



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

Guiding Teachers Through Student Input

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Background:

The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) offers free, community-based English as a second language (ESL) classes, on a drop-in basis, at five sites in Arlington, Virginia. The classes, which are taught by volunteer teachers, are aimed at beginners. Potentially, there could be between seven to fourteen teachers at any one site and students could have contact with at least four different teachers in any one week.

The aim of the community-based classes is to teach life skills English. Most teachers follow a topic list that provides guidance on lesson objectives. For example, for three weeks the topic may be employment and lessons may focus on getting a job, keeping a job, and advancing on the job. Throughout the three-week period, teachers plan lessons based on employment related objectives. Generally, teachers like the concept of the topic list as it provides a focus for lesson planning and a framework within which all of the teachers are working. However, problems relating to duplication exist; several teachers may decide to address the same lesson objectives, for example. Teachers do sporadically

communicate to each other what they covered in class, by e-mail or by writing in a logbook located at each site.

As the Volunteer Coordinator, it is my responsibility to recruit, train, and support the volunteer teachers. My interest, in terms of this project, was to explore ways of providing more support and guidance to the volunteer teachers. Two issues were addressed: communication between teachers and student input.

Inquiry:

What happens when teacher guidance is provided through student input?

Action:

A trial project was conducted at one site, building on the existing topic list through the creation of a Topic Notice Board (TNB). The process can be described as follows.

- Before the introduction of a new topic, teachers carry out a needs assessment focussed on the new topic.
- This information is recorded on the TNB, which is prominently displayed in the classroom.

- Teachers sign-up for the objectives that they wish to teach during the three-week topic period.

The idea was to improve guidance to teachers, not only on what to teach, but also on what other teachers are doing, thereby avoiding duplication. The mechanism for achieving this was increased student input through needs assessment. Although this was not addressed through the project, increased student input would, hopefully, make the classes more meaningful and relevant to students' needs, encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning.

Data collection:

The project sought to discover what would happen when the new strategy was applied. I therefore gathered data that attempted to capture any changes that related to the teachers and the classroom environment. The trial project was conducted over a period of nine weeks and throughout that time I collected data through various means, including, e-mail correspondence, meetings with teachers, and a journal log with my own observations and reflections.

Findings:

The concept of the TNB evolved through the pilot project and mid-way through the project, I came to the following conclusions:

- The teachers and myself, as an administrator, had different perspectives on the pilot project and whether it was for the teachers or students' benefit. The teachers thought that the project was not working because the students were not signing-up for the objectives on the TNB or telling the teachers what they wanted to study. From my perspective, it was not working because the teachers were not signing-up for the lesson objectives they would be teaching over the topic period.
- The mechanism for providing teacher guidance, i.e., student input through needs assessment, was proving to be stressful to the teachers rather than helpful. Difficulties stemmed from the fact that needs assessment was new to both the teachers and the students, classes were multi-level, and there were literacy issues for many students.
- The actual process was complicated and relied on the timely input of too many people to make it work effectively.

The situation led to discussions with teachers about the project and a meeting to discuss the way forward. Despite the difficulties, teachers were reluctant to abandon the project. Positive aspects were related to

teachers working together and the concept of involving students. The TNB enabled teachers to act as a more coordinated team, aware of what others were teaching, and providing more integrated lesson objectives. The discussions led to a review of the concept of needs assessment into student topic awareness and it was agreed that the primary use of the TNB was a communication tool between teachers.

A very positive aspect of the outcome of the project was that the number of e-mails between volunteers about what they had covered in class significantly increased over the course of the nine weeks. Regular e-mails were generally sent the day after class and contained information about lesson objectives, the number of students and any new students, a self-assessment about how the lesson went, plans for next week's lesson, and mutual support and feedback. The e-mails provided important information to the teachers as they were able to link classes and lesson objectives and it reinforced the idea of teachers working together rather than individually. The increased communication did not include all teachers, however. Some teachers did not participate in the TNB or e-mail correspondence although teachers with e-mail had the option of accessing the information if they wanted to.

Eventually, volunteer teachers relied more on the e-mail communication than the TNB as a source of information. Obviously, the e-mails contained more detailed and useful information than the TNB, but they excluded those who did not

have access to e-mail. Access to e-mail also affected perceptions of duplication. Teachers with access to e-mail tended to think that duplication was not a problem, presumably because it was controllable. A teacher without e-mail found duplication very frustrating, probably leading to the decision to opt out of the TNB project altogether by deciding to teach something different from the topic list objectives.

Conclusions and Implications

The TNB concept looked quite different at the end of the nine weeks. We moved from a position of providing teacher guidance through student input to one of developing a way for teachers to communicate more effectively. Participating in the project helped to clarify what was important for teachers, although different teachers have different needs and perceptions on what constituted guidance. E-mail is a very effective tool enabling teachers to easily communicate with each other and exchange important information. At the end of the trial project, it seemed that teachers preferred this means of communication to the TNB, which only provided minimal information. Unfortunately, this communication excludes those who do not have access to e-mail.

In terms of developing communication between teachers, there are several important implications for the volunteer program. The communication process needs to be self sustaining, i.e., not be dependent on any one person, volunteer coordinator or teacher, to make it work. If someone

wants to be a part of the process, it is important that the mechanism itself does not exclude him or her, by not having access to technology, for example. Before proceeding, however, it is important to find out why those who opted out did so.

With respect to needs assessment and increasing student involvement, this did not progress well through the project and it is something that needs to be addressed in the future. Any future development needs to take into account the continuous enrollment, multi-level classes, and training issues. □

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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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