



Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Investigating the Implementation of Student Orientation in an Adult Basic Education Program

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Background

The implementation of our region's new orientation procedure produced mixed results. When I performed my annual class visits as Regional Specialist and Program Coordinator and reviewed students' folders, I noticed that documentation of learners' individual learning plans varied from site to site. This led me to become curious about teachers' feelings concerning the new orientation procedures. I also wondered how teachers felt about the new program guide, which we designed to help implement the orientation in 17 classes spread throughout three rural counties and one city.

The new orientation procedure began taking shape last summer when teachers attended a staff retreat. There they had the opportunity to reflect and evaluate the mission, vision and beliefs of our program. Together we created a model for continuous program improvement through participatory management. Later that summer a few teachers met to create a program guide documenting the suggestions iterated at the retreat. During a Saturday staff development session, we introduced teachers to the new program guide

including the chapter that walked teachers through the process of orienting new students. To further support the new procedure, we also built an hour onto the front of each class period.

The student orientation was designed for teachers to implement in five consecutive class periods. Learners were to receive program information, to set and prioritize goals, and to realize their weaknesses and strengths through various assessments including the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE). The student-generated information was then to be documented on individual learning plan forms, which provided a basis not only for monitoring students' progress but for justifying program services as well. The guide included activities and suggested protocols to implement the process, conversation prompts and probing questions to engage students in dialog, for instance. The chapter on the orientation was written in a narrative style that I didn't expect to find difficult to use in front of a class, but when called upon to help with student intake last October, I found myself modifying the process significantly. Since this was a new process for all of us, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of its

implementation and find out how the other teachers felt.

Inquiry

What happens when an adult basic education program implements a new orientation procedure? What are teachers' perceptions of the orientation procedure? What factors influence its implementation?

Action

I decided to find out what was going on when teachers implemented the orientation procedures and used the program guide. I wanted to know what parts they found most useful and important, if they had identified gaps in the resource and added their own activities. I was interested in finding out what steps the teachers were taking, when, and how much time was required. I also wanted to understand how teachers felt about their own preparedness to implement the student orientation and what impact, if any, it had on classroom dynamics. There was no better way to gather this information than to ask the teachers directly.

Data Collection

Six female teachers agreed to participate in audiotaped interviews

about the orientation process they had been using since September 1999. The interviews, which occurred in March 2000, included three teachers who were new to adult education and three veteran teachers. Two of the teachers, one who had not attended the Saturday staff development session, worked together. I created a set of interview questions that centered around the orientation process in general; the content of the new program guide; setting learner goals and using the individual learning plan form.

Before interviewing the teachers, I responded to the questions in my journal — since I too had used the new guide for student intake. I also created an outline of the chapter that described the five-day orientation process. Outlining the narrative text helped me clarify the various parts of the orientation and provided a structure that helped later to organize and understand the teachers' responses to my interview questions.

Findings

Teachers implemented the orientation process with their students' needs in mind. They felt it was important to create a comfortable environment and largely used dialogs to achieve that purpose. Teachers adopted the orientation procedure but through classroom use identified the need to modify some of the activities in the guide and add their own. Likewise, teachers viewed the prescribed format and timeframe in a flexible way and depending on their own professional judgement manipulated the five-day orientation procedures to better meet student needs, teaching styles, and working conditions. Teachers do not have

much instructional planning time; therefore, they appreciated the guide as a ready-to-use resource and viewed it as a valuable reference material.

Comfortable environment

In the interviews I discovered the utmost concern of teachers during the orientation process is to make sure students feel comfortable. Dialogs among teachers and students during the first few class sessions helped to create a non-threatening situation. Teachers encouraged students to talk about what they wanted from the adult education program building student self-awareness and confidence: "It is important to create a comfort zone...to develop an environment where they feel safe, trusting self and others and the teacher. Sometimes it is difficult because of the past history with other barriers."

Some teachers facilitated this process through sharing their own educational experiences with the class: "I talk about myself and adult education...This allows them to talk about themselves. We talk about how they reached this point...We talk about their reasons for being here as a group."

Teachers practice the fine art of conversation to put new students at ease in the classroom. As one teacher pointed out, "We try not to push. We try to be as friendly and nice... and we always have a little conversation. [We're] all friends here, friends who help friends...We say, 'How was your weekend...what did you do?'"

Teachers felt the dialogs also served as an informal means of assessment providing them with the

information needed to see how to fit the curriculum into the context of a student's life. Dialogs served as both motivator and eye opener. "For most [students] it gets them excited about their learning and ready to go...for a very few it makes them scared and to say, I don't know if I can do this. Orientation brings out reasons why they are here and puts past [life] choices in perspective. The learner comes away with better feelings about themselves."

Flexible framework

In the interviews teachers stressed the importance of flexibility and having the freedom to modify the methods of delivery and the amount of delivery time. Teachers used the freedom of creative flexibility to accommodate the various student levels of academic ability, life experiences, and length of attendance in the program. Through the implementation of the orientation procedure teachers recognized the need for changing parts of the program guide:

"I was one of the teachers who designed it in the first place, but I think that after I used it I realized it can be modified."

"At first I followed it exactly and [then I] realized with some people you can't follow it by rote."

"When the student is enthusiastic about their learning a teacher should jump on that enthusiasm and run with it, not stop and administer a structured process."

"I compact some of these things and don't do them in the exact format as recommended. [I] mix the times of [administering] the items. Someone might be ready for the testing

procedure, and some might want to move through the test faster than someone else.”

One teacher expressed the group’s consensus when she said, “...it is too long...too much time to commit to it. [The orientation procedure] took away from instruction.” Teachers realize orientation for new students is important but they also know that most learners in a GED classroom are anxious to pursue their academic goals. Teachers felt that our five-day orientation could be either collapsed into a shorter time frame or integrated into academic instructional time, or both. For example, some teachers felt that in many students’ cases it was good to initiate the goal setting piece later in the orientation process. Overall, teachers preferred to complete most orientation activities as part of instruction rather than as a stand-alone procedure occurring prior to instruction, but as one respondent pointed out, “Combining the two is the real challenge.”

Valuable resource

Teachers viewed the new guide as a valuable resource — a reference rather than a regimented policy they felt forced to follow:

“I use it for reference, if there is a question that I have, I go to the program guide...We check the guide to make sure everything is done that needs to be done.”

“The program guide gives us a framework to work with. I developed a check sheet to make sure I included all the pieces in the orientation.”

Teachers appreciated having a resource that presented different ways

to implement orientation procedures:

“I tried all of it [the program guide suggestions]. I supplemented learning styles [inventory] with a multiple intelligence inventory.”

Adult education students also appreciated the process and substance of the orientation process, as the teachers’ comments suggest:

“They value the writing assignment and will ask the teacher what they thought, or if they understood what they wrote. We use it [the writing assignment] as a needs assessment to gauge their progress.”

“These goals inventories are very good because if [students] are not interested in something we are not going to waste their time going over it. If they say, ‘I’d like to be able to do this,’ it triggers [ideas] in their head.”

Teachers’ responses validated our program’s learning plan form, affirming its practical application and importance for identifying the needs, of individual students and the elements in the needs as well as potential ways to satisfy them. Teachers recognize their own role responsibilities in goal setting and their responses underscore some of the barriers to carrying out the learning plan process:

“[It is important] to be able to identify needs of the student. Needs perceived by whom? Should teacher be goal setting too? More advantageous for the teacher to do academic goals. The teacher has a better feel for what the student is able to accomplish in a given time frame.”

“Sometimes it is hard to get people to express their goals. Sometimes they

don’t even know what they are...they are so deep... They tend to clutch onto any suggestion you offer...so we try not to offer suggestions.”

I was surprised to discover in the interviews that all the teachers used the new guide and were not adverse to the orientation procedure, that is, program change. Instead they embraced change and made more changes through the ways in which they implemented the procedure. Our office needs to consciously emphasize to new teachers that the program guide is a resource to be used as just that, “a guide.” When a program tries to standardize its structure, as we did through the student orientation, teachers need a flexible content framework and the self-directing freedom to modify curriculum to meet the needs of all students.

Implications and Future Direction

I have gained a deeper understanding of how teachers orient their students to the classroom and how they feel about the process. My interviews with the teachers also generated more questions in my mind about increasing comfort levels, flexibility of teaching and how administration can best provide staff support.

We need to continue collecting activities that help students find out for themselves what they need to know and be able to do, but this year’s pilot did generate some new orientation materials to consider for the next edition of our program guide. For example, the teacher check sheet will be included, and I will continue using my outline of the orientation process and the summary

of useful orientation activities. We will encourage all staff members to have access to e-mail in order to explore how teachers and administrators can use e-mail to keep dialog journals, share questions regarding procedural policies and processes, and create and revise new instructional activities.

As Program Coordinator I see a need for more teacher training on the various forms of documentation to allow them hands-on experience and practice. Staff development is also needed to provide more strategies for implementing group instruction, especially on topics of personal

significance to learners. We need to address the issues teachers raised in the interviews surrounding the group goal setting process. Opinions about that part of the orientation were divided and varied. Some teachers felt that goal setting should be an individual task; they struggled with administering the process with a group and were more comfortable setting goals in a one-on-one situation. Other teachers experienced success with group instruction.

Teachers have requested more time for assessment tool training, and I would like to see us investigate ways to more actively involve students in

their own learning. In the interviews I learned that teachers simplified how they analyzed and discussed certain assessments to help lower level students understand the results and monitor their own learning. I wonder what else we can do to encourage adult students' ownership of the learning process. Students need a teacher's guidance and encouragement. However, part of that guidance should lead the student to self-discovery about their learning so that they can continue to learn on their own. □

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