



# Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

## *Orientation to Adult High School Programs Using the Discovery Method of Learning*

*Donna Chambers, Fairfax County Public School System, Fairfax, VA*

### **Background:**

Fairfax County Public Schools Adult and Community Education offers three distinct programs for adults to receive a high school credential: The General Educational Development Test (GED); The External Diploma Program (EDP); and the Woodson Adult High School credit program. Yet adults wishing to finish high school often choose the GED program without considering other options. There are several possible reasons for this. Many are cognizant only about the GED. Complete information about all three adult high school options is either not reaching the public despite extensive efforts to publicize programs, or the adults who receive the information do not fully understand it. Although all three programs are explained at a weekly one-hour free information session, students often do not attend to learn how to exercise their choices. Often adult learners do not take the time to learn what is needed in terms of skill level to succeed in completing high school. With their expectations being more in line with traditional school, the adults seem to have difficulty taking responsibility for their own learning. "I want to get my GED" is what we often hear. Also, there seems to be a high

percentage of non-native English speakers who are test-oriented and believe that the GED is the only acceptable way for adults to receive a high school credential.

With emphasis in society being placed on achieving a high school credential, it becomes important to make learners more aware of options so that they can choose a program that best allows them to achieve this goal. I believe they need to become informed consumers and invest in the process in order to know what it takes to complete a program.

Teachers and other program staff can help adults learn about high school completion options and select the program that best meets their life and learning style needs. With the appropriate information, it makes sense that adults will be able to decide which program is best for them and what learning resources can be applied. Going into this research project, my hunch was that this will make them more invested in taking responsibility for their own learning. Students need to be encouraged in a process to learn so that they can take action and have a voice in their learning.

These beliefs were the basis of my research project. I focused on the

process of learning using the discovery method to learn the content. The content was information on the high school completion programs.

### **Inquiry:**

*What happens when the learner is given an opportunity to learn using the discovery method?*

### **Action:**

A colleague, Marti Giese, and I designed an orientation workshop that became the framework for my research project. The workshop consists of three 2-hour sessions and involves students in learning the content within the process of the discovery method. Participants are told that they are expected to work in a group to learn about one of the three options for finishing high school.

We offered the orientation workshop six times over the course of six months. Four of the workshops were presented in existing learning centers. One was presented at a prison pre-release center and another at a Hispanic family literacy center. Each workshop had an average of 10 adults who volunteered to participate. Whenever a staff member who normally facilitated the

center was present that staff person was asked to act as an observer and his or her comments and observations were documented.

In the first of the three sessions students were introduced to the workshop. They were placed into teams and experienced team-building activities. Then they were oriented to the discovery and problem-probing methodology. Interactive sessions were used to determine what the adults knew. The entire group developed a list of questions they wanted answered about the high school completion programs. Typical questions were: How much does the program cost? What locations are offered? How long does it take? Can I work on my own while keeping a job? The students were then divided into three groups. These groups became the “experts” on their assigned program. During the second session students worked in their group to explore using the internet, telephone, dictionaries, brochures, the facilitator and anything else that would help them learn. They were reminded to think about the process while they were learning the content. We decided to embrace the motto, “Everyone teaches and everyone learns.” At the third session groups were given time to determine the method for reporting back to the whole group and finally they presented what they had learned. Students were told that their opinion on how the process worked was valuable to the facilitator. The terms “content” and “process” were discussed and referenced often.

### **Findings:**

With few exceptions, the participants in all workshops were

extremely enthusiastic about this process. The one exception was at the Hispanic family literacy center. Language was a problem, since all but three participants did not speak English well enough to engage in the activities. Work had to be done through an interpreter. While most people in the workshops still remained in the GED or test mindset, people were beginning to embrace the idea of other programs and the possibility for choices.

The presentations given by the groups were well thought out and complete. Programs were explained in ways that were easy for everyone to understand. While there seemed to be a predisposition toward test taking, and the groups had a tendency to explain all programs in terms of what test needs to be taken to qualify, they were learning the other options. The emphasis on GED was still apparent since adults understand the concept of testing, and so it was difficult to introduce new concepts.

Valuable information was exchanged. People began to try new resources as they became aware of what was available. One gentleman actually enrolled in classes at the Woodson High School once he realized how close he was to meeting all the requirements. Participants became increasingly aware that they had little idea of what was available to them.

Most important, however, was the enthusiasm that the learners had toward the process:

“We like working in groups and getting to know each other.”

“We feel better about ourselves, when

we learn on our own and take charge of our learning.”

“I feel more confident and I liked teaching others about what I learned.”

“Why can’t we learn this way all the time?”

The learning center staff who acted as observers during the workshops were also enthusiastic about the process. Group dynamics revealed changes in social interaction. One female participant who never spoke during the six months she had been coming to the learning center became the most vocal member of the group in which she participated. A gentleman who normally acts out in class became more reserved and said he had really learned a lot.

### **Conclusions:**

Clearly, this methodology was right for these adult learners. Participants in the orientation wanted to take charge of their learning and wanted the facilitator to allow them opportunities to explore and learn on their own. The adults liked working in teams and they learned from each other. This dynamic mirrors employee development and growth in the labor force in modern work environments. I believe, based on this research, that content is best learned when the discovery or exploratory learning method is practiced.

For many, the discovery method was a new way of learning. The students liked it and in all cases, with one exception (the Hispanic learning center), they did not want to see the workshop end. This methodology

most likely would also be appropriate for the ESL setting with some modification. The workshop could be presented at a slower pace and it could incorporate information on the ESL program offerings. It is my hope that the orientation workshop will become common practice and part of the intake process in Fairfax County Public Schools. Not only does it orient the adult learner to the content of what is available, but it also sets them on a course of learning through the discovery method. Once this workshop becomes routine practice, other areas such as assessment and counseling can be explored. □

## 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>*

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