



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

Goal-Setting in the New River Valley: Teachers' Perceptions and Strategies

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Background:

Setting goals when embarking on a new phase in one's life has many benefits. Knowing where one is going is motivational. Choosing a direction provides a focus and a time for reflection, assesses strengths and weaknesses, and allows for a plan. I believe that these benefits can enhance an adult learner's educational experience. As a new teacher in an open-door enrollment ABE and GED classroom, I noticed that students were having trouble articulating short-term goals. Since I had participated in a number of staff development workshops and seminars, I noticed that the practitioners with whom I work were struggling to find the right combination of goal-setting strategies and tools to sharpen the focus of their learners. Searching for a way to improve my own goal-setting practices and hoping to offer program enhancing suggestions, I became curious about effective goal-setting strategies used by other teachers in my program.

Inquiry:

How are practitioners in the New River Valley setting goals with ABE and GED students? What are the practitioners' perceptions of the process and the strategies they use?

Data Collection:

What better way to find out the answers to these questions than to ask the teachers directly? I held two tape-recorded focus group sessions, one with experienced teachers and the other with new teachers. I developed questions, ground rules and procedures for the focus groups. Following the sessions, I conducted interviews with focus group participants using questions developed from the transcribed focus group tapes.

In addition to holding the focus groups, I participated in a number of peer discussions about my research at three weekend retreats. I attended program-wide study circle meetings and observed teacher's responses to goal-setting activities. I kept a journal of my experiences and impressions of the research process and of the issue of goal-setting. I reviewed goal-setting articles in Focus on Basics and Progress Newsletter, and collected relevant items from the Equipped for the Future (EFF) listserv.

Since I was also interested in improving my own teaching, I developed a goal-setting activity for my class using the EFF content standard, Plan, and I observed the students' responses to the activity. I

collected goal-setting tools used by the teachers who participated in the focus groups and the study circle. During the data analysis stage of this project, I organized the data into the following categories: perceptions, feelings, processes, and strategies.

Findings:

How practitioners are setting goals with students

During the focus group and interview process teachers shared how they were setting goals with their students. Most teachers set goals with students by individual interviews. One teacher used a group goal-setting approach. To aid in documentation, teachers offered checklists to their students, which triggered ideas for potential goals. GED preparatory teachers used standardized assessments to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. From there, students determined what they needed to learn. The teacher who practiced group goal-setting developed goals over a period of time with initial activities centered around values and self-esteem issues. Most teachers conducted informal interview goal-setting sessions while the rest of the class was working independently. Other teachers conducted formal interviews using

the STEPS process and documenting the session in writing. All teachers tried to encourage students to make a commitment to their education. Most of the teachers used goals to monitor students' ongoing progress.

Goal-setting was defined through the responses produced by the focus groups. Teachers agreed that goal-setting is a process. This process, although unique to each teacher, had similar characteristics. I was able to identify various goal-setting characteristics of a beneficial nature to the student. Goal-setting provides a time of interaction between the teacher and student whereby an atmosphere of trust and rapport can be established. Teachers see goal-setting to be an important life skill to help students focus upon what they want to achieve and what they need in order to progress through their education. Goal-setting propels students forward, provides a teachable moment, and creates a clear picture of goal success.

Practitioners' perceptions of the goal-setting process

During the focus groups and interviews, teachers defined their feelings and their perceptions of how the learner feels about goal-setting. Teachers reported different levels of comfort when setting goals with their learners:

"It is very difficult to set goals with students who are there for two class meetings and don't show up for another two meetings and drift in and drift out...it is hard to get a commitment from them if we do have the time to determine a goal."

"It is a difficult process for me in light of the amount of time I have

with my folks...yes, I find it a very difficult process."

Conversely another teacher said, "I like it. That's how I feel. It's fun and the [students] like it."

Some teachers jump into teaching skills after the initial standardized assessment.

"My goal is to get them what they want as quickly as possible so they can move onto the next phase of their lives. I don't try to hold onto them at all."

Teachers mentioned "time" as a major factor when setting goals with students in all types of adult education programs. The program, the teacher, and the student are affected by "time" as it applies to goal-setting. Teachers in the focus group indicated that they must decide how much time they are willing to spend on goal-setting, at what point they are going to introduce goal-setting, and how much time they are going to spend developing the process of goal-setting. Some teachers did not emphasize goal-setting.

"... we need to use discretion [in] the amount of time that we allocate to different students to use for goal-setting. We have to develop the rapport, we have to be able to determine the sincerity level and the determination of the student."

"No, I don't define "goal" with my students. I don't use the word goal. You have mastered the math now and so you can take it over to the English now."

They questioned whether goal-setting should be a priority. Teachers defended their teaching methods

during the focus groups. The strategies they chose were ones that they felt worked the best for their students.

Teachers felt that "time" affects students when they are thinking about committing to an educational program, its homework and attendance.

"One of the problems we have [is that] so many of our students are gone by the time we get the goals set so we don't get the chance to monitor it. They come 2 or 3 times and then go home."

Teachers urge their students to set goals when thinking about their steps after they get their GED. Teachers ask their students to consider how long it will take to get the GED and if this is a realistic expectation given the student's educational level.

"They all want to get a GED, most of them want to get a better job, help their children with their homework. And that is it. When you try to break it down into short-term goals they are lost...they can do it but you have to work a long, long time with them in order to get them comfortable enough to do it."

One teacher who used to work with a low level student and found it easy to set goals about how to do basic things found that, "with a lot of the other adult GED students, they just want to get their GED and it's hard to get them to sit down and think about what they need to do to get there...shorter goals."

Time affects programs when they try to plan how long each class period will be, how many classes per week, and how much planning time the teacher will need. According to

the focus groups, the longer a teacher had with the student, the more goal-setting was being done, and the greater the retention rate.

Practitioners' goal-setting strategies

The focus groups and interviews highlighted various strategies that teachers favor when setting goals with their students.

“Mostly it is a matter of asking the questions.”

“I got them to write a paragraph on where they wanted to be and what they wanted to be doing in 10 years. I found out a lot about them by doing that. So when I sat down with them to set goals with them, that helped me to get them to focus.”

“You have your big goal of getting the GED...let's break it down in smaller increments and see how well you are doing.’ I say, ‘You have done well on your math so now we will work on English.’ I look at that as being a smaller more precise goal.”

“We work as a large group, small, and individual. A lot of projects [mapping], collages, writing, fun tests from magazines. We will go to the board and chart who's where. Get the whole class perspective. It's a large group; there is a lot of discussion. ”

“I also use goal sheets with mine that are GED goal sheets, preps that I typed up that go along with my Steck-Vaughn texts. [I ask my students to] look and see how much work they have to do to prepare and to look and see how much they [have done]. Schedule out your calendar... [indicate] where you are. At this point [on the calendar] you are done. You get a pretest. The ball is definitely in their court.”

“I will share the areas that they are weaker or stronger in and ask which would they prefer to address first. Whatever subject they say they want to work on first, I generally don't have them work over three broad areas at a time.”

“They need that positive reinforcement to help them go on to next one. They [can't progress in education] without success in their goals.”

Conclusions:

Goal-setting processes are not standardized across the New River Valley. Virginia's adult education handbook provides teachers with a goal-setting/monitoring process called STEPS, however, teachers are finding that they must severely modify it to be compatible with the amount of time they have the students in class and teachers are finding they must modify STEPS according to the students' level. Goal-setting processes are unique to each teacher. Methods of goal-setting relate to how the program is structured. The teacher who set goals over a period of time was in a program where the students attended nine hours per week. Teachers who limited the time spent on goal-setting were in programs where students attended for four hours per week or less.

While valuing goal-setting, most teachers addressed it only briefly in their classrooms. The reasons that they gave for this dichotomy were programmatic issues over which they felt they had no control. Teachers admitted during the study circle that goal-setting is not done well in just one sitting. Most teachers agreed that goal-setting is most effective when done over time.

Teachers shared the conditions under which they taught while explaining why goal-setting was not emphasized in their classes. Teachers cope with open enrollment, various levels of student motivation and commitment, fluctuating students' life situations, mixed ability levels, the lack of adequate classroom space, and documentation mandates.

Some teachers observed that their students were able to articulate goals for their lives, and other teachers observed that students had trouble articulating goals. Some teachers thought in terms of long-term goals and some thought in terms of short-term goals. Discussion fluctuated between long-term goals and short-term goals, identifying similarities and differences. Some teachers spoke about goal-setting in general. Teachers said that when a student comes in and says, “I want my GED,” they must assume the student knows this goal is a reachable goal. In many cases, especially for the lower level learners, it is not a reachable goal in a short period of time but may be in a longer period of time.

Teachers offered suggestions as to how the goal-setting process could be improved in their particular situation. One of the suggestions made by teachers is to have goal-setting become a part of the intake process during the sign up ritual. When students have a realistic picture of how long it will be before they are ready to take their GED test, they are better equipped to commit to the process. When long term goals are broken down into manageable short-term goals, the process seems more palatable and doable. Teachers suggested that an intake specialist, who would

complete assessments and goal-setting with students thus freeing the teacher to pursue the instructional functions in programs of four hour classes per week, would be beneficial.

The focus groups and interviews brought out problems and issues that teachers feel surround setting goals in the field of adult education. Accountability and student commitment would seem to be

primary factors of student retention. Effective goal-setting, which causes students to gain confidence, was demonstrated in one teacher's classroom to increase student commitment. Programs that spend more time with the students setting goals and stressing self-esteem issues generate greater commitment among their learners.

When states and programs

mandate extensive documentation from part-time teachers who already volunteer the time needed to demonstrate professionalism, teacher frustration levels increase. Adult education programs that support their teachers and learners by providing sufficient time to effectively work through the goal-setting process will become benchmarks for other programs to follow. □

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The Virginia Adult Education Research Network supports practitioner research as staff development. In practitioner research, groups of teachers, tutors, and administrators use qualitative inquiry methods to systematically explore issues or problems, arising from their own practice. Practitioner research is a long-term learning process that occurs, over the course of months, within a supportive group and continues as researchers carry out projects in their classrooms and programs. Through brief reports that they write practitioner researchers contribute their knowledge to others in the literacy education field. The complete series of Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999, is available on the Internet at <http://www.vcu.edu/aelweb/vaern.html>

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