



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1998-1999 Report Series

Taking a Closer Look at Student Retention

Tina Spencer, Newport News Public Schools, Newport News, VA.

Background:

I am the lead teacher at Denbigh High School in the Adult and Continuing Education Program, Newport News, Virginia. Year after year, I register many adults for my adult basic education class. By the end of each year, I realize a disturbing pattern; I only have a handful of adult learners who are still in the program when the class ends each May. Even though I start in early September telling all my learners that those still enrolled in the program when it ends in May will receive a certificate of completion, my end-of-the-year enrollment is always low. This year alone, I had over 50 adult learners who registered for my ABE class. In May, only 8 students received certificates.

In the past, I spent two nights a week teaching basic skills to my learners. I used several sources to help me decide how to teach these skills. Using information that I had gathered from short-term goals written by the learners themselves, I taught skills that I presumed the learners needed and wanted. Another source to help me teach the classes was the pretest that my adult learners took before starting my class. The final source I used was a pre-GED textbook series covering all subject areas on the GED test. I feel

that the majority of my students value education, and I feel that they enroll with the intention of making better lives for themselves.

Inquiry:

So why do people who seem so dedicated drop out? Will it help if I change the set up of my class so that students work independently in a computer lab?

Action:

In mid February, I changed the way I taught the class. Monday nights remained the same with me teaching skills to the whole class. My learners asked questions during class whenever they needed to. As a whole group, we worked through problems to solve them. Wednesday night classes were set up differently. The learners came into a computer lab and worked on whatever they felt like they needed to work on. The choices during lab night were varied. Some of the learners chose to work on their keyboarding skills. Others practiced writing by using a word processing program. Many of the adult learners wanted to independently study the different academic areas covered on the GED test. They did this by entering a pre-GED program that had been previously loaded onto the computer. I walked around the class in the role of a guide or monitor. I

answered very few questions. When questions came up during the Wednesday night sessions, the learners wrote them down in a notebook. These questions were saved until the following Monday when they were discussed as a whole group.

Data Collection:

I began collecting data simply by keeping a nightly journal in which I wrote down my observations of the adult learners. Not long into the research project, I began allowing five to ten minutes at the end of each class for my learners to also write in a journal. I asked them to write down their thoughts about what they had learned from each class and to try to tell how they would use what they had learned in their daily lives. In my observation journal, I wrote down thoughts and notations about how my learners reacted throughout the evening. As I read over the journals, I realized that they weren't really reflecting on how their learning could help them in their everyday life. They were simply restating exactly what the lessons were. This caused me to begin keeping field notes in which I documented my learners' comments as well as their reactions during class sessions.

Throughout the project, class activities provided additional data

collection opportunities. An example of such an opportunity was the “snowball” activity we did during which my learners shared reasons why coming back to school was easy for them. For the second part of this activity, the learners had to share reasons why coming back to school was difficult for them. I also interviewed four of my peers who teach in the continuing education department. The interview focused on their worst and best experiences as a learner, then as a teacher, and lastly as they observed another colleague. I spent quite a bit of time analyzing this part of my data. I was amazed at how much insight I got from this data as it pertained to the issue of student retention. My final source of data was my attendance record book. Ultimately, this record book was a big factor in answering my research questions.

Findings:

Once I had collected all my data, it was time to study and analyze each piece. I rearranged each category several times. From studying and studying each piece of data, my findings became very clear:

- Changing the set up of my class did not make a difference.

- Working independently in a computer lab did not improve the attendance of my adult learners.

The adult learners who registered in my class came with a definite purpose in mind. This was supported by the short-term goals they were asked to write during registration. However, through the reflection journals, it was clear:

- My adult learners were not able to make the connection between the lessons I taught and their everyday lives.

Attendance was poor by the time the class ended in May. After analyzing the data collected from four of my colleagues, I have concluded that reasons for not returning to class are varied. Teachers being late for class and not providing students with clear directions cause students to stop attending classes. Students being embarrassed that others in the class know so much more than they think they know is another reason for stopping for awhile. The data also show that family emergencies can be another cause of students deciding not to come to class anymore.

Conclusions:

Personally, I know I will keep looking for ways to improve the attendance of my adult learners. Yet, after analyzing my data, more questions keep going through my mind. I would like to study different localities in our state one day to see if, or rather how many, adult learners actually do return to school. Would the goals of those adult learners returning to school change? Would adult learners really view getting their GED as a long-term goal and be willing to make more practical short-term goals? Also, would adults benefit from some type of counseling before entering continuing education classes? If those same 50 adult learners who came through my class this year had to attend a one-day session on goal setting, would they have still registered for the class? Maybe the answers to many of my questions have already been researched by my peers. The very next step for me will be to read more about what has already been studied in hopes of finding ways to help my adult learners make and reach practical goals in their lives. □

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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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