



# Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

## *What Happens When ESL Students Experience Authentic Work Situations?*

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### **Background:**

Imagine yourself transported to another land with a different language and strange customs. Imagine, too, that your husband is not with you and you are suddenly the sole provider for yourself and your children. Your new land provides you with some assistance to start your new life but within two years these benefits will cease and you will be on your own. This is the situation in which many of the women in my program who are refugees from Somalia, Kurdistan, Iran, Cambodia, and Vietnam, find themselves.

My job as one of two transition facilitators in the Families Transitioning to Work (FTW) Program is to assist these women by providing instruction in job readiness and basic computer skills for two hours each afternoon. The women also attend intensive English classes for 3 hours in the morning. The class profile ranges from literacy to advanced level English, from 0 years of schooling to high school graduates, and from no work experience to those who have run their own businesses. They are very diverse! How best to assist them in their transition to the American workplace?

As I became more familiar with these women and their life stories, I began to realize how abstract the American workplace was to them and I wondered how to make it more real and more concrete. Opportunities to experience work and a work environment in a guided learning situation seemed like a possible solution.

### **Inquiry:**

*What happens when my students experience authentic work situations?*

### **Action:**

My colleague and I decided to integrate a work component into our curriculum. We would try to identify some job sites within our community where students could either volunteer or job shadow and we would ask students if they would like to participate and give them a choice of sites. All of the students responded very positively to this proposal. We were able to locate three job sites to begin this experiment: the local Headstart child care center; the public library; and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. At the child care center and the library, students would act as volunteer aides and at the hotel they would have the opportunity to shadow various hotel workers, such as housekeepers,

laundry workers, and kitchen helpers. Students rotated job assignments so not all students were at “work” on the same day. We reserved Mondays and Fridays for group instruction on job related topics and skills so that students were working on a rotating basis on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. On Fridays, the students shared their work experiences with their classmates in the form of a focused discussion. They were asked to complete a simple form for each job assignment; they recorded the name of the job site, the date they worked, the name of the job, and the job duties they did or observed.

### **Data Collection:**

Data collection consisted of a classroom journal that I kept during the course of the project, transcripts of the three Friday focused discussion groups, and the job assignment forms that the students completed about their work assignments. In my journal I recorded daily classroom activities and student initiated conversation. For the Friday discussion groups, which acted as a kind of debriefing session of the work experiences of that week, my colleague led the discussion based on a prepared list of questions; she asked the students to describe what they had observed and done and to reflect

upon their experiences. I took notes and also recorded these discussions on tape. Five students participated in the first discussion, nine in the second, and seven in the third. Three students participated in all three sessions.

The transcripts of the focused discussion groups provided the richest source of data while my journal and the students' written forms provided supplemental data. The actual phrases used by the students during the discussions were organized into four broad categories: Observations by the Students; Experiences of the Students; Communication by the Students (with each other or with people at their work sites), and Evaluation or Critical Thinking by the Students. Under each of these main categories, a subset of headings was identified as the chart below illustrates:

Observations	Experiences	Communications	Evaluation
Demographics	Job Duties	Exchanging Information	Job Choices
Dress Code	Filling out Applications	Asking Questions	Job Duties
Kinds of Jobs	Problem Solving		Job Sites
Job Duties and Responsibilities			Identifying Problems

**Findings:**

After categorizing, coding and sorting my data as described above, two observations jumped out. The first observation was how much more the students spoke about work related topics as the project progressed. This was documented both in the transcripts and in my classroom journal. The second and more interesting observation was how what they talked about changed. This was most clearly shown in the analyzed transcripts. In the first discussion group, most of the students' comments centered around their observations of the workplaces and descriptions of their experiences on the job. There were very few questions asked of each other and very tentative evaluative comments were made, such as, "Fun job," "Easy job," or "I'm sorry I don't speak Spanish."

By the second discussion, a shift in emphasis occurred; most of the

students talked of their observations again but now the number of evaluative comments was just as great and the types of evaluations ventured were more varied. For example, students stated:

"Hotel very good for talking."

"Like library. I don't like hotel, far away, I don't have car."

"Better to go, see other jobs. We can figure out what are the duties of the different jobs."

However, there was still little communication that occurred between students; their comments were directed towards the teachers.

In the third session, a dramatic change occurred. Not only did the students seem to want to talk more but most of the talking took the form of asking and answering questions of each other, reporting information they had learned from other workers at their job sites, or making

evaluative statements. In this discussion time, students asked each other information questions:

"How many rooms?"

"You see people busy?"

"You talk with manager?"

"How many time for break for lunch?"

They also asked questions to learn the opinions of their classmates. One student asked, "Do you think it's hard to work with kids?" And another asked, "You like working in kitchen and cleaning?"

They were able to bring back to the classroom valuable information they had learned from their job sites and they wanted to share this information with their classmates. This included information about salary: "After three months, \$8. After four years, \$12." About benefits they reported: "Fifteen hundred

dollars for education.” And about the workers they shadowed: “She speaking English very well. She say when I come from my country, no English. Then she learned. She very nice.”

Their evaluative comments broadened as they began to weigh the information they had gathered:

“Hard job, but not bad for money.”

“Woman with big heart for children. For me, it’s no easy.”

“But you know, in child care you improve your language. You hear a lot of stories...You learn what they learn.”

The session ended with the students brainstorming ideas of other job sites where they would like to volunteer or shadow.

My journal entries mirrored similar findings of growth. In March, at the beginning of our authentic work placements, one student who was scheduled to volunteer at the library informed me that she had an interview for a job at the same time she was scheduled to work. When asked about this conflict, she said maybe she would not go to the interview. We discussed ways to handle schedule conflicts. The following month, she told me she had not gone to her volunteer job the previous week because her son had been sick but she had called the library and told them.

Students also began to show initiative in securing themselves volunteer opportunities. After I placed one student in the public library as a volunteer, another student expressed interest in this site. I referred her to her local library and

suggested she call to inquire about volunteer opportunities. She did so, filled out the application, and began working there shortly thereafter. This inspired two more students to approach their local libraries for volunteer posts and they, too, began volunteering on a weekly basis.

The job assignment forms that the students completed after their work assignments were less useful to me as a source of data. However, the job assignment form provided the students an opportunity to record details about their jobs which they were later able to use as they filled out job applications. Now students had something to write in the experience section of the application.

### Conclusions:

After being placed in authentic work situations, students were able to discuss various aspects of work from identifying who were the workers, what they were wearing, what kinds of jobs were being done, what the job duties were, to what were some of the responsibilities and qualifications for the jobs. They gained valuable work experience as they participated as volunteers, and some secured references from their supervisors. They also developed communication skills, demonstrated by being able to ask and answer questions about their work experiences and to gather information from employees at the job sites. They began to evaluate and analyze different types of jobs and they began to vocalize job preferences and their reasons for them. This applied to students at all levels of English ability, from those at the literacy level to those at the more advanced levels.

My findings indicate that placing

students in authentic work situations while they are still receiving classroom instruction can be very valuable. Not only do students develop the vocabulary and experience the culture of the workplace, they do so in a supportive environment. Our Friday discussion groups gave students a forum to share their experiences, to discuss their concerns, and to correct some misunderstandings. It gave great input into our curriculum, as we tried to address issues that arose from these sessions in the classes of the following week.

The logical next steps would be to increase the number of job sites available for the students to sample, and to extend the amount of time they are able to spend at each site. If partnerships could be formed with more businesses, our program could be extended to include other ESL students who are seeking first jobs. Also, if we could develop a way to continue offering support to newly employed students, we could help students address the many challenges they will continue to face as working parents. If our program could find a way to connect with employers to provide these students with continuing workplace training as they become employed, we would I think increase their chances for self sufficiency. Finding the first job can be very difficult but keeping that job is also a challenge. Through authentic work experience we hope to address some of those challenges before our students leave our program, but extending our support to the first job might provide the scaffolding they need on their way to complete self sufficiency. □

## **Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series**

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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>*

*This project is funded under Section 353 of the Adult Education Act, Title VI, P. 93-380 through the Adult Education Service, Department of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia with additional funding from the Arlington Public Schools and the Virginia Association for Adult and Continuing Education. Ronna Spacone and Cassandra Drennon edited this series of Practitioner Research Briefs; the perspective expressed through each is that of the researcher and author. For more information, including how to contact the researchers, contact Ronna Spacone at 703-228-8024 or Toll Free at 877-832-2327.*

***Published August 1999***