



# Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

## *Designing Instruction for Incarcerated Men*

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### **Background:**

I am an academic instructor for the Department of Correctional Education at Haynesville Correctional Center, a medium/maximum security institution located in the Northern Neck of Virginia. I instruct approximately 54 incarcerated men daily in ABE, GED, or ESL. According to a law first enacted by the state legislature in 1989 and revised in 1991, every individual who enters the correctional system must have their basic skills assessed upon arrival. Any individual whose reading level falls below an 8th grade equivalency must be enrolled in the Literacy Incentive Program (LIP) in order to raise their reading level to 8.0 on the Test of Adult Basic Education and to achieve a series of life skill competencies. As originally conceived, participating in LIP and other programs in their treatment plan could earn inmates thirty days good time for every thirty served. Since 1995, however, the Virginia General Assembly requires all convicted persons to serve a minimum of 85% of their sentence thus eliminating the external incentive behind LIP. Inmates are still required to attend classes if LIP eligible or if they have no high school diploma or GED certificate, and if they expect to earn up to 15% off of their sentence and other eligibilities.

Once in my class, some students are eager to learn but others are not. I find myself often feeling as if I spend too much time trying to convince them that participating in an educational program is “good” for them beyond their annual reviews. I believe in one of the department’s slogans, “You are here because of your past. We are here because of your future.” But my average student does not seem to grasp the pertinence of adult education now or for the future. My preaching goes only so far and it takes too much of my energy.

I first became acquainted with the National Institute for Literacy’s Equipped for the Future (EFF) model several years ago, before I began my work at Haynesville. I was intrigued by its effort to help measure what real-life effects participation in an adult education program was having in peoples’ lives and its effort to develop a curriculum that would address skills adults say they need to fully participate in today’s world. Working at Haynesville made me question how applicable the three roles that arose from EFF’s research were in a prison setting. Did the roles of worker, community member, and family member “live” in incarcerated men’s lives when they seemed to be so physically separated from them? Might connecting instruction to the

roles they have in prison invigorate their learning? I decided to explore what might happen if I designed instruction around my incarcerated students’ roles, but there were other things I needed to learn first.

### **Inquiry:**

*What roles do incarcerated men see themselves in? How do they think of education in relation to themselves in these roles?*

### **Data Collection:**

I introduced the EFF framework to the inmates as a launching point. Then, I developed classroom discussions and individual surveys about students’ roles and how they were currently using skills garnered in class. I also asked them what skills they anticipated using in their future to fulfill their roles. I chose both oral and written forms of collection to gather more information from individuals who felt more comfortable using one format over the other. I purposely used differently sized groups to offer a variety of settings for them to interact in. Afterwards, I conducted small learning table sessions on goal setting to see if students would be able to include their roles in developing their individual learning plans. I also kept a journal of my reflections on class activities and events.

## Findings:

The students were able to identify goals for themselves within the framework of worker, family member and student. Some mentioned, for example, having more contact with children. Others mentioned receiving a GED. They were also able to identify skills that they need to fulfill these roles both inside and outside the institution:

- Writing a resume,
- Working with computers,
- Learning how to manage personal finances,
- Being able to read better to help others in their family.

They were also able to identify needs for personal growth including changing their attitudes, building their self-esteem, developing forms of self discipline, communicating and living with others, and improving family relationships.

When asked to identify how specific classroom activities apply to their lives, some reported only in terms of academic progress isolated within the classroom while others made vague connections. One inmate remarked, for instance, "Learning about something you never knew is always helpful."

However, when asked what prompts them to come to class, in terms of what they like and appreciate about it, they remark strongly on the personal benefits of participation. The following benefits were frequently noted:

- A classroom community,
- Increased motivation,
- Personal voice,
- An atmosphere encouraging inner reflection.

## Conclusions:

Ultimately, the students' answers suggest an awareness that inner growth is foundational to fulfilling their roles. However, using an academic skills curriculum, I cannot directly "teach" personal growth in the same way I deliver academic instruction. Still, with an appropriate curriculum and classroom environment, I can support the development of positive attitudes, increased self-esteem and self-discipline, improved communication skills, and broadened skills for living with others. As a teacher, I must keep in mind the relevance of personal development to successful performance as workers, family members and students/community members. This is especially the case for incarcerated

adults.

Students need to know, through structure and leadership, that the teacher has high personal expectations of them as members of the classroom community. The classroom community must provide a positive and encouraging atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking for help from their tutors and where they can be certain that they will receive it. In such a guided community, their voice is listened to and they are allowed to choose the daily direction of their learning. The community offers guidance when at an impasse. Daily encounters with the curriculum in the classroom community afford students the opportunity for vital growth. Teachers and students must make the connection between the academic skills that students work towards and their overall growth as human beings. For example, goal-setting activities may address the developmental issues a student identifies as being relevant to achieving his goal, and they may also outline the academic skills that are necessary. When developing a curriculum, then, a teacher must keep in mind that these inner issues help to build the foundation for successfully fulfilling the roles each individual sees living out. □

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## 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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