

Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education

A NCSALL Research Brief

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This, the first major study in a quarter century to investigate classroom behavior in adult literacy education, considers questions critical to adult literacy education: How is instruction delivered? What is its content? What processes underlie teaching and learning? And what external forces shape classroom behavior? The findings can help policymakers, teachers, and researchers better understand these important issues.

The researchers observed 20 adult literacy classes in eight states and interviewed the teachers of these classes. Although the sample size is limited and findings are not meant to be generalized to an entire population, the study generates new understanding and propositions for future research.

The Content and Structure of Instruction

The content and structure of instruction fell into two general types: discrete skills instruction (found in 16 of the 20 classes), characterized by teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lessons conveying factual information and emphasizing basic skills development, and making meaning instruction, focused on developing higher-level abilities and teacher-learner collaboration. If the essence of becoming literate is the acquisition of concrete skills and factual knowledge, this norm has merit. If, however, literacy also entails critical thinking, problem-solving ability, oral as well as writing proficiency, creativity, and an understanding of how society works, the norm is substantially deficient.

Despite teachers' proclaimed desire to meet learners' needs, the researchers found little evidence that teachers systematically assessed learners' needs or evaluated whether instruction met individual or group needs. However, the researchers found that teachers behaved in learner-centered ways in their affective relationships with learners.

Social Processes in the Classroom

The researchers identified seven classroom processes important to understanding the adult literacy education classroom: sanctioning, engagement, directing, correcting, helping, expressing values and opinions, and community.

Across the sample, they observed considerable tardiness and tuning out, which, unlike in other educational settings, were almost universally tolerated rather than negatively sanctioned. The greatest significance of these behaviors is that they may signal an intention to drop out, an endemic problem in adult literacy education.

Key Findings

- ♦ Most classroom instruction focuses on developing basic skills, not higher-level abilities.
- ♦ Although teachers rank learners' needs as their top priority, their teaching doesn't reflect this goal.
- ♦ Seven classroom processes—sanctioning, engagement, directing, helping, expressing values and opinions, and community—are important in understanding adult literacy education classrooms.
- ♦ Class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressure shape classroom dynamics.

Implications for Practice

- ♦ If literacy entails acquiring higher-level as well as basic skills, current instruction is deficient.
- ♦ Lack of open discussion may impede development of important oral literacy skills.
- ♦ Inclusion activities could help teachers increase community in the classroom, at little expense.

Implications for Policymakers

- ♦ Relatively homogenous classes seem to promote sharing and community.
- ♦ Continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels are serious and understated problems in the adult literacy classroom.
- ♦ How funds are allocated is as much an issue as the amount of available funds.
- ♦ Staff development should be mandated, and funding for it should increase.

Implications for Researchers

- ♦ How tardiness and tuning out relate to dropping out should be better understood.
- ♦ The relationship between community and key instructional outcomes requires further study.
- ♦ Best practices in managing continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels should be identified.

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Understanding how tardiness and tuning out relate to dropping out could help teachers identify at-risk learners and successfully intervene. It might also lead to new teaching methods that reduce the likelihood of learners' dropping out.

The researchers also observed that teachers rarely asked learners about their feelings, opinions, or beliefs, which may impede development of important oral literacy skills. In only about a quarter of the classes was community pervasive. Assuming that community is important in producing desired educational outcomes, teachers need additional training, beginning with brief inclusion activities they could use with new learners to provide valuable gains with little expenditure of resources.

Shaping Factors

Classroom dynamics were shaped by three strong forces: class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressure.

Relatively homogenous classes seemed to promote community, with gender, age, and ethnicity being the most important elements. Continuous enrollment made it difficult to create a sense of community because class membership was always in flux. It also made it difficult for teachers to use complex teaching methods, such as project-based learning or peer coaching.

The researchers concluded that continuous and enrollment and mixed skill levels are among the most serious and understated problems in adult literacy education. Better ways to manage these problems are possible, however, and they propose a systematic search for best practices, which should then be shared with teachers and program administrators.

Funding source regulations and eligibility requirements often determine what kinds of learners are served and the content and length of their instruction. How funds are allocated is as severe a problem as the amount of available funds. When all means of improving instruction quality are considered, professional development stands out as the most important. Leadership, strategic planning, and resources are required. Finally, if professional development is to receive the resources it needs, the 1998 law permitting but not requiring expenditures for professional development must be changed. Staff development must once again be a mandated function and the funds allocated to it increased.

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For a full or summary report on the Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education study, or to learn about other NCSALL efforts connecting research and practice to strengthen adult literacy education programs, visit <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu> to download a free electronic version, or contact NCSALL at (617) 482-9485 for a low-cost print version.

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Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

by Alisa Belzer

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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

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The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation

by B. Allan Quigley

"Isn't there anything I can do to keep my students motivated?" This is the question I asked back in 1972, when I lost two students from my first adult basic education (ABE) class. At the time, my reaction was: "I must do better." I tried harder. I searched for more and better materials. I employed the best techniques I could find. I was as supportive as any teacher could be. But, somehow, even with my best efforts, things didn't change much. Some students stayed. Some didn't. I just couldn't get a handle on it. My best wasn't enough."

In the late 1970s, as an ABE program director, my staff and I tried everything we could think of to improve our retention rates. We had full-time, part-time, and drop-in courses. We had block and continuous intake. We had centralized and decentralized classes around the city. We had large individualized classes, team-taught classes, childcare in some, computers in others. Still, even with our best ideas and best efforts, some students dropped out while others persisted. Our collective best still wasn't enough.

Entering doctoral studies in 1984, I believed the books in the library would hold the answers. However, after working on this issue for almost 11 years as a professor and researcher, I still don't have the answer. A quarter century of worrying about the same question is a long time. I nevertheless think the contemporary literature and some of what I have found recently may be taking me closer to a better understanding of how to keep students motivated. While others may disagree, I like to think we are getting closer to answers. Let's see.

Different Perspectives

Looking back, I think neither my excellent co-workers nor I were really able to analyze our world because -- and here's the conundrum -- we saw it as our world. You might notice in the above story that at no point did my co-workers and I draw upon the perspective of the learners. I think this is a serious self-limiting condition in ABE. As educators, we often seek to reproduce the experiences that worked for us. Most of us basically liked school and succeeded at the schooling process. Educators have a common experience that separates us from our students. The culture of school that we so enjoyed is not necessarily a culture into which our students fit. We must keep that in mind when we design programs and instruction.

Our learners are not a "different species," as some would have us believe (Quigley, 1997), and I must say immediately that I hate the negative stereotypes of our learners.

Yet the common characteristics within our learner population, the one that distinguishes it from other populations in the educational spectrum, is that most of our students dropped out of school. Furthermore, most did so under unhappy circumstances. While our learners have many characteristics in common with mainstream adult students, they also have some radical differences. We can certainly learn from theories and research done with the larger adult population in mind, but we cannot extrapolate freely.

A Framework

That said, a model provided by Patricia Cross in 1982 suggests that ABE learners -- like all adult learners -- must overcome three barriers to enroll and stay in ABE classes. First, ABE learners, like all the rest, must negotiate family, financial, health, transportation, and other problems if they are to come and to stay. These are the situational barriers; they arise out of learners' day-to-day lives. Many researchers have identified and discussed these barriers in ABE (see, for instance, Hayes, 1988; Malicky and Norman, 1994; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). Second, ABE learners, like adult learners everywhere, must confront the institutional barriers our agencies seem inevitably to create. Which adult students don't have to deal with some type of institutional red tape, or program fee, or scheduling inconvenience at their learning institutions? Our learners face institutional rules and procedures that too often seem to serve the institution, not the learners. So, when we add up the problems that may cause learners to leave, we can separate some of them into these two categories, situational and institutional.

We can try to help our students with the situations they face by referring them to resources. But we can only refer them, we can't be the resources. Situational barriers are often those about which we in ABE can do very little. This is an area where we need to realize our limitations and reduce the personal guilt we feel when we see our students floundering in the face of these barriers.

Likewise, we can and should keep chipping away at institutional barriers -- we do have some control over these -- but, again, I don't think this is where we should expend most of our energy. I have become convinced that the third barrier holds the most promise. The third -- and most enigmatic by far -- is the area of dispositional barriers. Herein lies the curious inner world of unique attitudes, personal values, and unstated perceptions. Our learners often carry into our programs mixed emotions, many of which are negative, born of past schooling experiences. These may take up more space in their dispositional baggage than we usually want to acknowledge or are willing to explore.

Our students come to our programs with hopes, fears, and expectations, just like other adult learners. But, as I have said, our students' feelings grow from negative schooling experiences. The "answers" we offer may exacerbate the problems they bring. Faced with students who show low self-esteem or an apparent lack of confidence in ABE programs, Fingeret (1985) found that ABE teachers often "try to be all things to each individual student" (p. 112). But, as Fingeret concludes, even the total devotion of a caring teacher in the face of apparent low self-esteem may not be enough. While Fingeret agrees that such "are admirable aspirations it is possible that instructors ... may actually undermine the adult student's ability to use the program as an area for risk-taking,

growth, and learning" (p. 112). As Fingeret found: "Many students do not simply remain in a program because it feels good' to them. They remain because they see the potential for meeting their goals" (p. 112). I would add, despite the unquestionable value of a caring teacher and learner-centered approaches, these are not the singular answers for retention. If they were, the dropout rate in the U.S. would not have been a staggering 74 percent in the 1993-94 year (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

I now believe that the gap in perception created by our school-based experiences, when contrasted with those of our students, is a source of serious unseen, under-researched problems. I think that if we can understand dispositional barriers better, if we can see the differences between our dispositions and theirs more clearly, we can become more effective at our tutoring, teaching, counseling, and retention.

Dispositional Barriers

As I noted earlier, schooling experiences in the formative years have a lifelong effect on learners. Cervero and Fitzpatrick (1990) found, through a longitudinal study of 18,000 students from 1,200 U.S. schools, that adults who had been early school-leavers -- drop outs -- had extremely mixed feelings toward past schooling. Early school leavers participated in credit and non-credit adult education opportunities at a rate well below the norm for mainstream adults who had completed school. The researchers concluded that those who quit school are "shaped...by a powerful set of social circumstances" (p. 92). Taking the same point further, Wiklund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg (1992) found that undereducated adult "participants and potential participants tend to perceive and experience the adult education programs...as extensions or continuations of the school programs in which they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals" (p. 4). This is another important conclusion that can help us think more critically about our programs.

In a study I conducted in 1992, we held in-depth interviews with potential students who chose not to attend ABE programs even though they knew they were probably eligible to attend. We found that the terms education' and learning' were understood positively if applied to the children and the friends of the resisters. These two constructs implied absolute good. When we mentioned ABE' or literacy' -- when we flat out asked if they would go to the local ABE programs and register -- they heard school.' They said they did not want to "go back to school" although we had never used that word.

Theories of Participation

If we turn to research on the psychological and socio-cultural and socio-economic factors that go into motivation, we come away disappointed. But we have no lack of advice. In the past, our field was advised to address motivation and participation using mainstream adult education models. Boshier (1973), and Rubenson and Hogheim (1978), for instance, have argued that mainstream adult education theories should be used in ABE settings. In 1986, Gordon Darkenwald wrote that if we would just use such mainstream adult theories "The quality of ABE participation and dropout research would be vastly improved" (p. 12). Maybe, but, given the differences in learner populations, it does not necessarily follow that mainstream adult education research applies to ABE.

Another model we could consider is Miller's 1960's force field analysis (1967), which says that certain influences pull adults towards a desired goal as other influences push them away. In the classic Miller force-field theory, we need to research the forces acting on students via a force-field analysis. Miller's theory is, however, constructed on socio-economic status, ignoring prior education and its effects.

Peter Cookson's (1987) ISSTAL model argues that an individual's social background and roles, combined with a list of other external and internal elements, can act as a series of filters. These either discourage or challenge the learner to the point where she will either engage in further education or choose not to participate. Actually, Patricia Cross (1982, p. 124) had much the same idea in her chain-of-response (COR) model a few years earlier. For Cross, the adult's decision process begins with self-evaluation and moves through a predictable sequence of links. So, according to Cookson and Cross, if we can just know the filters and links in the sequence, we can predict who will participate. Neither Cookson nor Cross explicitly includes the powerful effects of pre-adult factors such as past educational experiences in their equations.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) created a model that does allow for several pre-adult influences. Their model takes into consideration eight groups of factors from the prospective learner's experience. This seems relevant until we notice that all types of educational goals and participation are lumped together. Credit-bearing, noncredit-bearing, and variations of both are assumed to be essentially the same, and labeled further adult education. Where does ABE fit into this mix of mainstream goals? Does this theory really do justice to the formative experiences of our learners? More recent research by Roberta Umland (1995) and researchers at the Center for Literacy Studies (1992) tells us this adult mainstream view of educational attainment can vastly oversimplify the ABE learner's decision process (and see Beder, 1990).

Perhaps the theory that, more than any other, perpetuated stereotyping in ABE was Roger Boshier's congruence model (1973, 1977). It classes all potential participants into growth-oriented and deficiency-oriented learners. Boshier effectively says that low-literate adults are at the rock bottom of any Maslowian hierarchy of needs based on 48 motives. They are so seriously deficiency-oriented in the motives department that it would seem almost impossible for our learners to be motivated at all. As Beder (1990) says, Boshier "perpetuates the very social stigma attached to low literacy which limits life success and reduces motivation (p. 44).

On the other hand, perhaps the most promising theory for our field from mainstream higher and adult education is the Vroom (1964) expectancy-valence model. It promotes research on two levels of inquiry. First, it asks what the learners' expectations are of the upcoming experience, or program, in this case. Second, it tries to measure the inherent valence -- or worth -- of a program as the learner sees it. The strength of these two, says Vroom, will determine participation and success. While expectancy-valence theory has been used with some success in our field (e.g., Van Tilburg & DuBois, 1989; Quigley, 1992, 1993), we are not sure how dispositional barriers interact with what learners find in

programs. We don't really know how expectancy and valence interacts with dispositional barriers. And note that all of the above are theories of participation. They are asking: What influences adults to join programs? They are not explicitly focused on retention: "What influences them to stay or quit?"

The Drop-Out Weeks

We need to go beyond participation theory and find a way to understand what our learners actually experience during the first three critical "drop-out weeks." We do have some understanding of this period, and we have some strategies worth using.

An interesting study by Christophel and Gorham (1995) may be appropriate for us, even though it is based on college students. This study has to do with in-program, not before-program, questions. The researchers found that among young adults in college, motivation "is perceived by students as a personally-owned state, while demotivation is perceived as a teacher-owned problem" (p. 303).

While this finding has yet to be tested in ABE settings, it does make a potentially useful contribution. It introduces the demotivation side of learner experience. And it does square with ABE retention and persistence work (e.g., Bean et al, 1989; Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984), which indicates that our learners tend to come to ABE with sufficient motivation to succeed, but things happen that, through their eyes at least, "demotivate" them. It gives us language and a framework to continue the line of reasoning that persistence and motivation are not ultimately "their" problem.

This line of demotivation research also indicates that "motivation is modifiable" (Christophel & Gorham, p. 304). Squaring with the nascent ABE retention research, it suggests that teachers can do something. One positive way intervention can occur, according to Christophel and Gorham, is if teachers respond to student needs right away. They call this teacher-immediacy. As they learned, "teacher immediacy affects motivation." (p. 304). My own research suggests that "nonverbal immediacy relationships are more slowly established than are verbal immediacy relationships" (p. 304). The point here is that early verbal connections with new learners are critical in sustaining motivation.

The value of teacher immediacy was also demonstrated by a study I conducted in 1993. Through in-depth interviews that contrasted persisters with dropouts, two interviewers found that a randomly selected group who had dropped out of an ABE program in the first three weeks due to evident dispositional barriers had chosen not to talk with their teachers about their decision to quit during the decision period. Instead, they had all gone to the intake counselor. One had done so up to seven separate times prior to dropping out. This is potentially disconcerting for teachers. In contrast, those in the study who persisted for months did not go to the counselor once in the same critical period. Instead, persisters talked to their ABE teachers regularly. Thus, the "immediacy" role of the intake counselor or intake person may be at least as important as the role of the teachers among the potential dropout population.

Those learners asking for counselor assistance were not the ones who, to the teacher, appeared to need assistance. They were basically invisible in the classrooms. It was the potential persisters who squeaked and seemed to get noticed.

As time goes by, say Christophel and Gorham, the teacher-learner relationship becomes increasingly important in sustaining student motivation. They make it clear that the first few weeks are crucial. If teacher immediacy is not established early, the odds that students will drop out increase. It is imperative that we figure out who needs such attention.

Identification

Most programs have an intake person. It may be a counselor, a teacher, a receptionist, or the program administrator. Research I have done (Quigley, 1997) suggests that some new learners -- not all -- will need more attention than others, both inside and outside the classroom. I believe it is worth building a sensitive interviewing process for new learners at initial contact, and right after intake, and to use the same personnel to follow up with learners who need more attention. It is also advisable that this person, or persons, not be the same as those actually teaching the learner. As I will explain, some learners may need a safety valve. To make this degree of interview and follow-up manageable, consider ways for staff -- not only the teachers -- to look systematically for "at-risk indicators" (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). "At risk" here means those learners who probably have the highest chance of dropping out in the first few critical weeks by virtue of the dispositional barriers they must overcome. The overall logic here is that some new students have more significant dispositional barriers than others. These "at-risk" learners can often be identified and assisted to stay in programs longer.

The study we conducted involved 20 at-risk learners and a control group. The intake counselor, a male, looked for body language and verbal cues that suggested dispositional barriers were at work, barriers sufficient to cause the applicant to drop out early on. These cues included skepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty. This observation occurred during a meeting at the beginning of the program. The second meeting was the student intake, about two weeks later, during which the counselor once again looked for the same behaviors and attitudes. At this point, if he saw the same behaviors or attitudes, he referred the student to another counselor, a female. She conducted a more in-depth interview with the new learner about her past schooling experiences. Having toured the program by now, the student was asked to compare the past with her future expectations for this program. The Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory, which contrasts aspect of past performance and relations with peers with what the potential learner was anticipating in this program, was created and used for this more lengthy interview (Quigley, 1997, pp. 245- 246).

With these three procedures, we had identified an at-risk group: learners we hypothesized were especially susceptible to demotivators. But now what? Remember how we usually place so much emphasis on a caring teachers' ability to raise self-concept? Other possibilities were tested. Those who now appeared to be at-risk were referred at random to four separate classroom settings. None were aware they were part of a study. The first randomly selected group was referred to the mainstream just like the others that came to

the center. This control group was placed among the usual classes of anywhere from 15 to 20 students, taught by one teacher. Another randomly selected group received team support. This meant their teacher was made aware they were at-risk students and the female counselor visited each in this group at least once per week. The counselor and teacher used the Inventory as a baseline to see how the learner was progressing. So, this "team-supported group" received all the support that a teacher and a counselor could possibly give within the program's structure. We hypothesized that if caring teachers and counselors are vital to retention, this approach would result in the highest student retention rate. The third randomly selected group went to small classes of five or six students. This option played down the teacher's importance; we hypothesized that more peer attention, not just more teacher attention, would have a positive impact on retention. The final randomly selected group were assigned to one-on-one volunteer tutors rather than to a classroom, giving them the most teacher attention one could ever get in ABE. What happened? All three special treatment groups retained students past three weeks and beyond the control group. Our goal was met. The small group option held the most students the longest. This suggests that increased peer support as well as enhanced teacher support for the at-risk, through the small group setting during the first three weeks, may provide an "absence of negatives" sufficient for many at-risk learners. In all events, any of the three treatments were an improvement over the traditional classroom for the at-risk.

Implications

What does this suggest for program design? First, identify those least likely to stay. The at-risk group should be identified by an experienced intake person in the first one-on-one meeting. These observations should be verified during a second interview, using the Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory (Quigley, 1997). Although using this instrument hardly constitutes scientific prediction, it at least provides a profile based on the new students' own expressed expectations and personal concerns. And it grounds observed behaviors and learner self-perceptions in dispositional barriers. I recommend also using the Witkin Embedded Figures Test (Quigley, 1997; Witkin et al, 1971). This test assesses learners' field dependence and field independence, which, simply put, means levels of needing to belong.

This means making informed judgments early on in programs. Some programs will be able to place the at-risk in classes of five or six students. Some will not. Most programs can have the intake person act as follow-up support to the at-risk by meeting with these students individually at least once a week to go over their progress, using the Inventory as a baseline. The follow-up should include informing the teacher that these students will need more support than others, even if they do not always request it. Finally, the intake person and the teachers can meet and work as a team. In any case, the intake person should be someone other than the teacher so that another interested person is available to the students. This provides a second, less symbolically authoritative figure with whom the at-risk can consult.

Other team support techniques suggest themselves here. Groups within classrooms can be formed to create a smaller peer support group for the at-risk. After-class support groups

can be created and the at-risk can be encouraged to attend. Approaches such as mentoring and "buddy systems" can be used with good effect. The idea is to build more support for the at-risk using peers as well as teachers and intake personnel. Finally, many programs can add volunteer tutors to ABE programs, either in or outside of ABE classrooms. The last model tried in the study was to give fuller attention through tutors. It worked better than nothing did. Why not add a tutor to help the at-risk in ABE if this is the approach available?

No one is suggesting that situational and institutional barriers will not creep up on many learners during or after the critical three weeks. We are dealing with adults here. Little is predictable; less is "controllable." But, based on this study and the success of programs that have acted on these same suggestions, we know that we can: 1) understand the time frame in which we must identify the at-risk, 2) identify an at-risk group upon which to focus energy, and 3) employ various groupings found to provide support for the at-risk. Above all, we can at least begin to untangle some of the complex issues of retention and make a better, more informed start. Yes, there is something I can do.

The Answer

If I knew how to enhance motivation, I would have done it 20 years ago. I only wish I had taken the time to question, to analyze, and to be more self-critical in ways that allowed for greater learner input. The efforts of recent researchers, and emerging trends such as action research for the classroom (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997) are positive. Here are some questions I think we should be asking. What are the differences -- dispositional, cognitive, age, gender, and cultural -- between those who stay and those who do not? What is the actual process of disengagement? Are there stages of dropout? Do demotivators -- especially things done or not done by the teacher -- trigger them? What role does learning style play in motivation? And how can we -- practitioners, researchers, and learners alike -- share and learn from our experiences so that, as a field, we are not reinventing the same disjointed solutions? In my view, just being able to communicate and share ideas through such means as Focus on Basics is a major step forward.



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Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes

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A key difference between adult and child learners is that adults choose to participate in educational programs while children participate because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces that identify schooling as the proper “work” of childhood. Adults must make active decisions to participate in each class session and often must overcome significant barriers to attend classes. Every adult education program should help adult students persist in their learning until they reach their educational goals.

NCSALL is engaged in an ongoing study designed to:

- 1) develop and test advice for adult basic education practitioners on how to help adult learners persist in their studies; and
- 2) develop and test advice for policy makers on how to structure funding and accountability systems in ways that will support learner persistence.

In the first phase of the study, four key supports to persistence were identified:

The first support is management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence. Understanding the forces, identifying which are strongest, and deciding which are most amenable to manipulation provides an indication of how to help someone reach an educational goal. Any intervention meant to increase persistence must help adults strengthen the positive forces and lessen the negative forces. The first step is to identify all the forces that are acting upon an individual. The next step is to identify which forces can have a significant effect on an individual’s path. Of these strong forces, a determination must be made as to which ones can actually be managed or, rather, which positive forces can be made stronger and which negative forces can be made weaker.

The second support is self-efficacy. The educational program must help adult students build self-efficacy about reaching their goals. The term self-confidence is used more often in adult education literature, but self-efficacy is a more useful term to describe this support. Self-confidence is a global feeling of being able to accomplish most tasks. Self-

efficacy is focused on a specific task and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that task, which here is successful learning in ABE, ESOL, or ASE programs.

The third support to persistence is the establishment of a goal by the student. This process begins before an adult enters a program. Adults who could be classified as potential ABE, ESOL, or ASE students experience events that cause them to enter educational programs. The events might be dramatic or subtle. They provide potential adult students with goals they hope to accomplish by entering an ABE, ESOL, or ASE program. The staff of educational programs must help the potential adult students define their goals and help them understand the many instructional objectives that must be accomplished to meet the goals. Teachers must then use those student goals as the context for instruction, and the goals should be continuously revisited since they may change over time.

The fourth support is progress toward reaching a goal. Adult students must make progress toward reaching their educational goals, and they must be able to measure that progress. Programs must provide services of sufficient quality that students make progress, and programs must have assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress.

Policy Support to Persistence. Aspects of the four supports presented here already exist in some programs, but a combination of the four may provide a more supportive environment to persistence. These supports are more likely to be built if persistence becomes a more important measure in program accountability, and if funding agencies provide the technical assistance and training needed for programs to put these supports in place. Policy makers should then hold programs accountable for the quality of the intake, orientation, instruction, and program approaches that support persistence. They should use an expanded 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 programs as soon as the demands of their lives allow. Using only attendance in class or in tutoring sessions as a measure of persistence undervalues effective learning activities that should be encouraged. The wider definition of persistence would allow practitioners to focus on helping adults become persistent learners who use episodes of program participation as critical parts of a comprehensive learning strategy that employs other forms of learning.

Study Findings. This study found that the many ways in which we can classify adult students (by gender, ethnicity, age, employment status, number and age of children, previous school experience, and educational background of other adults in their lives) do not tell us much about how to help them persist in their education.

The only significant findings were that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children were more likely to persist than others in the study. The greater likelihood of persistence by immigrant students in ESOL classes is well documented, and the findings of this study suggest that this effect continues as immigrants learn English and move on to ABE and GED programs. Grown children might encourage their parents to join and persist in a program. On the other hand, adults