



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

Orienting Adults to Program Options Using Small Group Research

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Background:

I work in a high school completion program in a large, densely populated county adjacent to Washington, D.C. In the last five years the enrollment of non-native speakers of English and former welfare recipients in this program has increased considerably. I noticed that both of these populations have difficulty understanding the differences between program choices available to them. They make choices without asking questions or making comparisons about program options. I also noticed that once in the classroom, these adult learners want the teacher to direct all of their learning. They seem to be passive recipients to our services rather than actively motivated to engage in the rigors of pursuing a high school credential. Dropping out is not uncommon.

I believed that these adult learners needed to become more independent in their learning and decision-making about their education. I believed it is best for them to make informed decisions about which program is best suited to their needs based on a more complete understanding of the options. I believed that working together to ask questions, gather information, and make comparisons would help them make more appropriate program choices.

Inquiry:

What happens when groups of adult students are helped to research high school completion options as part of an orientation procedure?

Action:

I knew that a new orientation procedure would have to accommodate an extremely diverse group of people, those who could read and write little English and those nearly ready to complete a high school credential. An orientation would have to appeal to learners in a jail, in an ethnic housing development, and in community learning centers. People from a wide variety of cultures and educational experiences would attend as well. Finally, the orientation activities would have to be non-threatening enough to engage both the timid and confident alike.

A colleague, Donna Chambers, and I developed a three-session orientation workshop in which we facilitated small groups of adult learners through a series of research activities. Instead of the traditional approach to teaching that focuses on dispensing specified doses of content to learners, the design of our workshop provided a process — a progression of group research activities intended to help learners

discover the workshop content for themselves.

In the first session learners got to know each other, voiced their purpose for pursuing an education, and came up with a list of questions as a method for comparing program options. By session end, they were divided into research teams, given a research topic (one of the program options), and offered an array of printed materials. Selection of specific materials was up to them.

During the second session we met in a computer lab to explore the internet as a tool for researching program options. Students also telephoned program offices to follow up on questions they were unable to answer with information they had thus far.

In the third session each research team reported to the large group what they knew about each program option. Each presentation was followed by questions from the audience about how program options would suit their needs.

Data Collection:

My colleague and I kept a journal during the weeks of the orientation workshops. In it we made a simple division between observations and reflections. We gave forms with these headings to teachers, tutors, and

administrators who also observed the process. We collected the forms after each session. We consulted the adult learners in the workshop by asking a series of questions at the end of each session that focussed on what they had learned and how they felt about the activities in which they had participated. At workshop end, we asked the learners to fill out evaluation forms concerning the effect and value of the entire workshop.

Findings:

Because our approach focussed on process and relied on the learners to discover content, each of the workshops produced slightly different results. All of the groups, however, came away with an understanding of the differences between the program options. Students from the jail focused on which program would best support them when they left the jail. Mothers in the housing development discussed how they could juggle family responsibility and pursuing an education. Participants from the community learning centers talked about the content from an employment and community college perspective. Each was able to learn what he or she needed. The facilitators did not have to take responsibility for figuring out who needed what.

Since learners were motivated by personal need, they engaged in the process with enthusiasm. One observing administrator was surprised that a mother who had recently arrived in this country was willing to leave her two preschoolers with a woman she did not know so that she could continue to attend our

sessions. An inmate from the jail volunteered that he regretted having missed the first session. And several people from the community learning centers asked why they had not been given this workshop before.

By the second session, learners demonstrated ownership for the work that was progressing. We found that some students voluntarily continued their research outside of class by making phone calls and going to the local library to use the internet. One man remarked, "I feel responsible because you are making me do the work."

The learners also demonstrated a sense of commitment to their assigned research groups. The 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 did not want to let his group down." At the housing development an observing administrator remarked that it was wonderful to see a woman who had arrived in this country last year take responsibility for a newcomer. At one of the community learning centers, participants left the room after the third session with reluctance. Each stopped just 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. The newly developed classroom community had been a new experience for them.

Within the three sessions, people began to help each other and a 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 student 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."

Out of the support of this new found sense of community in the classroom came surprising statements of self awareness, seed thoughts that could change attitudes and quite possibly change lives. These self discoveries came to students at all levels.

"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 focussing fully on my objective...need to grow up and realize what's real important. That's what I've learned."

As a facilitator of growth, results such as these excited and inspired me. As a teacher, I wanted to know if I had given students the necessary learning skills they need for the future. So I asked each of them at the end of the workshop, "What have you learned through our work together?" They told me, "I learned to work in groups is very important, rather than try to get all the information by myself." Another said, "It made me realize that the telephone, the computer, and printed information is there to help me learn." And another student remarked, "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." It was satisfying for me to hear these kinds of comments.

Conclusions:

Using a process of group research to drive the content (instead of the reverse) allows adult learners to become involved and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. When this occurs learners can personalize the lesson to their own needs. Classroom attendance may be less of a problem; the drop-out rate may be reduced as well.

Working in teams to research information builds a sense of community where adult learners can learn and practice important life skills. Those who can explain, guide, and support, do. Those who need to learn these skills can do so from peers. Others who see the big picture can be informed by those who see detail and vice versa. Those who are good at organizing a plan can learn from those who are good at evaluating results.

In this open and low risk atmosphere everybody teaches and everybody learns far more than from a single teacher-centered lesson. It is where learning to learn happens.

In the coming months I hope to offer the orientation workshop to all perspective students in our program. I also intend to begin a series of staff development inservices for our instructors that will focus on the benefits and methods used in this approach to facilitate adult learning.

The next questions I plan to explore include:

- What is the minimum level of English needed to profit from this approach?
- How will we screen for minimum level of English?
- How can we help non-native students understand that asking questions is as important as finding answers?
- How can we help those students who need more time to personalize the information?
- How can we build in a learning style preference and study skills component? □

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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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