- Providing potential students with enough information that they can make an informed decision about enrolling

- Instituting a comprehensive orientation process

- Hiring an intake specialist

- Building a trusting, respectful, and caring relationship amongst program staff and students from the beginning

- Clarifying mutual expectations for students, instructors, and the program

- Implementing managed enrollment and/or limiting open enrollment

- Maintaining confidentiality of student records and staff-student conversations

- Instituting a case management model for all students

## For participation in services

Instruction that fits students' patterns of participation and support services that help students address their particular persistence needs

Consider:

- Improving the quality of instruction

- Building self-efficacy through vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and addressing physiological and emotional states

- Showing progress toward reaching student's goals

- Creating successful first classes

- Ensuring continuous success

- Encouraging instructor/student collaboration

- Creating a student-centered (not teacher-centered) classroom

- Offering relevant instruction

- Using authentic materials and activities

- Establishing trust and cooperation

- Giving productive and immediate feedback regarding student learning

- Providing clear explanations of content

- Accommodating the variety of adult multiple intelligences and "ways of knowing" (adult development stages)

- Using instructional activities that promote active learning

- Planning strategies for "plateaus of progress"

- Establishing an environment of "community"

- Implementing project-based learning

- Using a variety of instructional groupings, such as large group, small group, one-to-one, peer-to-peer, and so on

- Developing students' problem-solving and critical thinking skills

- Utilizing student feedback to assess teacher/tutor approaches

- Offering a challenging, organized curriculum that addresses the needs and goals of the students

- Adhering to adult learning principles

- Scaffolding instruction and providing for reinforcement and practice of skills

- Developing a culture of acceptance and support

- Fostering a safe learning environment

- Offering a multiplicity of instructional modes

- Expanding hours of services to accommodate changes in students' schedules

- Offering alternatives to classroom instruction, such as distance learning, computer-assisted instruction, drop-in instruction or activities, conversation or book clubs, peer learning groups, and enrichment classes

- Offering accelerated courses, workplace education, health literacy, family literacy, etc.

- Expanding services to off-site locations, students' communities, etc.

- Establishing a lending library of books on tape, videos, software, workbooks, etc.

- Coordinating with other adult education and literacy programs for alternative and transition services, such as tutoring, career planning, distance learning, etc.

- Increasing duration and intensity of instruction to match learning needs of students and their learning tasks

- Maintaining appropriate staff-to-student ratios, which are informed by instructional goals and the characteristics of the student population

- Placing students in classes according to tracks, such as employment and academic (GED), or according to levels (beginning, intermediate, etc.)

- Supporting self-study

- Establishing learning plans for those who must stop instruction

- Assessing progress of students upon return for changes and starting instruction there

- Providing counseling/referral services when students are not able to meet their instructional schedules

- Offering counseling services

- Providing educational, personal, and career planning services

- Helping students overcome embarrassment at returning to school

- Building self-confidence

- Addressing situational and dispositional barriers to attendance

- Referring students' to agencies/services for non-academic needs

- Assisting students to develop effective coping strategies

- Providing transition services

- Identifying students at risk of dropping out early

- Building commitment from student to achieve goals

- Offering stress reduction classes

- Improving information and referral to outside agencies

- Expanding support services

- Ensuring privacy and a safe environment for learning

- Providing on-site childcare, transportation assistance, and other social services

- Celebrating student achievements; recognizing students who accomplish goals

- Providing opportunities for student involvement and leadership

- Holding regularly-scheduled conferences with students to talk about goals, review learning plans, and update their progress

- Initiating activities for students that include families, children, and other "sponsors"

- Encouraging students to support each other's efforts

- Assigning a student mentor/"buddy" for first weeks of instruction

- Fostering cultural awareness and affirming diversity

- Adding informational strategies or community presentations to address student's needs on such critical topics as violence prevention, nutrition, hygiene, etc.

- Assisting with job placement or offering job readiness courses

Ask:

- What other considerations might be added?

- What are the implications for policies, procedures, and/or practices?

- What might be the associated needs for professional development?

- What might need to be changed in the program for this phase?

## FOR REENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

Procedure for staying in contact with students who are not attending and for reengaging them in services

Consider:

- Implementing a formal system for staying in contact with students

- Formulating a student communication plan for no-shows and absenteeism

- Creating peer telephone support system

- Talking to students about "stopping out" and making plans for that event

- Engaging students in leadership roles

- Bridging students to next steps, furthering education or becoming employed

- Transitioning students to another adult education or literacy program

- Changing perceptions that it's okay for students to be "stopping out," (not "dropping out")

- Using former or current students to address reengagement in learning with students who are not attending

- Reallocating resources to institute program procedures to support formal systems for staying in contact with students who are not attending

- Intervening for problem absenteeism

- Forming graduate support groups

- Hiring former students as follow-up counselors

Ask:

- What other considerations might be added?

- What are the implications for policies, procedures, and/or practices?

- What might be the associated needs for professional development?

- What might need to be changed in the program for this phase?

- Collaborating with other educational and support providers to form one-stop, comprehensive programs

# NOTE TO FACILITATOR: SUGGESTIONS FOR ORGANIZING A FOLLOW−UP SESSION

If your group decides to meet again for a follow-up session, here are some suggestions for how to organize that session.

- **Suggest to the group that they choose a date for a follow-up session** that is far enough in the future that participants have a chance to try something out in their classroom related to what they learned in this study circle (that is, to implement part of their individual plan) but not so far in the future that participants lose the "thread" or drift away from the work. A follow-up date of six to eight weeks is probably ideal.

- Suggest to the group that participants should come to the follow-up session prepared to talk about what they did and what they learned from it. In other words, rather than have a follow-up session simply to talk more about the research, the follow-up session could focus on sharing what participants have done and learned in implementing their individual plans.

- After Session Three but before the follow-up session, **send participants the following guiding questions for preparing to come and talk about what they may have tried** in their classrooms related to adult student persistence. These questions could serve as a format for a written or oral update of teachers' experiences.

  1. What specific research finding related to adult student persistence prompted you to try a new strategy in your classroom or program?

  2. Why did this research finding particularly interest you?

  3. In brief, what did the research finding recommend as an effective practice or policy?

  4. What instructional or program strategy did you decide to implement, based on this finding?

  5. How did you implement the strategy? What, specifically and step-by-step, did you do in your classroom or program?

6. What was the outcome of the strategy for the students, for the program, and for you? What did you learn and what do you think the students got from it?

7. What do you plan to do next?

- **Ask participants either to come prepared to talk about what they did,** using these questions as a guide, or to write up something that could be photocopied and shared with other practitioners at the session.

- At the follow-up session, **ask each person whether they have** (a) **an experience to share** or (b) **a question to pose to the group.** Figure how much time you have and allot equal time to each participant either to:

   (a) describe what new strategy they tried in their classroom or program, share what they learned in doing this, and hear feedback, questions, and comments from their colleagues in the group; or

   (b) pose their question and facilitate a discussion among their colleagues that is designed to shed light on their question.

# TIPS FOR FACILITATING A STUDY CIRCLE

## Contents

Materials from *A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators* (1998) by the Study Circles Resource Center:

- Key Facilitation Skills

- Good Study Circle Facilitators…

- Background Notes for "Good Study Circle Facilitators"

- The Importance of Neutrality

- Tips for Effective Discussion Facilitation

- Suggestions for Dealing with Typical Challenges

- Resource Brief: Leading a Study Circle

## Key Facilitation Skills

- **Reflecting** – feeding back the content and feeling of the message. "Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly…"

- **Clarifying** – restating an idea or thought to make it more clear. "What I believe you are saying is…"

- **Summarizing** – stating concisely the main thoughts. "It sounds to me as if we have been talking about a few major themes…"

- **Shifting focus** – moving from one speaker or topic to another. "Thank you, John. Do you have anything to add, Jane?" "We've been focusing on views 1 and 2. Does anyone have strong feelings about the other views?"

- **Using silence** – allowing time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.

- **Using non-verbal and verbal signals** – combining body language and speech to communicate—for example, using eye contact to encourage or discourage behaviors in the group. Be aware of cultural differences. Neutrality is important here, so that we don't encourage some people more than others.

## Good Study Circle Facilitators...

- are neutral; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.

- help the group set its ground rules, and keep to them.

- help group members grapple with the content by asking probing questions.

- help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

- bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.

- create opportunities for everyone to participate.

- focus and help to clarify the discussion.

- summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.

### *And*

- are self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.

- are able to put the group first.

- have a passion for group process with its never-ending variety.

- appreciate all kinds of people.

- are committed to democratic principles.

# Background Notes for "Good Study Circle Facilitators"

Study circles require a facilitator who can help focus and structure the discussion and, at the same time, encourage group ownership. The facilitator's main task is to create an atmosphere for democratic deliberation, one in which each participant feels at ease in expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The study circle facilitator does not "teach" but instead is there to guide the group's process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed, but must know enough about it to be able to ask probing questions and raise views that have not been considered by the group.

*Above all,* **staying neutral and helping the group to do its own work are central to good study circle facilitation.** This takes practice and attention to one's own behaviors. Make sure to ask for the group's help in making this work well for everyone.

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## The Importance of Neutrality*

- Act as if you are neutral; *practice* neutrality.

- Encourage and affirm each person.

- Explain your role.

- Be aware of your own "unconscious" behaviors.

- Resist the temptation to step out of the role of facilitator.

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* Thanks to the RKI Facilitator's Work Guide.

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# Tips for Effective Discussion Facilitation

### BE PREPARED.

The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the discussion materials, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help further the discussion.

### SET A RELAXED AND OPEN TONE.

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

- Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.

### ESTABLISH CLEAR GROUND RULES.

At the beginning of the study circle, help the group establish its own ground rules by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. Here are some ground rules that are tried and true:

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

- One person speaks at a time.

- Share "air time."

- Conflict is not personalized. Don't label, stereotype, or call people names.

- Speak for yourself, not for others.

- What is said in this group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that.

### MONITOR AND ASSIST THE GROUP PROCESS.

- Keep track of how the group members are participating—who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.

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- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.

- When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.

- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.

- Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.

- Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.

- Remember: A study circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

## HELP THE GROUP GRAPPLE WITH THE CONTENT.

- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.

- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.

- Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.

- Help participants to identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

## USE PROBING COMMENTS AND OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS WHICH DON'T LEAD TO YES OR NO ANSWERS. THIS WILL RESULT IN A MORE PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSION. SOME USEFUL QUESTIONS INCLUDE:

- What seems to be the key point here?

- What is the crux of your disagreement?

- What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?

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- Please give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.

- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?

- What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?

- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?

- What would be a strong case against what you just said?

- What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?

- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?

- What have we missed that we need to talk about?

- What information supports that point of view?

## RESERVE ADEQUATE TIME FOR CLOSING THE DISCUSSION.

- Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.

- Thank everyone for their contributions.

- Provide some time for the group to evaluate the study circle process.

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# Suggestions for Dealing with Typical Challenges

Most study circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that study circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

**Problem: Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.**

<u>Possible responses</u>: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact—it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a study circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the study circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

**Problem: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.**

<u>Possible responses</u>: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you **must** intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate; "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet."  If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say."  Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice—you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

**Problem: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.**

<u>Possible responses</u>: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?"  If a participant goes into a

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lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

**Problem: Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no one present knows the answer.**

<u>Possible responses</u>: Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

**Problem: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.**

<u>Possible responses</u>: This rarely happens in study circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?"

**Problem: Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.**

<u>Possible responses</u>: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a study circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: It is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and that encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the

energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

# Resource Brief: Leading a Study Circle*

Once a study circle is underway, the study circle leader is the most important person in terms of success or failure. The leader guides the group toward reaching the goals that have been set by the organizer and the participants. It is the leader's responsibility to stimulate and moderate the discussion by asking questions, identifying key points, and managing the group process. While doing all this, the leader must be friendly, understanding, and supportive. The leader does not need to be an expert or even the most knowledgeable person in the group. However, the leader should be the most well-prepared person in the room. This means thorough familiarity with the reading material, preparation of questions to aid discussion, previous

> *Encourage interaction among the group. Participants should be conversing with each other, not just with the leader.*

reflection about the directions in which the discussion might go, knowledge of the people and personalities in the group, and a clear understanding of the goals of the study circle. The most difficult aspects of leading discussion groups include keeping discussion focused, handling aggressive participants, and keeping one's own ego at bay in order to listen to and truly hear participants. A background of leading small group discussion or meetings is helpful. The following suggestions and principles of group leadership will be useful even for experienced leaders.

## BEGINNING

• ***"Beginning is half," says an old Chinese proverb.*** Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. The goals of the study circle should be discussed and perhaps modified in the first session, as should the ground rules for discussion. It is important that participants "buy in" right from the beginning.

• ***Start each session with a brief review of the readings.*** This is best done by a participant and will refresh the memories of those who read the session's material and include those who did not. Recapitulation of the main points will also provide a framework for the discussion.

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## MANAGING THE DISCUSSION

• *Keep discussion focused on the session's topic.* Straying too far could cause each session to lose its unique value. A delicate balance is best: Don't force the group to stick to the topic too rigidly, but don't allow the discussion to drift. Most people do not regard a "bull session" as a valuable use of their time.

• *Do not allow the aggressive, talkative person or faction to dominate.* Doing so is a sure recipe for failure. One of the most difficult aspects of leading is restraining domineering participants. Don't let people call out and gain control of the floor. If you allow this to happen the aggressive will dominate, you may lose control, and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated.

• *Draw out quiet participants.* Do not allow anyone to sit quietly in the corner or to be forgotten by the group. Create an opportunity for each participant to contribute. The more you know about each person in the group, the easier this will be.

• *Be an active listener.* You will need to truly hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.

• *Stay neutral and be cautious about expressing your own values.* As the leader, you have considerable power with the group. That power should be used only for the purpose of furthering the discussion and not for establishing the correctness of a particular viewpoint. If you throw your weight behind the ideas on one faction in the study circle, your effectiveness in managing the discussion will be diminished.

• *Use conflict productively and don't allow participants to personalize their disagreements.* Do not avoid conflict, but try to keep it narrowly focused on the issue at hand. Since everyone's opinion is important in a study circle, participants should feel comfortable saying what they really think—even if it's unpopular.

• *Don't be afraid of pauses and silences.* People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Leaders who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to 10 after asking a question.

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• *Do not allow the group to make you the expert or "answer person."* The point of a study circle is not to come up with an answer, but for the participants to share their concerns and develop their understanding. Don't set yourself up as the final arbiter. Let the group decide what it believes and correct itself when a mistake is made.

• *Don't always be the one to respond to comments and questions.* Encourage interaction among the group. Participants should be conversing with each other, not just with the leader. Often questions or comments are directed at the leader, but they can be deflected to another member of the group.

• *Synthesize or summarize the discussion occasionally.* It is helpful to consolidate related ideas to provide a solid base for the discussion to build upon.

## USING QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY

• *Ask hard questions.* Don't allow the discussion to simply confirm old assumptions. Avoid following any "line," and encourage participants to re-examine their assumptions. Call attention to points that have not been mentioned or seriously considered, whether you agree with them or not.

• *Utilize open-ended questions.* Questions such as, "What other possibilities have we not yet considered?" do not lend themselves to short, specific answers and are especially helpful for drawing out quiet members of the group.

## CONCLUDING

• *Don't worry about attaining consensus.* It's good for the study circle to have a sense of where participants stand, but it's not necessary to achieve consensus. In some cases a group will be split, and there's no need to hammer out agreement.

• *Close each session with a summary and perhaps an evaluation.* Remind participants of the overall goals of the program and ask them whether the discussion helped the group to move toward those goals. You will definitely want evaluations from the group at the midpoint of the course and at the final session.

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# NCSALL Feedback Form for Study Circle Facilitators*

1. Name of study circle conducted: _____

2. Location/site of your study circle: _____

3. When did your study circle meet?    Day: _____    Time: _____

4. How many times did your study circle meet? _____

5. Generally speaking, how satisfied have you been with your experience as a study circle facilitator?

   ☐ Very satisfied          ☐ Somewhat satisfied          ☐ Not at all satisfied

   **Why?**

6. What was your most satisfying experience as a study circle facilitator? Please provide an example:

7. What was your most frustrating experience as a study circle facilitator? Please provide an example.

8. In all, how many people participated in your study circle? _____
   (Count everyone who attended at least one session.)

   8a) How many people started with the first session? _____

   8b) How many of those people attended all the sessions? _____

   8c) How many people attended only one or two sessions? _____

9. How satisfied were your participants with the study circle process?
   ☐ Most participants seemed satisfied
   ☐ Most participants expressed dissatisfaction
   ☐ Most participants expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction at various points in the process
   ☐ I couldn't judge their levels of satisfaction

   **Please explain:**

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* Adapted from Study Circles Resource Center Feedback Form.

# NCSALL Feedback Form for Study Circle Facilitators (continued)

10. Did you have adequate support from the program organizers?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Please explain:

11. What additional support would have been helpful?

12. If you were to facilitate another study circle, what factors would you change (for example, discussion materials, activities, etc.)?

13. What difference has taking part in this study circle program made in you personally?

14. Other impressions, concerns, and comments:

Your name: (optional)_____

Return to:

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44 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210-1211
Attn: Cristine Smith

# NCSALL

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

## NCSALL's Mission

NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort between the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

## NCSALL's Research Projects

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) learner persistence, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) professional development, and (4) assessment.

## NCSALL's Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge, and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly magazine for practitioners; *Focus on Policy*, a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports* and *Occasional Papers*, periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs.

For more about NCSALL, to download free copies of our publications, or to purchase bound copies, please visit our Web site at:

# www.ncsall.net