

# Focus on Basics

CONNECTING RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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NCSALL RESEARCH

## Low Self-Esteem: Myth or Reality?

by Anastasiya A. Lipnevich

**W**hen you look at your class full of students, whom do you see? Individuals failing in life or accomplished people with enough energy to add schooling to their list of responsibilities? How do you think they see themselves?

Adult basic education (ABE) students' self-esteem is a surprisingly under-investigated subject. Many researchers assert that high self-esteem is a crucial component in achieving positive results in the adult literacy classroom, and that a lack thereof is among the biggest deterrents to participation in adult education (McGivney, 2001; Beder, 1990; Valentine & Darkenwald, *continued on page 3*



**F**ocus on Basics is the quarterly publication of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. It presents best practices, current research on adult learning and literacy, and how research is used by adult basic education teachers, counselors, program administrators, and policymakers. *Focus on Basics* is dedicated to connecting research with practice, to connecting teachers with research and researchers with the reality of the classroom, and by doing so, making adult basic education research more relevant to the field.

All subscription and editorial correspondence should be sent to:

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*Focus on Basics* is published by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). NCSALL is funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, Award Number R309B960002, as administered by the Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement), U.S. Department of Education.

The contents of *Focus on Basics* do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of NCSALL or World Education; the Institute of Education Sciences; or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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National Center for the Study of  
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# Welcome!

“Do ask, they’ll tell” is a good way of describing much of the research shared in this issue of *Focus on Basics*. How do adult learners feel about themselves? What works for them in terms of reading instruction? What do they read outside of class? What keeps them engaged in class? Researchers from the NCSALL team at Rutgers University posed these questions, followed learners at home and in the community, and videotaped them in classrooms to learn more about the experiences of the learner and what implications those experiences have for educational practice.

Anastasiya A. Lipnevich looked for empirical data to confirm the assertion that adult basic education (ABE) students have low self-esteem. She found the opposite. Although it is only one small study, her results, in the cover article, should cause us to examine the image we may have of ABE learners and make us look for data whenever we hear a commonly held but perhaps unsubstantiated concept touted as truth.

Engagement is a precursor to learning, reasoned Hal Beder, who leads the NCSALL team at Rutgers, therefore understanding engagement will provide insight into instruction. Turn to page 6 for insights on the factors that shape engagement in classes that use individualized group instruction (learners working at their own pace on materials chosen for them). To gather data on engagement, the research team videotaped learners in classes and, together with teachers from those classes, reviewed the tapes. Jessica Tomkins asked the teachers what impact the videos had and learned that they provided the teachers with useful insight—about themselves. Her report on video as a professional development tool starts on page 10.

Curious about the reading and writing adult learners do outside of class, Alisa Belzer traveled with three adult learners as they went about their days. She shares her findings and the implications they have for teaching in the article on page 14.

Perrine Robinson-Geller and Anastasiya Lipnevich studied the types of instruction used by ABE teachers across the country. Their findings indicate that teachers are just as likely to mix instructional types as to stay with only one. Read the article on page 19 and identify your predominant type.

One source of information on effective reading instruction is the students who have been effective in learning. Alisa Belzer interviewed 15 such learners and shares their insights in the article that begins on page 23.

Seven other research studies on reading, all still in process, are described in the section that begins on page 27. A study on the factors that have an impact on service delivery is also in process; Patsy Medina describes that research on page 26.

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All good things, including *Focus on Basics*, must come to an end. We’re looking for funding to continue publishing but, at this point, we have just one more issue planned. Look for it in the late fall.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in orange ink that reads "Barbara Garner".

Barbara Garner  
Editor

## Low Self-Esteem

*continued from page 1*

1990; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Scanlan, 1986). Scanlan (1986) provided a review of the literature on barriers to participation in the adult literacy classroom, and named lack of self-confidence as one of the six major categories of deterrents. Results of several of Quigley's (1997) studies confirm the finding that a lack of confidence appears to be a major deterrent, and usually relates to a negative attitude towards school in general. McGivney (2001) notes that a key issue in increasing learners' participation in adult literacy classrooms is helping students see themselves not as academic failures but as successful learners. Quigley (1997) and Scanlan (1986) use self-confidence as a synonym for self-esteem. Self-schema, self-attitude, self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-perception are among other terms sometimes used to describe this broad theoretical entity (Vygotsky, 1991; Schafer & Keith, 1999; Marsh, 1990).

individuals' self-esteem. No solid link has been established between low literacy and low self-esteem, yet all the literature I encountered on the subject presumes low self-esteem levels in adult literacy students.

Beder (1991) and Quigley (1997) suggest that public adult literacy policy is based on the presumption that the culture of those with limited literacy skills is inferior to the

achievement as secondary to building up self-esteem and establishing trustful, reassuring environments (Beder & Medina, 2001).

As a result of negative schooling experiences in the past, adult learners often dislike school. However, this should not automatically lead to the conclusion that their self-esteem is low. In fact, none of the references above presents empirical evidence

in support of this assumption. Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox (1975) state that "lack of participant self-confidence was *thought to be widespread*" (p. 62, italics mine) when referring to teachers' views on the students in adult basic education classes. Because the role and importance of academic success are taken for granted in modern society, this assumption is further generalized from the academic domain to individuals' overall self-esteem. As a result, the view of adult students as having very low self-esteem became prevalent.

To address the lack of empirical evidence on the self-esteem levels of adult literacy students, I designed a study that

would investigate the self-esteem levels of a group of adult literacy students. I report on this study, the findings, and their implications here.

## No Empirical Evidence

These claims seem to be quite logical. However, despite presenting strong arguments about the importance of self-esteem, almost none of the existing studies has closely examined it. Researchers who did look at self-esteem often treated it as an outcome measure of the adult literacy program, and measures of this complex construct were based on self-report, usually elicited through one or two questions on a survey or interview. Although these studies provide evidence that self-esteem is important to adult learning, they do not offer insights on how its levels might influence learners' achievements in the adult literacy classroom, nor do they present a detailed picture of



mainstream culture. Adults with low literacy levels are viewed as unintelligent, unproductive, and deficient (Quigley, 1990). This stigma may be exacerbated by some instructional practices, such as inappropriately high praise for even small achievement, resulting in a "...condescending stance on the one hand and a cheerleader style on the other" (Beder, 1990, p. 72). Some educators believe that their students have lived lives of failure, that failure has resulted in poor self-concepts, and that until their deficits get fixed, the circle of failures will repeat. Therefore, some teachers believe that the goal of a literacy program is to identify the self-esteem deficit and "cure" it (Beder, 1990, 1991; Beder & Medina, 2001). Teachers focused on providing positive feedback may treat actual academic

## The Study Sample

This study was conducted with two groups of participants. The first group was comprised of 219 adult literacy students attending classes in the National Labsite for Adult Literacy Education, a partnership between the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) at Rutgers University and the New Brunswick Public Schools Adult Learning Center. This New Jersey adult learning center serves about 3,700 students per year. The classes include adult basic education (ABE), adult high school (AHS),



preparation for tests of General Educational Development (GED), and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). These research participants were awarded a \$10 honorarium for answering the survey questions.

The survey I planned to use was one I created, based on a Russian survey (Panteleev, 1993). Since, as far as I know, it has not been used in the United States, self-esteem norms for the general US population were not available for comparison. Judgments of whether a certain self-esteem score

is low or high could not be made. To solve this problem I invited doctoral students from several programs at Rutgers University to participate in a Web-based administration of the same survey; 47 participated. They were not compensated.

This brought the total number of participants to 266, with 38 percent enrolled in ESOL programs, 17 percent in ABE programs, 16 percent in the AHS programs, 10 percent in GED programs, and 18 percent in PhD programs. The average age of the participants was 33 years, with a range in

age of 16 to 67. Females made up 65 percent of the sample. In terms of ethnic background, 50 percent of our sample were Latino/Spanish-speaking students, 26 percent were black/African-American, 10 percent Caucasian, 6 percent Asian; the other students did not report their ethnicity. The average highest grade students had completed before coming to the Center was 9.6, with a range of grade 3 to 18.

## Administering the Survey

Our instrument consisted of a total of 25 items (see sample, left) that measured global self-esteem, defined as feelings of general satisfaction with oneself and affection for oneself; and academic self-esteem, defined as attitudes towards the learning process, a sense of direction, and self-expectations for academic performance. We used a data collection method called assisted self-completion with the adult literacy students. In assisted self-completion, the data collection team monitored the students as they completed the questionnaire and provided literacy assistance as necessary. This method breaks the rules of standardized survey administration: it relies on teachers and data collectors to help students understand the specifics of taking a survey as well as the language used in it. Our justification for the use of this method is that it enables us to collect responses from learners with very limited literacy skills.

It has been commonly accepted that it is inappropriate to use questionnaires with people who have limited literacy skills. Our research team believes that this denies a voice to the very people who are supposed to benefit from adult literacy research. In the course of a week-long data collection marathon, the researchers answered all questions students had by paraphrasing, providing examples, and explaining word meanings in detail. A teacher or data collector translated the survey for those students with extremely limited

### Academic Self-Esteem

1. I can do as well or better than others at school.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
2. I have a good understanding of the things I learn at school.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
3. My skills are weaker than other people in this class.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
4. I can understand the ideas and skills taught at school.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
5. I am as smart as most people.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*

### Global Self-Esteem

1. I am happy with who I am.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
2. I am sure I will be able to reach my goals.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
3. I have a lot of things to be proud of.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
4. I feel like I am a failure.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*
5. If I met the exact copy of myself, I would enjoy talking to this person.  
 *Strongly Disagree*     *Disagree*     *Agree*     *Strongly Agree*

English. Anecdotal evidence suggested that survey completion turned out to be a valuable literacy task. Students used dictionaries to look up the meanings of unknown words, wrote down new words and expressions in their note books, and explained unfamiliar words to each other. Not only was their school task uninterrupted but taking the survey was also an excellent literacy exercise for them.

The reliability of the survey instrument was high, as measured by Chronbach's alpha coefficient. Reliability means that "repeated measurements of the same thing give identical or very similar results" (Vogt, 1993, p. 195). It is believed to be affected by many factors, but from the researcher's point of view, the three most important factors are the length (total number of questions), the quality of the questions, and the fit to the group being measured. The high reliability of the present instrument suggests that the unusual survey administration procedure has been warranted during the data collection, and provided good results. With careful design and help, it is evident that basic-skills students can validly complete a questionnaire.

## Results

To understand better the self-esteem level of adult literacy education students, I compared their level to those of the graduate students. Therefore, the main research question that guided this study was whether the self-esteem levels of adult literacy and graduate students differ. We used a statistical procedure known as analysis of variance (ANOVA); the results indicated that the self-esteem of adult literacy students was not significantly different from that of doctoral students. Pairwise comparisons were run and they showed no differences in either global or academic self-esteem levels among adult students enrolled in the ABE, AHS, GED, and ESOL classes.

Surprising findings, aren't they?


Some readers may be too skeptical to take them seriously. Let me lay out several possible explanations for the results. First, Steele (1988) proposed a self-affirmation theory that may be helpful in supporting the finding of adult students' normal levels of self-esteem. This theory suggests that people cope with negative outcomes in one domain by focusing on their achievements in other, unrelated domains. This may mean that low-literacy adults who have failed academically but succeed in other aspects of their lives may have a high general self-esteem that will allow them to lead full lives and fuel the self-confidence necessary for their coming back to school.

Second, all the participants in this study — the literacy and the doctoral students — voluntarily enrolled in their respective educational programs. Even though doctoral students and adult learners are at different educational levels, they had to believe they could succeed when they joined the program. They may have similar doubts about their potential success as they progress. Similar problems, fears, and motives shared by the two groups should make us revise our assumptions about detrimentally low levels of adult learners' self-esteem.

Finally, it is believed (Stolin, 1985; Pantelev, 1993) that self-esteem is partly a product of how a person believes others see her or him and how he or she is compared to others. Several studies (Hughes & Demo, 1989; Rosenberg, 1965) show that individuals from minority groups do not evaluate themselves against the dominant group but against those in their own group. It means that a specific frame of reference significantly influences individuals' self-perceptions. Graduate students consistently comparing themselves to more successful peers may have lower self-esteem levels than basic-literacy students who are doing better than others in their classroom

Overall, these findings, if con-

firmed by further inquiry, have significant implications for the practice of adult literacy education. This study provides solid evidence that neither the academic nor the global self-esteem of adult literacy students differs significantly from a comparison group of doctoral students. Teachers' perspectives and beliefs about their students' self-esteem, which might affect their teaching styles, should be re-examined in the light of these findings.

Take another look at your class full of students. You may be surprised by whom you see. 

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# Shaping and Sustaining Learner Engagement in Individualized Group Instruction Classrooms

by Hal Beder

**E**ngagement is defined as mental effort focused on instructional tasks or, more simply, working hard at learning. Learners cannot progress unless they are engaged. It is important for teachers to understand what affects engagement so that they will know how to keep learners engaged and what to do if learners become disengaged.

To conduct a number of studies on adult literacy, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) at Rutgers partnered with the New Brunswick Public Schools Adult Learning Center (NBPSALC) in the National Labsite for Adult Literacy Education project. One of these studies was a five-year qualitative study conducted in six classes to determine what influenced learners' engagement and how it was fostered. Five of these classes used individualized group instruction (IGI): students working on their own on materials chosen for them. In this article, we share some findings from the study. We also highlight aspects of the IGI model that can either support or detract from engagement.

Researchers study engagement from one of two perspectives. In one tradition, often called cognitive engagement, they look at engagement as a mental process closely associated with other mental processes such as motivation and self-concept. Researchers from the cognitive tradition often focus on self-regula-

tion. Self-regulated learners are able to contemplate their own learning and, as a result, to come up with learning strategies appropriate to the task at hand (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Meece et al., 1988; Pintrich, 1990). In another tradition, researchers focus on the contextual factors that affect whether and how learners are engaged. For example, Newmann and his associates focused on how the organization of schools affects student alienation and how alienation, in turn, affects student engagement (Newmann, 1981; Newmann et al., 1992).

In our study of engagement, we focused on the contextual factors for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical perspective, we were concerned that almost all the literature that might guide our work was from the K-12 context. Yet as adult literacy researchers, we knew that the adult literacy context differs substantially from that of K-12. Thus it made sense to begin the line of research on engagement in adult literacy education by first exploring how contextual factors affect engagement. Other work is in progress that investigates engagement more from the cognitive perspective.

Practically speaking, teachers can usually tell whether learners are engaged just by observing them. Are pencils moving? Are pages turning? Are learners responding to teachers' questions? These are very visible markers of engagement.

## The Labsite, the Methods

Our partner, the NBPSALC, serves about 3,700 learners each year in adult basic education (ABE),



preparation for the tests of General Educational Development (GED), and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, an adult high school (which awards a New Brunswick Public Schools diploma to adults), and several other programs. In accordance with state regulations, all the teachers of the classes we studied were certified in a K-12 area. We studied three beginning-level ABE, two adult high school, and one GED class. We used a qualitative methodology called grounded theory, in which analysis is built from the bottom up as opposed to testing hypotheses generated from existing theory. The goal of grounded theory is to discover themes and categories that explain what is going on in a given context. It is not a useful strategy for outcome assessment but is appropriate for studying behavior or contextual factors.

To collect data we used multiple data sources, including videos of classroom behavior, ethnographic observation, and interviews with learners. The teachers with whom we worked participated in some of the data analysis sessions, and when they were present, we tape recorded and transcribed the session (For insight into the impact of these sessions, turn to the article on page 10). When all the data sources were consistent with a point of analysis, we were confident that it was valid. On the other hand, if some of the data sources were inconsistent with our continuing analysis, we reconsidered the analysis. When the study was finished, the teachers read and commented on the analysis. Comments were minor and the report was modified to account for them.

## Findings

We found that engagement was very high in the classes we studied. Learners' eyes were focused on their work, pencils moved, pages turned. If learners talked to each other, the

conversation almost always focused on the business of the class. If learners took breaks, they were short and usually taken in place. After the break, they went back to work.

When we interviewed learners we learned that a major reason for high engagement was that they were very motivated to achieve their learning goals. Most of the GED and adult high school learners we interviewed had explicit career goals and most wanted to continue on to postsecondary education. Although many of the basic-level learners also had career goals, many also had more modest, short-term goals.

*“...three primary factors shaped engagement in the classes we studied: the instructional system, teachers' behavior in the role of IGI instructor, and classroom norms.”*

One woman, for example, wanted to write letters to family who lived abroad, and another woman wanted to read and write because she was the only one in her family who could not. That learners were motivated, at least initially, stands to reason because the learners in our study attended voluntarily. If they were not motivated, they would not have come. Thus initially high motivation is a resource that feeds engagement; as with any resource, it can be either used productively or squandered.

The learners whom we studied at the Labsite were disposed toward engagement; the issue was how to support and maintain their engagement by influencing the contextual factors that shape engagement. We found that three primary factors shaped engagement in the classes we studied: the instructional system, teachers'

behavior in the role of IGI instructor, and classroom norms. We believe that these factors are tools that teachers can use to support and promote their students' engagement.

## The Instructional System

As mentioned, five of the six classes we studied used IGI. One class used small-group instruction. Although the contrast between IGI and the small-group instruction class was very useful to our analysis, space limitations preclude a discussion here. In IGI,

learners are tested at intake to determine their literacy skills levels. Based on this diagnosis, they are placed in classes where they are assigned instructional materials appropriate to their skill levels. Learners then work individually on the materials. When they complete an exercise, teachers correct their work. If it is essentially correct, more difficult work is assigned. If it is incorrect, materials at the same level are assigned and teachers often engage in one-on-one instruction

to help the learner. If learners have trouble with the work, teachers assist.

In the classes we studied, learners worked individually, deciding when they would come to class and engage. This is important because adult learners often experience conflicts that make regular attendance difficult. We noticed, for example, that learners sometimes came late or left early and occasionally they missed a class. When learners missed part or all of a class, they simply began where they previously left off, without penalty and without missing instructional content. Each learner also engaged at his or her own pace. Learners who were adept at reading or math progressed more rapidly, while slower learners progressed more slowly and did not fall behind, as they might have in a group-based class. Thus, with the use of IGI, learners have a considerable amount of control over

their own engagement and engaging becomes more learner- than teacher-directed.

The materials, rather than the teacher, primarily conveyed instructional content, so the materials determined the subject matter in which learners engaged. Moreover, to a great extent the material's directions determined how the learner would engage. For example, reading materials commonly directed learners to read a passage and then to complete a multiple-choice exercise that gauged their comprehension of it. When a learner's answers on a given reading or math exercise were essentially correct, the teacher assigned materials at a more difficult level. Consequently, learners assessed the outcomes of their engagement by how successfully they were progressing through the sequence of materials.

The instructional system plays a large factor in engagement. In the case of IGI, the elements of the instructional system that shape engagement are:

- assigning appropriate learning materials,
- keeping learners engaged in their work while they are waiting for help, and
- rendering help effectively in a one-on-one teaching environment.

### **Assigning appropriate learning materials**

In the IGI system, materials convey instructional content, so assigning appropriate materials is a critical aspect of classroom management. If the materials assigned are too easy, too difficult, or are uninteresting, learners' engagement can suffer. Based on our work at the Labsite, the key to the appropriate assignment of materials is teachers' experience. Although we did not study what makes materials effective (and this is an area that merits further study), we did talk to teachers about materials. In data analysis sessions, teachers told us that they continued to use the materials that seemed to work and gradually eliminated the

materials that did not produce the results they expected. So teachers acquired an appropriate repertoire of materials over time. Three of the teachers in our study were full-time and had worked at the Labsite for many years. Their assignment of materials was finely tuned. For example, the GED teacher, who had been teaching GED full-time for six years, knew the materials so thoroughly that he was

*“Deciding how much time to spend with learners was one of the major challenges the teachers faced.”*

able to predict the problems learners would experience at various points in the materials' sequence. Thus when he assigned materials, he was ready to intervene when learners hit the trouble spots. For new teachers, however, selecting appropriate materials was more problematic, and in some cases the materials the previous teacher had used were the only guide for a new teacher.

### **Keeping learners engaged**

In IGI, teachers rendered help on a one-on-one basis. That meant that while they were helping a learner, other learners who needed help had to wait. If teachers spent a good deal of time with individual learners, waiting time increased for the others. If they spent too little time, help was ineffective. Deciding how much time to spend with learners was one of the major challenges the teachers faced. Teachers at the Labsite used two different ways to help keep learners engaged during waiting. First, they made sure that learners had other materials in their folders that they could work on while waiting. Second, many of the teachers encouraged peer instruction: allowing learners to help each other while they

waited for the teacher. The teachers' encouragement, however, was more in the form of moral support than a concrete intervention to create a formal peer-instruction system.

### **One-on-one help**

For teachers who are used to group instruction, rendering one-on-one help can be a professional challenge. Teachers first have to establish mechanisms that initiate helping sessions. At the Labsite one teacher used a sign-up sheet. Others teachers monitored their learners for signs of difficulty or used the convention of raising hands. Helping had to be efficient, because if a helping session took too long, other learners who needed help had to wait too long. Helping also had to be as thorough as possible because if the problem that was blocking a learner was not solved, the block was likely to re-emerge. As with assigning appropriate materials, teachers at the Labsite learned how to render one-on-one help primarily through experience. Thus for programs that experience high teacher turnover, effective and thorough one-on-one help may be a challenge.

### **Teachers' Roles**

Teachers' behavior in the role of IGI instructor pertains to how teachers define themselves as teachers and how they perform their classroom duties. All the teachers we worked with at the Labsite had K-12 experience. Most, however, lacked experience in either adult education or IGI when they were first hired. That meant that teachers had to self-define their roles in relation to IGI and teaching adults. In adapting to IGI, in which materials conveyed the instructional content, most of the time teachers performed the role of facilitator of learning rather than conveyor of content. Part of their role as facilitator was to monitor, encourage, and support engagement. Teachers monitored learners' engagement, taking disengagement to mean that a learner



was blocked and needed help. Teachers supported engagement by constantly praising learners for work done well and by talking up learning tasks. In the basic-level classes, teachers provided extra one-on-one help to learners who were struggling. Thus in IGI, how teachers facilitate instruction is an important issue that affects whether initially engaged learners continue to be engaged until they achieve their learning goals. As facilitators, teachers need to identify learners who are experiencing problems. They need to be able to diagnose their problems, to render help efficiently and effectively, and to maintain learners' motivation over time.

Although in IGI the teacher's role was primarily that of facilitator, there were variations in how teachers performed that role. One teacher of a basic-level class, for example, emphasized helping her learners to get the correct answers on the teaching materials. Thus most of her efforts were directed at correcting the materials and showing learners what the correct answers were if their answers were incorrect. In contrast, when a teacher in the adult high school taught advanced writing, he conversed extensively with his learners in order to help them select writing topics that interested them and to refine their clarity of expression. To work with as many learners as she possibly could during a class, one experienced teacher stressed efficiency in her facilitation. Her interactions with learners began with a brief but friendly introduction, such as "How are you today?" and moved promptly to a diagnosis of the learner's problem. She then provided one-on-one help and generally concluded with a short quiz to make sure the learner had understood the material. She was usually able to provide the help learners needed in three to five minutes.

## Classroom Norms

In all the classes we observed, the predominant norm was one we termed "sticking to business": it was

primarily informal and accepted by learners and teachers alike. The only formal rule we identified that was directed at sticking to business was that cell phones were prohibited. Sticking to business meant that all behavior during class was directed toward the business of the class. When learners interacted with each other, and they often did, their interactions almost always focused on helping each other with their work. When learners entered the classroom, they picked up their folders and began to work immediately. Teachers adopted a very businesslike posture. We hardly ever observed a teacher negatively sanctioning a violation of the sticking to business norm, and in the very few cases in which a student was sanctioned, it was simply a friendly reminder that the student quickly complied with. Teachers did not have to apply sanctions, because learners accepted the sticking to business norm and complied with it willingly.


In all the classes in our study, teachers did orient new students to the class. Yet because enrollment was continuous, new students were constantly entering, and orientation took time away from facilitation. Orientations were typically brief — especially on busy days. Thus learners learned that sticking to business was an important norm primarily by observing the behavior of teachers and other learners.

The norm of sticking to business meant that engaging and maintaining engagement for the entire class session was the commonly accepted behavior of the class. It was so ingrained that it hardly ever needed to be enforced.

## Implications

We have found that the context of the adult literacy education classroom shapes learners' engagement in instruction. The instructional system determines when, how, and in what learners engage. Teachers' interpretations of their roles affect the extent to which engagement is supported and classroom

norms directed to sticking to business create a climate in which being engaged is the predominating value.

Learners' level of engagement can function as a set of visible events that teachers can note and reflect upon in assessing the effectiveness of their teaching. If the results of the assessment prove negative, malfunctions of the instructional system, teachers' interpretations of their roles, and/or classroom norms may be places to search for possible problems and solutions. 

### Full Report Available

To read the full report on this research, go to <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=29#28> and click on Report # 28.

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# Video as a Professional Development Tool

by Jessica Tomkins

**T**he video projected on the wall shows a full classroom. One student works with her teacher; two students — good friends, it seems — sit shoulder to shoulder and whisper as they do their work. At another table, two students work in silence, each intent on his writing assignment. Five members of the engagement research team and two adult literacy teachers from the research study site are watching the video of the class. On the video, a student enters the room noisily and begins looking for her work. After a few minutes she interrupts the teacher to ask for help. A member of the research team stops the video to ask, “Who is this? What is she having trouble with? Are students supposed to interrupt the teacher?” The teachers explain that while being quiet and waiting your turn is a norm in the classroom, there are reasons particular to the student that explain her behavior.

[The video] jogged my memory, but it was through the data analysis sessions and talking with other people and explaining what I thought was going on that led into what I got out of the tapes. If I hadn’t had the opportunity to get

this great visual thing I never would have thought of that stuff at all. If someone had reported it to me, it would not have had the impact. So it was a good way for me to see exactly what was going on in the classroom. (Labsite teacher)

For the past five years, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) at Rutgers University research team has worked closely with the New Brunswick Public Schools Adult Learning Center on a study examining student engagement. During the data collection process we observed and videotaped classes, interviewed teachers and learners, and worked with teachers to analyze data. The video data played a central role in the research. It also turned out to be an unexpected source of professional development for the six teachers who participated.

## Joint Data Analysis

Our procedure for analyzing video data was to play the tape, review it, and then have one member of the research team prepare for a joint analysis session by reviewing a video tape of one class and noting interesting episodes related to student engagement. When we watched the tape with teachers, we viewed the episode, and then paused the video and discussed what we saw. This enabled the research team to understand more clearly what

we were seeing on tape. The teachers report that these conversations created an opportunity for them to reflect on their practice. Many of the teachers afterwards remarked upon the important difference between thinking about their classes informally and participating in this structured exercise. As one teacher in the project explained,

You prompted me to try to step back and really look at it from the outside. I had the opportunity to try to evaluate what I was doing more, and see the interaction that was going on around me, which I often wasn’t aware of when I was in the middle of it.

The video data allowed researchers to observe learners in the classroom in a more thorough way than a single observation could. Although we also sat in classes and took field notes, our main

*“It offered an extra set of eyes, showing teachers what students were doing when teachers’ own attention was elsewhere.”*

source for data analysis was the video, because we could view it over and over again. It grounded our questions into the very specific reality of the teachers’ classrooms. The video allowed teachers to watch themselves teach and see with some objectivity an episode that they had been involved with during the class. It offered an extra set of eyes, showing teachers what students were doing when teachers’ own attention was elsewhere.

## Concerns

Although the data analysis sessions were ultimately very informative for both teams, some

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teachers were initially skeptical about joining the project. Everyone worried at first that we would be evaluating them, although this fear seemed to be put to rest fairly quickly by our focus on the students. Of more concern to some was the worry that the camera in the room would make them nervous or self-conscious. Whatever the feelings of the teachers before the experience, many were surprised by their actual reaction to the camera.

Some teachers found themselves very uncomfortable seeing themselves on tape, or surprisingly self-conscious with the camera in the room, as in this anecdote from a teacher who had entered the project with no initial qualms about the video component:

**I was working with a student; it was either the first or second time that we were videotaped. And I thought the student was nervous because he was being taped. I said, "It's hard to ignore that camera, right?" He said, "What camera?" He looked up and said, "Oh, yeah, we're being taped," and went back to what he was doing. And I thought, 'Oh, you're not nervous, I'm nervous. It's not you at all, this time it's all me.' I was convinced that the students were uncomfortable, and they weren't even processing that they were being videotaped.**

Other teachers very quickly forgot the presence of the camera. One teacher felt she taught better than usual when she had an audience. Regardless of the teachers' comfort levels, all teachers seemed to embrace the video process as a learning opportunity, and

spoke of it as the most important aspect of their involvement on the project.

Another initial concern about the video process was the students' reactions. Would students behave differently with a camera in the room? As the example demonstrated, after brief exposure to the project, students carried on as though the camera was not there. Some students expressed an interest in the research and



seemed to want to be a part of it, and others basically ignored our presence, or were as unaware as the student described above by his teacher. Perhaps the teachers set the tone by running class as usual despite the camera, or perhaps, like the teachers, the students were too busy working to spare us much thought. For whatever reason, the video shows little student reaction to the camera.

### Uses in Other Venues

In the K-12 environment, "The use of video evidence as a vehicle for promoting discussion and critical reflection is well established in

educational literature in the field of professional development" (Jones & McNamara, 2004, p. 279). The educational director of a K-8 school a few blocks from the literacy center explained how common it is to use video as a tool in peer coaching, particularly as an additional form of formal observation for new teachers. They then review the video with a mentor or colleague to get feedback,

and follow up with a piece of reflective writing (personal conversation, Michele Waldron, January 31, 2006). The practice may not be as common in adult literacy classrooms, where observations are not necessarily mandated. However, it certainly meshes with current ideas about effective professional development in which the teachers and the classroom are central. It draws on and respects teachers' input and their role in planning, and invites collaboration (Sherman & Kutner, 1998).

### Three Benefits

Teachers on the project used the video data as a professional development tool very informally. Although reflection in general was embedded in the data analysis process, teachers used the opportunity to reflect on their own practice voluntarily and on their own initiative. We researchers asked few questions about the teachers' behavior in the classroom. The questions that teachers asked themselves varied from very personal ones, about their demeanors in the classroom, to much broader questions about their delivery of the program. The two main benefits of the video seem to be the chance to watch oneself on tape with some objectivity (increased self-awareness), and the chance to see



how students engaged when working alone or with other students (the video as “extra eyes”). The third benefit was positive validation.

### **Self-awareness**

Increased self-awareness translated into both minor and significant changes in teaching style. One teacher noticed, for instance, that the hand gestures she used while speaking were exaggerated and distracted her students. Another teacher noticed that his voice was often the loudest in the room and was at times disruptive. He also got a sense from the video that the pace of his teaching was unnecessarily fast, and resolved as a result to slow down:

...a lot of the time when I was watching the tape, I thought, ‘I really could have spent a couple more minutes with that person.’ Part of the jumping around [from student to student] is because there are so many students and you want to make sure everybody gets attention. But part of the jumping around is my attention span. So I’ve been trying to decide more on a case-by-case basis.... I don’t think I would’ve ever come to that conclusion if I hadn’t watched myself running around like I did.

Another teacher saw she that was dividing her time unevenly among her students, and realized she needed to be fairer. This teacher also explained her surprise when watching the video of a group lesson she had taught. At the time, she had felt that it was successful, but when viewing the tape she could see that the students disengaged fairly quickly and would clearly have preferred to carry on with the work they had been doing previously. This teacher spoke about becoming more mindful of the students’ responses to her presentations. In general, the increased self-awareness resulted in teachers being more mindful of their own behavior in the classroom.

### **Awareness of students**

The value of the video as an extra set of eyes (or, as one teacher described it, “a bird’s eye view of your teaching style”) translated into different kinds of changes. Teachers became more aware of students’ behavior in the classroom. A couple of teachers spoke about becoming aware of how often students were helping each other when not working with a teacher. In both of their classrooms, as with most at the Center, learners work at their own pace, and teachers move around the room to work with students individually. The video revealed how much more the students relied on each other than this teacher had realized:

I think it was very valuable to see the videos, to notice what’s going on around me in the classroom. Because with one-on-one you’re really not aware of everything that’s happening, and to see what the student continues to do after you’re finished working with her was very interesting. To see the interaction of the students among themselves, to see if there is really learner-to-learner inspiration and motivation going on, that was really great too. I hadn’t noticed that before. It’s such a varied selection of students of all ages, backgrounds, and interests, that a lot of times they don’t really seem like they’re interacting very much. But I noticed from the videos that it really does happen, more than I saw before, and it’s helped me to try to change my teaching style a little bit more too, to encourage that more, and take advantage of it more.

Similarly, another teacher became aware of how much time students spend working alone, and was able to

see that many need more frequent direction from the teachers. Although he was aware of this beforehand, watching the video allowed him to experience the students’ time working alone more from the students’ point of view, and to alter his classroom accordingly:

... I am trying to modify some of the things I do with students so that they’re done in shorter segments. I think it would help a lot of people that need help before the finished product because there’s an awful lot of time that people are on their own and I think that more students could be successful.... if things were put in even smaller chunks so that they can get more from a teacher.... I mean, it’s fine that they can ask questions of other people, but I still think there has to be more of an impact from a teacher, and seeing the way these things work on a tape I think there can be....As I said, I have not done massive changes with my curriculum but I think that it needs to be delivered differently.

This type of understanding of the students’ experiences also influenced a few teachers to improve their orienta-

**“Increased self-awareness translated into both minor and significant changes in teaching style.”**

tion process, so that new students would have a better sense of direction.

### **Positive validation**

The teachers’ self-reflection also served as a source for positive validation of their practice. This does not result in change in the classroom, but contributes to teacher development in

its own right. Just as teachers do not have many chances to be observed and evaluated, they also do not have many opportunities to get positive feedback. One administrator pointed out that seeing themselves do good jobs was beneficial to her staff.

**“...the way in which teachers seized the opportunity to watch their classes suggests that many are eager for such input into their teaching.”**

Teachers were also conscious of appreciating the validations, despite their interest in self-critique:

**It also gave me an interesting viewpoint about my teaching style. I don't think I'd change the overall style. I'd change the way I deliver some things, but my teaching style? The video helped me realize why it's worked as well as it has over the years. So, that was a validation.**

## Conclusion


The intent of the research team was to use video as a source of data on student engagement. Teachers used the video to evaluate themselves, and watching their classes became a forum for both self-critique and for positive validation. One teacher on the project described it as “ongoing professional development.”

Reflecting on the project, the Center administrators also spoke about professional development as a central benefit. NCSALL hosted professional development days for staff and presented with staff at conferences, but the most significant professional development came from working together on the project.

In general, the way in which

teachers seized the opportunity to watch their classes suggests that many are eager for such input into their teaching. While it may have been uncomfortable if the research team had been in an evaluative role, some of the teachers actually hoped for this, and frequently sought feedback during our joint data analysis sessions. Other teachers have suggested that using the video record for critique would be welcome if done by peers. In one way or another almost all the teachers on the project pointed to the lack of opportunity for formal reflection on their practice as a gap that the data analysis process temporarily filled.

Although this teacher development occurred through collaboration with researchers, the process they followed does not require the presence of outsiders. In fact, professional development was outside the scope of this study. The research teams' role was to provide the video and to ask the question, “What's going on in this learning episode?” That simple question was probably the teams' most important contribution to teacher development, because it encouraged teachers to observe the students and not fixate on their own behavior.

Teachers could use video to capture their classes and, with colleagues, ask similar questions. There could be great benefit in pursuing a version of the video data analysis among teachers, with the focus on student engagement and the premise that analyzing this can be a valuable way to develop as a teacher. 

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# Influences on the Reading Practices of Adults in ABE

by Alisa Belzer

**W**hat do adult literacy learners do, intentionally or unintentionally, outside of class to improve their reading and writing? And what seem to be important influences on these actions? We followed adult literacy learners Edna, Juan, and Margaret for a brief period, using observation and interviews to take “snap shots” of their out-of-school literacy activities and efforts. We learned that teachers, access to materials, and perceptions about the importance of reading practice play a role in what they knew to do and actually did to improve their literacy skills outside of class. This article describes these findings and identifies their implications for practice.

Extensive research on children has found a positive relationship between time spent reading and reading achievement (Anderson et al., 1988; Goodman, 1996; Smith, 1994; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992; Taylor et al., 1990; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Much of the research on adult literacy learners’ reading development has focused on issues and techniques related to formal instruction. However, adults may spend as little as three hours a week in adult literacy programs, and programs that do provide more

instructional hours often focus on developing a diverse set of skills that might only tangentially include reading (e.g., workforce readiness and development, so-called life skills, math). It seems likely that to improve their skills significantly most adult struggling readers need to do more than simply attend a program. They may not spend enough time reading in class to become fully competent readers. By examining the ways adult learners intentionally and



unintentionally interact with literacy outside of formal settings, researchers, teachers, and the learners themselves may get insight into how to increase the likelihood that they will meet their reading goals.

The study participants, Edna, Juan, and Margaret, were all learners at the New Brunswick Public Schools Adult Learning Center (NBPSALC), a partner with the National Center

for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) at Rutgers. NBPSALC offers classes ranging from beginning literacy to adult high school and include workforce development and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The learners were selected for this study by recommendation of their teachers based on the duration and consistency of their participation in the program, their potential to be reflective and communicative, and their willingness to participate in the study. The data collection for this cross-case study of three adult learners involved a combination of observations of literacy interactions outside of class (the researchers spent one day “shadowing” each learner and the learners recorded an audio log one other day to document their interactions with literacy), and interviews with the learners and their teachers.

## The Adult Learners

The following descriptions of the three focal learners in this study are drawn from the data and are constructed to help us understand more about how, why, and under what circumstances adult struggling readers interact with text outside their classes. At the program they attended, none of the teachers assigned homework, and none had a class library nor did they report making a particular effort to encourage their students to read outside of class. Whatever reading the learners did was as a result of their own initiative.

**Edna** is a 54-year-old married woman and mother of five adult children. She was born in Guatemala and came to the United States at about age 16. Literate in Spanish, she earned her certificate of General Educational Development (GED) in English when her children were young. She has recently returned to school to improve her skills for different kinds



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of work after being laid off from an air conditioning factory, where she had worked for 24 years. Edna participates in the adult high school classes at the program, and reads relatively fluently. Of the three participants, Edna reads at the highest level.

Outside of school Edna likes to read in both English and Spanish, and does so on a daily basis. When she talked about reading at home, she primarily referred to reading her schoolwork. Edna reported that she reads the local newspaper and the Bible several times a week. In addition to the scriptures, Edna reads religious materials “about people in the church.” She also reads magazines that her daughters pass on to her. She uses her computer on a daily basis, reading the headlines on the Yahoo website and a Guatemalan newspaper on the Internet. However, she spends much of whatever spare time she has completing reading, writing and grammar, and math workbooks, often slipping this work in between household chores.

Since starting school again, Edna feels her skills have improved. She believes that doing school work at home, although not required, is critical to her success in school. Being able to go to her daughters and a family friend for help with homework, as she does, is also an important source of assistance for her. Edna also believes

that reading books would help her improve her skills, but she does not do this often. She expressed a strong desire to get a library card and borrow books that are “stories about people,” but complained that she has not followed through on this. She believes that spending time reading would “calm me down.” Although she spends more time reading on the computer than in books, she believes that the former is less valuable.

Quite a bit of text was visible in Edna’s house, including mail and newspapers in her dining room; books in her computer room on the desk and on shelves; notices, coupons, and recipes stuck to her refrigerator door; and a framed printed passage on the wall entitled “The Unknown Guest” (referring to God). On the day we spent observing her, Edna went to class, the grocery store, and the bank. During the course of her day she was surrounded by text in all of these places and seemed to interact comfortably and fluently with it. For example, at the grocery store, she compared labels looking for specific ingredients, and at the bank she filled out a deposit slip without hesitation.

**Juan** is a 21-year-old man who lives with his mother, was born in the United States, but has spent extended periods of time living in Puerto Rico with his father, who resides there. He describes himself as equally fluent in English and Spanish. He is the father of 2-year-old twins who live in another city with their mother. Juan explained that, subsequent to a serious car accident at age seven, he was always in trouble at school. Transferred from his regular high school to a disciplinary school in high school, he

dropped out at age 16. After returning from a five-year stay with his father, he decided to go back to school. Juan reads at an intermediate level.

Juan reports that, “Sometimes I write, I don’t hardly read.” When asked why he doesn’t read, he said, “It’s ‘cause I got things I got to do.” He later admitted that reading just “doesn’t attract my attention...I look for something...that’s more comfortable for me.” In school, he explained that he reads, because that’s what you do there. “When I’m home, that’s my freedom, and I do what I want.”

Juan does not have a job, but he described himself as the person his family counts on to help out with various responsibilities. His days tend to be somewhat unstructured. He reported that on a typical day he may hang out in the downtown business area, or help out in the beauty salon where his godmother works. When Juan was observed, there was almost no evidence of interaction with any text. He seemed to operate almost completely outside a world that demands reading skill. He does not drive, work, or have a bank account. Although we were not invited inside his home, Juan reports that there are no books or magazines there. Although he can read some, there is almost nothing in



Juan's life that seems to require him to do so, and he reports that he just about never seeks out text to read except when he's in school.

**Margaret** is a 42-year-old African-American woman. At the time of data collection she was pregnant. She had a 10-year-old daughter who lived with Margaret's mother and visited Margaret on the weekends. Margaret dropped out of high school, at age 18, just weeks short of graduation. She reported that school had been hard for her. Margaret did not articulate any specific long-term goal for participating in the program, other than simply going to school. "My goal was going to school and finishing school." She hasn't thought much beyond that. She does see herself going to school, not only for herself but also for her daughter. "I want to get something for my life for my daughter and so she can get an education, and I can get an education, and we can learn something together. That's the best thing for my daughter, for me." Her teacher reported that when Margaret first came to class, "She could not read five words." However, she sees her as one of her successes. "She has done amazingly well...She has made really good strides." Margaret was reading at the most beginning level of the three study participants.

Margaret does not drive, so on a typical day she rides the bus or takes a cab to school. Sometimes she is absent from school because she can not afford the transportation. She comes directly home afterwards. She reports that at home she "looks" at her mail and the newspaper. She also says that she reads the Bible and other religious materials frequently. When she has difficulty decoding something, she seeks help from her fiancé, with whom she lives. He often reads the newspaper aloud to her. Margaret always keeps the TV on when she's home. She likes to watch shows about animals, but she said she

also likes to watch game shows that involve figuring out words.

Margaret lives in a residential area with no stores within walking distance. Although she doesn't make shopping lists, Margaret reports that she does read when she goes shopping, "I have to read stuff there to buy something because I might buy the wrong thing. You've got to read it." She also reads directions and recipes on food boxes. Although Margaret does read some, there is a scant amount of print material in her home and, based on her reports and our observations, the time she spends engaged with it on a daily basis is short.

## Reading Practices Across the Three Cases

The three research participants interact with text in diverse ways both quantitatively and qualitatively. At one end of the extreme, Edna reads a range of texts every day. She reads as part of fulfilling her adult responsibilities, to stay informed, for spiritual reasons, and to do schoolwork. At the other extreme, Juan seems to find little reason to read at all outside of class. Although a less capable

ment, and the home environment.

All three seem to think that school-like reading really counts for improving their skills. Even Edna, who said she believed she should read more books, put her considerable effort primarily into completing academic exercises, rather than spending the time engaging in more authentic reading tasks. When asked what the best thing was that she could do to help herself improve her skills, she replied, "If I do my homework, I will be better in everything that I want to do." Juan resists reading anything more than absolutely necessary because doing so does not engage him. Margaret believes the main ingredient in improving her reading is to spend more time in school. When asked if there was anything she could be doing outside of school to help herself, she said, "Not right now." Because their teachers did not report that they make any particular effort to encourage their students to read outside of class, or to engage them in reading for pleasure, students' experiences in the program probably did little to dispel their beliefs and alter their practices. Thus students' preconceived notions of reading seem to work, to some extent, against the likelihood of their engaging in extensive or additional reading practices outside of class. The data indicate that these adults may not choose, be able to, or even think to increase the amount of time they spend reading outside of class without support, motivation, and encouragement from their teachers.

At least two elements of their home environments seem relevant to their involvement in reading as well: their access to print, and the support and interest of their family members. Juan, who has the least text in his home, seems to read the least; by reading less he is decreasing his chances of reaching his reading goals. Similarly, Edna, with reading materials throughout her home and opportunities and expectations for interacting

*"...help adult learners understand the importance of reading more each day."*

reader than Edna, Margaret seems to read more in her day-to-day life than Juan. She does read some on a daily basis. She, in turn, has shown significant progress in her reading. These subjects' reading behaviors indicate a complex interaction among learners' beliefs and understandings about reading development, teacher messages and behaviors about reading develop-

with text throughout her day, reads the most. Although the causal relationship between access to print and engagement with reading among these three adults cannot be established, since the study numbers are so small and there are likely other factors at play, it seems logical that someone who has more to read within his or her environment also has more opportunity to read. In other words, access to text seems likely to be a necessary, if not always sufficient, ingredient in actual reading.










Also related to the home environment is the role that other family members play in encouraging or discouraging the adult learner to read, work hard, and improve his or her skills. Baker et al. (1997) make clear that parents play an important shaping role in their children's beliefs about reading and their motivation to read. However, we have no research on the role that adult children and spouses play in motivating adult students to do the same. The data indicate that family members are an important part of the mix. Edna gave us several examples of her family's support and involvement in her reading development, and learning more generally, that seemed extremely important to her. In contrast, Margaret and Juan have little support or encouragement for their efforts. Margaret's boyfriend sometimes acts as a literacy helper by reading the newspaper to her and helping her with personal business, but she did not report any involvement on his part in her learning. Not resisting her participation in the program is an important element, but active involvement and encouragement in her reading at home may have further assisted her development. Similarly, although Juan's teacher reported that his mother frequently checked up on his attendance when he first started participating at the program, she seemed to pay no attention to his actual progress, or the work that he was doing. This seems to indicate that she felt her role was simply to get him to school. The rest was up to him and his teacher.

## What Teachers and Tutors Can Do

This case study offers some straightforward implications for practice. Although teachers can only work to improve what goes on in their classrooms, and must accept that the demands of adult life may militate against many of their efforts to encourage reading outside of class, they should be aware of what they can do to increase the potential of adult literacy learners' reading in their day-to-day lives.

An important step is for instructors to help adult learners understand the importance of reading more each day, reading widely from a range of texts, and reading for a range of purposes (information, pleasure, as well as skill development). Explicitly communicating this message is important, but may well not be enough. The data suggest that educators may need to help adult learners re-evaluate their beliefs, values, and goals regarding reading, especially if belief systems are bound

### Ideas for Encouraging Students to Read

-  Make an explicit connection between reading practice and reading improvement.
-  Create a classroom library. Be sure to include books at different levels of difficulty, and diverse genres. New books are expensive, but used ones are plentiful and cheap at yard and rummage sales. Don't shy away from children's and young adult literature that focuses on topics that might be of interest to adults. A great source of titles can be found at <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Resc/Trade/index.html>
-  Do "book talks." Teachers and students can introduce each other to favorite books through brief "hooks." Try reading aloud the back cover, the first paragraph of the first chapter, or another favorite part. Tell others why the book was enjoyable.
-  Provide 10 to 15 minutes of class time for reading books, magazines, and websites.
-  Set up book clubs made up of students interested in reading the same book. Provide discussion questions and formats for talking about the book.
-  Help students come up with techniques for reading independently including how to pick a book that is not too hard, a range of strategies to employ when encountering word-level or comprehension difficulties, and how to find time to read.
-  Take a trip to the library. Help students get library cards or work out any previous difficulties with library fines and overdue books.
-  Have students log their reading activity inside and outside of class. Logs should include what was read, how long it was read, or how many pages were read. Celebrate benchmarks such as every 100 minutes (or pages) or every three books completed. Let students determine how logs should be kept and what the benchmarks should be, as well as how to celebrate them.
-  Hold a book fair. Teachers and students bring in books to swap. This can be coupled with book talks.❖




by images of school-like reading, which inhibit the range and quality of texts read (as well as motivation to read). Teachers also need to emphasize and maximize the conditions that can support increased reading practice. The fact that some teachers do not take an active role in promoting reading practice, for whatever reasons, makes it seem unlikely that those who are not already inclined to do so will increase the types of reading they engage in or the amount of time they read outside of class. Or they will not increase that enough to improve their reading above and beyond what would happen through class participation alone.

Access to text is another ingredient in encouraging reading outside of class. A starting point is providing a classroom (or easily accessible) library with a range of books, magazines, and other print materials in a variety of genres and levels of difficulty. Beers (1996) suggests that while choice is important, it should be limited so that inexperienced readers are not overwhelmed. It is unlikely that most adult struggling readers will go to the public library and select a book to read simply at the suggestion of a teacher. These adults will need a great deal of step-by-step direction in helping them know how and where to locate texts, how to select texts that will engage and not frustrate them, and how to find time to read. Therefore teachers will need to go beyond simply providing access to texts. One element may be creating extended time in class to read (Campagna, 2005).

Earl (1997) took many of the steps described here but still found that her students did not read outside of class. She worked with her students to develop an incentive system to encourage reading, but she also gave them a reading log that they were to fill out and return each week. She found that by the time the incentive

prizes arrived (greatly delayed by bad weather), the students no longer needed them. The logs not only seemed to serve as an adequate reminder to read but they also conveyed a strong and clear message about the importance of reading outside of class and provided a structure for tracking progress. In addition, as the students started reading more, they started talking to each other about it more. The book-related talk that occurred in class also seemed to spur the learners on. Although teachers cannot hope to change the culture of support for learners in their homes (for better or worse), teachers can work to build interested and supportive networks of learners in class who share and discuss their reading likes and dislikes, triumphs and challenges. They can thereby create a book club atmosphere that may help adults over the hump when they, their spouses, partners, or children do not do so.

## Conclusion

It is a simple idea to argue that adult struggling readers need encouragement and help to read more as a way to increase their potential to become more fluent and capable readers. The data presented here suggest that to do so is a complex task that needs focus from teachers, learners, and researchers to implement. Although an important first step, simply telling adult students that they should read more is probably not enough. Instead, teachers should proactively help learners rethink their assumptions and attitudes toward reading, gain access to a wide variety of texts, and help them overcome a range of barriers that make reading outside of class difficult. Adult learners can do a great deal to help themselves learn to read more quickly, but they may need help getting started. 

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## About the Author

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# Instructional Practices of ABE and GED Teachers

by Perrine Robinson-Geller & Anastasiya A. Lipnevich

**W**hat are teachers doing in their classrooms? As part of a line of research pursuing this question, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) team based at Rutgers University conducted an online survey of teachers. One of the purposes of the survey was to describe the spectrum of instructional practices in adult basic education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) classes; the other was to validate the typology developed in an earlier study on classroom dynamics (Beder & Medina, 2001), described in the box on page 22.

This article focuses on the first purpose of the study, providing a snapshot of ABE and GED instruction in some states; the findings cannot be generalized to the ABE system in the United States. However, the study does provide some insight into what may be going on in the classrooms where student/teacher interactions take place. The survey has some limitations: it did not examine outcomes and therefore cannot address which instructional practices are better than others. It was based on self-report; observation of classrooms might yield different results. The states were not chosen at random, although an effort was made to use states that varied in their location, size, and most common type of sponsoring agency. There were 598

complete responses to the survey; statistical validity of the responses therefore high.

## The Survey

The survey was conducted entirely online: in each state, a state-level literacy official e-mailed the ABE teachers in his or her databases and asked them to complete the survey. A total of 695 teachers from 12 states complied, the majority (94.5 percent) of whom were from six states (CA, NY, WI, OH, OR, and MA). Of the 695 responses, 598 were complete and appropriate for data analysis. The respondents taught classes from beginning-level ABE through preparation for the GED. More than half of the participating instructors taught in GED classrooms, one-third in advanced ABE, and one-sixth in beginning ABE. Teachers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) were excluded because the ESOL context is considered to be significantly different from that of ABE. Confidentiality prevented us from collecting data on the number of different institutions represented in the data. Table 1 presents the number of respondents by state and by class type.

The survey asked teachers to answer 29 questions about their classroom practices on a five-point scale from *Almost Never* to *Almost Always*. The questions were in the form of statements such as *Teachers initiate and terminate class discussions* or *Learners work in small groups*. Another 14 questions covered demographic and background information such as: What level was the class? and What type of agency sponsored the class (public school, community college

etc.)? The questions were written based on the behaviors observed in two studies: one on classroom dynamics and one on engagement (Beder et al., 2006). A pilot study had validated the survey instrument. No questions were changed after the pilot, so the pilot data were incorporated into the final data.

## The Results

The findings of the collective data from all 12 states are discussed here. We did not have enough data for each state to make individual state analysis statistically meaningful.

### Categories/Types of Instruction

Three categories of types of instruction — teacher-led group (TLG), basic skills; individualized group instruction (IGI), basic skills; and meaning making — emerged from factor analysis. Factor analysis organizes the data by combining those that highly correlate with each other to create categories. Table 2 shows which survey items were grouped into which instructional category.

To determine what proportion of respondents could be classified into each instructional type, we analyzed

**Table 1**

State	N	Percentage
CA	194	32.4
NY	107	17.9
WI	102	17.1
OH	87	14.5
OR	42	7.0
MA	34	5.7
NM	9	1.5
WY	2	0.3
CT	2	0.3
NJ	1	0.2
NE	1	0.2
IL	1	0.2
Unknown	16	2.7
TOTAL	598	100.0
<b>Class type</b>		
GED	337	56.4
Advanced ABE	171	28.6
Beginning ABE	90	15.1

**Table 2**

<b>Instructional Type</b>	<b>Items included in the instructional type category</b>
<b>TLG, basic skills</b>	Learners answer multiple-choice questions after they finish a lesson. Learners' comments are mostly directed to the teacher. Teacher asks learners questions that have one correct answer. Teachers initiate and terminate class discussions. Learners work with commercially published materials.
<b>IGI, basic skills</b>	All learners do not work on the same lesson at the same time. Learners work at their own pace. Teacher does not deliver lessons to the class as a whole. Learners are assigned sequenced materials. Learners work individually. During class the teacher rotates among learners. Learners keep their work in folders stored in the classroom.
<b>Meaning making</b>	Learners are encouraged to interact with each other. Learners share their opinions with each other. Learners work in small groups. Learners discuss issues connected to their lives. Project-based learning is used as a teaching method. Learners write in their journals in class. Learners work on materials related to their lives. Learners write on topics they select themselves. Learners help decide what topics will be covered in class.

the data further. We found that the respondents often could be classified into more than one of the instructional types. The distribution of respondents is shown in Table 3. Some 76 percent of respondents incorporated the basic skills instructional type in their classroom and 53 percent of respondents incorporated meaning making.

**Table 3**

<b>Instructional type</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
IGI, basic skills and TLG, basic skills and meaning making	89	14.9
Meaning making	87	14.5
Meaning making and IGI, basic skills	82	13.70
IGI, basic skills	79	13.20
IGI, basic skills and TLG, basic skills	77	12.90
TLG, basic skills	64	10.70
Meaning making and TLG, basic skills	63	10.50
Other*	57	9.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>598</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* Respondents were classified as "Other" if they did not score high on any of the three scales. They may identify with some instructional type that the survey failed to capture

We did further statistical analysis (cross-tabulations) to explore the relationship among instructional types and several background variables. The background variables in the survey included class type, sponsoring agency, full-time or part-time teachers, frequency and duration of class, paid professional development time, paid preparation time, and class size.

We found statistically significant relationships between instructional type and the background variables instructional level, sponsoring agency, and enrollment type. The background variables of full-time/part-time teacher, paid preparation time, and paid professional time did not show statistically significant relationships with instructional type.

## **Instructional Type and Instructional Level**

### **Beginning ABE, Advanced ABE, GED (Graph 1)**

For beginning ABE, the prevailing instructional type was meaning making and almost no combined IGI, basic skills & TLG, basic skills. For advanced ABE the prevailing instructional type was combined meaning making & IGI, basic skills and the use of combined IGI, basic skills & TLG, basic skills increased. At the GED level there was less use of meaning making and the most prevalent types were combined IGI, TLG, basic skills or the all three type (combined meaning making, IGI; TLG, basic skills; and basic skills). That IGI, basic skills were almost nonexistent at the beginning ABE level was consistent with other NCSALL center research which suggests that IGI may be problematic at the lowest levels of learners (Beder et al., 2006; Robinson-Geller, in press).

## **Instructional Type and Sponsoring Agency**

### **Community College, CBO, Public School, Other (Graph 2)**

There was significant variation by sponsoring agency. Teachers from community-based organizations (CBO) were much more likely to use meaning making (or a mixed type that included meaning making) than any other instructional type. A limitation of the survey was that data about the kind of CBO were not collected. Teachers in community colleges were about equally likely to use meaning making and the mixed type IGI, basic skills & TLG, basic skills and they use these two more often than any other instructional type. Public school teachers were more likely to use the mixed type of all three, IGI, basic skills or the mixed type meaning making & IGI, basic skills.



### Instructional Type and Type of Enrollment (Graph 3)

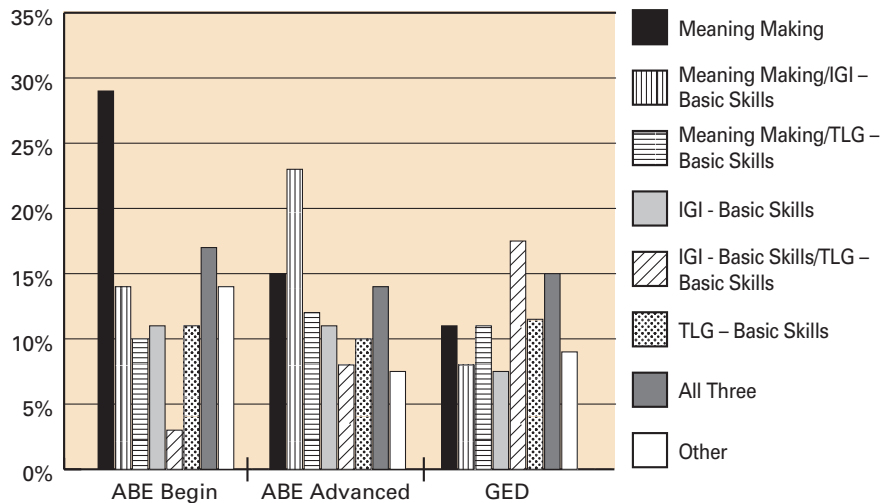
There was significant difference in instructional choices made by teachers with managed-enrollment classes compared to those with continuous-enrollment classes. Those with managed enrollment were more than twice as likely to use meaning making or meaning making & TLG, basic skills as those with continuous enrollment. Conversely, teachers with continuous-enrollment classes were more than four times as likely to use IGI, basic skills or IGI, basic skills & TLG, basic skills than teachers with managed-enrollment classes. This is consistent with Robinson-Geller's (in press) findings that coping with the challenges of continuous enrollment is one of the reasons to use an IGI approach. Meaning making requires more negotiation and dialog between teachers and learners, which is more difficult when new students are continuously entering and leaving the class. This may explain why meaning making is markedly more prevalent in managed-enrollment than in continuous-enrollment classes.

### Discussion

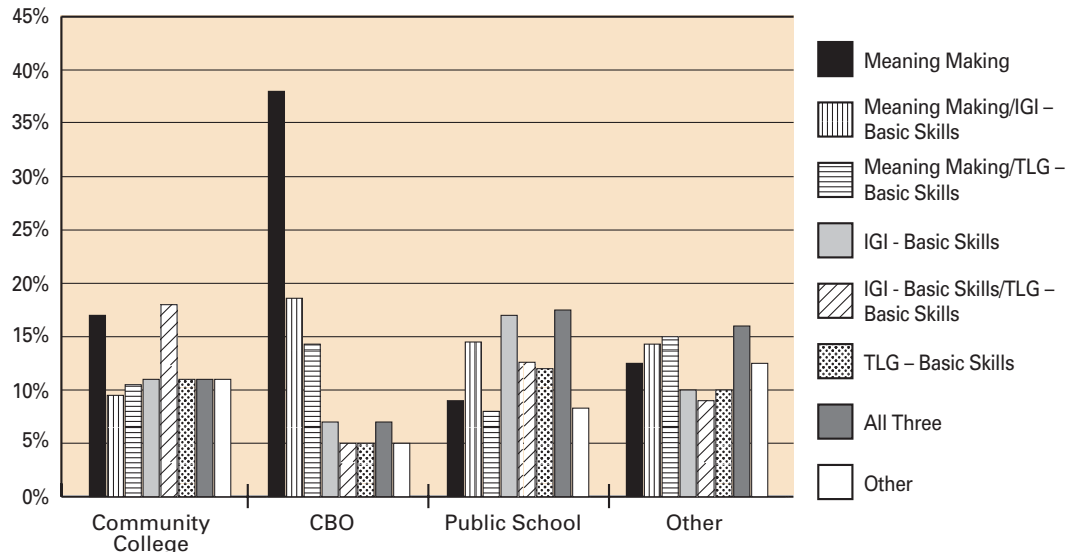
The study has provided an initial framework for thinking about instructional practices in the ABE/GED classroom and is valuable for the following reasons:

- It offers insight into ABE classroom instruction.
- The finding that mixing of instructional types is as likely to occur as using just one instructional type supports the theory that teachers pick and choose, using what works for them.
- The existence of the "other" category

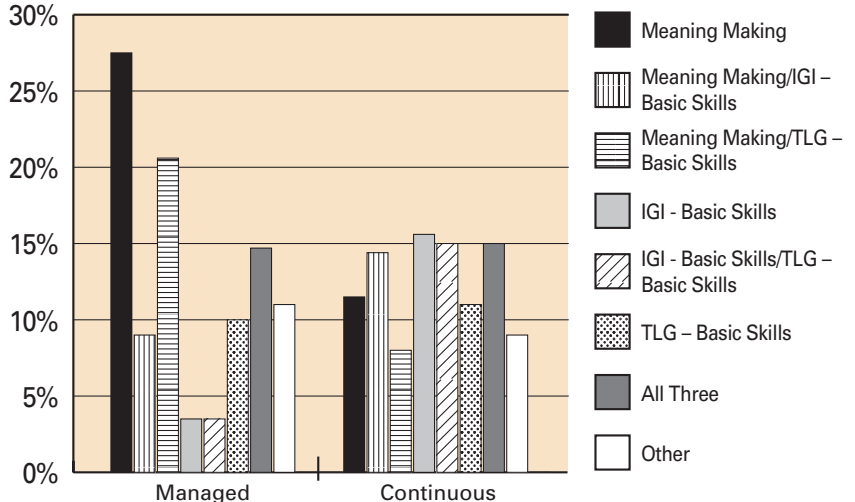
Graph 1: Type of Instruction by Class Type



Graph 2: Type of Instruction by Sponsoring Agency




Graph 3: Instruction Type by Enrollment Type



implies that further research is needed to understand the full diversity of classroom instructional types.

- The findings indicate that different instructional practices are being used for different levels of learners.
- The type of sponsoring agency and enrollment policies may be related to instructional practices used.

This survey has identified instructional types used in ABE/GED classes and has posed some interesting questions regarding their use. Questions around efficacy and outcome need to be asked next. Which type is best? For whom? Under which conditions? What is the relationship between sponsoring agency and instructional type? How can understanding instructional types affect the practice of program directors, staff

developers, and teachers? The answers to these questions would move the field ahead substantially. 

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## The Classroom Dynamics Study

The classroom dynamics study focused on ABE classrooms. The researchers observed 20 adult literacy classes in eight states and interviewed the teachers of these classes. The purpose of the study was to examine what happens in adult literacy classrooms. The researchers were specifically interested in the content of instruction, how that content was structured, what social processes characterized interactions within the classroom, and what outside forces shaped classroom behavior. One of the results of this study was a typology of instruction. This typology classified ABE instruction into two major types: meaning making and discrete skills. Meaning making classes are characterized by the following:

- Problem-solving skills, critical thinking, creativity, and social awareness in addition to reading, writing, and mathematical skill development.
- An emphasis on process over structure and lessons that are less likely to be discrete units bounded by time.
- Considerably more collaboration between teachers and learners than in discrete skills classes.
- For the most part, authentic materials rather than commercially published ones.
- Teachers tend to function more as facilitators and process managers than as conveyors of information.
- Authority relationships between teachers and learners are more level than those in discrete skills classes. All teachers in this category negotiated curricular content with learners to some extent.
- A high level of learner engagement is present.
- Communication occurs between learners as well as from teacher to learner and learner to teacher.

- Spontaneous expression of learners' feelings and opinions occurs. (Beder & Medina, 2001).

In the classroom dynamics typology, discrete skills, called basic skills in this article, are characterized by:

- Teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lessons focusing on conveyance of factual information and literal recall from learners.
- A predominance of commercially published materials for reading, writing, math, and GED instruction.
- Lessons, each with a clear beginning and end, organized into distinct time periods.
- A focus on the discrete skills that encompass traditional subject areas. Reading, for example, is divided into comprehension, inference, facts, and opinions. Math is divided into addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, and the rules governing mathematical operations are emphasized.
- A high degree of teacher-to-learner and learner-to-teacher interaction and a low degree of learner-to-learner interaction. (Beder & Medina, 2001)

As shown in Table 3, the items included in each of the three primary instructional types identified in the survey, meaning making, IGI, basic skills, and TLG, basic skills, correspond very closely with the Beder and Medina typology. The meaning making instructional type corresponds to the meaning making category in the Beder and Medina typology. IGI, basic skills and TLG, basic skills instructional types both correspond to the discrete skills category of the Beder and Medina typology. They represent different ways in which instruction is delivered. The implication is that the typology, which was derived through observation and analysis, has been validated by this survey. ❖

# Learners on Learning to Read

by Alisa Belzer

**R**ecent efforts to synthesize the research base on adult reading instruction have revealed a significant need for more information on how to teach reading to adult developing readers (Belzer & St. Clair, 2005; Kruidenier, 2002). One source of information that has not yet been tapped is adult learners themselves. Despite calls to “authorize” student experiences and perspectives so that they can have a direct impact on policy formation and improved practice (Cook-Sather, 2002), adult literacy research has not done this in any systematic way, especially when it comes to reading instruction. Such an effort would be congruent both with the principles of participatory literacy education and with theories and research about the capacities of adult learners to direct their own learning. As a small, preliminary step in the process of learning from learners, I interviewed 15 adults who have made significant progress in their reading development and

*asked: To what do they attribute their success?*

I recruited the participants from multiple adult literacy practitioner-oriented electronic discussion lists. Subscribers were asked to nominate current or past students who had entered their programs reading below the 4th grade level equivalency and who had made very significant progress in their reading. Rather than try to quantify their progress, we focused



on the quantity and quality of literacy practices. Therefore, we operationalized our definition of a learner who has made significant progress as a reader who has attained the competence and desire to read comfortably and as a normal part of his or her day-to-day life.

This effort identified 10 women and five men from 11 programs in 10 states. They ranged in age from 21 to 66 years. One participant had never attended school, two had attended sporadically until age 13 and 14, five had completed between the 5th and 8th grades, two had finished 9th or

10th grade, and four had completed high school. Six were employed full-time, six were employed part-time, and three were unemployed. When I interviewed them, eight had completed their adult basic education programs, all but one very recently. The programs used a wide range of instructional approaches to teach reading.

The interviews, conducted by phone and both tape-recorded and transcribed, lasted from 30 to 70 minutes. Using open-ended questions, I asked participants to discuss their reasons for entering the program, their assessments of their progress, the main ingredients of their success, and their previous experiences with learning to read. I also interviewed an administrator or instructor who had recently worked with them (except for the participant who completed her program years ago) about the learning context in which the learners participated.

## Findings

An initial analysis of the data on the factors that contributed to adult literacy learners' success in reading development indicated four key ingredients: (1) their own motivation and determination; (2) program features, including relationships with an instructor,

instructional strategies and materials, and structures and formats; (3) reading practice; and (4) supports. Only rarely did students suggest that one factor was solely responsible for their success. More commonly they acknowledged that a combination of factors was important.

## Motivation and Determination

Students stated that they could not have succeeded without an inner drive pushing them to do so. Some



described this kind of motivation using words such as excitement, hunger, willingness, push, desire, and faith. One participant, Ruth, said, “It’s on you to want to learn how to read. It’s called desire. You desire a change in your life... If you’re going to learn how to read, you’ve got to take matters in your own hands. Here are the tools. You want it, you’ve got to get it. [The program] can only present it to you. You’ve got to take it the rest of the way... The student has to be thirsty for this.”

Another participant, Susannah, had a similar sentiment: “You really won’t learn anything [unless] you want it deep inside. If you want it, you will go after it. You will stay with it, like I did.”

Both women indicated that some of the specifics of instructional strategy and format may be irrelevant to students who lack a clear sense of purpose. This implies that programs can do little to boost learners’ chances of success if learners themselves do not have a strong internal drive to succeed. However, Comings and Cuban (in press) argue that this type of learner represents just one path to persistence (and, ultimately, to success) and that programs need multiple ways of supporting learners who come with less focus. Because program staff described many of the learners I interviewed as significantly more motivated than their peers, it may be useful to help all learners understand the very important role they play in their own success.

## Program Features

Students had the most to say about the role that aspects of their programs played in their success. Their responses focused on the importance of relationships with teachers, and the ways in which instructional strategies, materials, and formats (such as one-on-one, small group, or class instruction and frequency of meetings) sup-

ported their learning. While their ways of describing instructional relationships were quite consistent, their descriptions of other key program features were not. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that they were limited to what they had experienced, and the programs were quite different. However, it is also likely that the

**“Students stated that they could not have succeeded without an inner drive pushing them to do so.”**

diversity of responses can be attributed to the diversity of learners; no cluster of strategies is going to feel most effective for everyone.

### **Personal connections with instructional staff**

The learners stressed that the human connection their instructors made with them played an extremely important role in their success. When they were afraid, frustrated, or flagging in their own motivation, their instructors helped them feel safe, boosted their confidence, and assisted them in working around problems that were deterring them. The study participants’ descriptors for their instructors and the connections they had with them included kind, helpful, encouraging, nice, compassionate, patient, trustworthy, reassuring, and affirming. The emphasis that the students placed on personal relationships with their instructors suggests the importance of a commitment to the individual above and beyond the content and technique of instruction. Delores explained, “If it hadn’t been for them, the books and tapes, all that wouldn’t have done me any good. I feel that it’s the personal contact with other people that helped me.”

While not the sole ingredient in their success, the relationships they

described were often an important element for the learners. The emotion with which several students described the meaningful ways their instructors had reached out to them seems to reveal the “primacy of the caring relation and of dialogue in educational practice” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 5). Demonstrating a deeply caring stance towards learners may be a necessary, but likely not a sufficient, ingredient in success. Staff in every program had professional training (i.e., more than a “degree in caring”) and many years of experience upon which to draw.

### **Instructional strategies and materials**

In the case of instructional strategies, learners’ perceptions seemed shaped by what they had experienced and reflected the diversity of the programs in which they had participated. Some methods and strategies, however, came up again and again: the use of technology; practices such as repetition, not putting students on the spot, and confirming that they truly understand; spending one-on-one time with students even in class-based instructional settings; making connections among teaching, learning, and learners’ lives; and the use of interesting and relevant materials.

The participants offered a range of specific strategies for reading that they thought were important, such as syllabic chunking or sounding words out. One learner explained that “a lot of people get scared and they don’t like to go through with it... But I would say sound it out. That’s the most important thing I learned, how to break down a word and ‘sound it out’.” Others mentioned developing a larger sight word vocabulary or learning to skip over and return to unknown words. Some considered that reading aloud had been important, while others praised their program for putting time aside for silent reading.

The learners' identification of specific strategies that worked for them is not scientifically based, but does indicate that students appreciate at least some direct skills-based instruction. The responses in this area also suggest that a range of instructional approaches, sets of skills, and strategies can be used successfully with adult learners; it is also likely that no one approach can work for everyone.

Several students noted that reading interesting, adult, and relevant materials had been important to them. Chuck stated, "Someone has to read something that they're interested in...If you're not interested in it, you're going to sit there and day dream." Sally explained that reading adult materials that were of interest to her opened her eyes to new information, representing access that she valued highly. She said, "The material was interesting and I was learning things. I remember we'd be reading stuff and I'd be like, 'Oh, wow! I didn't know this'"

### **Program formats**

Similar to their assessments of instructional strategies, learners tended to highlight program formats with which they were familiar. One format was noted across several different programs: being able to read aloud and discuss texts in small groups with other students. According to the learners, this format provided communal support, enabled them to get immediate assistance on an as-needed basis, helped them to maintain focus and gain a better appreciation for the meaning of texts.

### **Practice**

There was considerable agreement on the important role that daily reading practice outside of class time played in their success (for more on this, see page 14). Carlos gave advice: "[If you read] everyday, you're definitely going to get it. I mean when

we learned how to walk, we didn't learn how to walk right away."

Chuck stated, "If you want to learn how to read, you just got to read, read, read, and you got to read something you're interested in."

Unfortunately, adult literacy learners do not always have or act on this knowledge (Belzer, 2006). Given the relatively few hours most adult learners can spend actually reading during formal instructional time, they may not have sufficient time to practice there. Therefore, instructors should use every tool at their disposal to make explicit the importance of outside reading as a way of maximizing development and to assist learners in working around technical difficulties and personal obstacles. These might include helping them develop strategies for: reading independently, rethinking their attitudes about reading, and finding time in the day to read.

### **Supports**

Beyond relationships with teachers and internal motivation, the learners I interviewed mentioned family and friends' cheering them on and showing

***“One format was noted across several different programs: being able to read aloud and discuss texts in small groups with other students.”***

pride in their accomplishments as integral to sustaining their motivation. Being able to help family members by using her developing skills was also viewed as an important ingredient by at least one student, Cora. She explained that she and her granddaughter helped each other, but "when [my granddaughter] runs into a problem [and I can help her], that's why I think I


progressed so much, because I could help her." In addition, three learners cited their religious faith as extremely important to their success.

Practitioners cannot create family- or faith-based support where there is none, but they can heed the importance of building informal support within the program. Several study participants commented that feeling like they were part of a group of adults with similar goals and needs was extremely important to them. Fellow students helped each other when they were stuck and never made fun of their colleagues. For example, when asked what one of the most important ingredients of her success was, Brenda said, "It's people getting together and helping each other... Everybody can help each other... Everyone in the class, they feel good and clap for each other. I've noticed that that makes everybody feel better about actually being there." Statements like this indicate that even in individualized programs, it may be important to provide some opportunities that encourage learners to connect with each in ways that are mutually supportive and encouraging. (For more

on the role of the cohort in adult learners' educational experiences, see "The power of a cohort and of collaborative groups" in *Focus on Basics*, 5(B), available at [www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=254](http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=254).)

### **Conclusion**

Successful students' discussions of what helped them accomplish so much may not provide precise, technical information on how to teach reading. They may not tell us anything that experienced, knowledgeable practitioners do not on some level already know. They do, however, highlight factors that may sometimes get lost in the rush to meet accountability standards, serve as many learners in as diverse circumstances as possible, and respond to the latest findings of evi-

dence-based research. Adult learners' perspectives reinforce the value of the human element in learning how to read: they know this better than any teacher or researcher can. The knowledge and experience of successful learners about what helped them are available to every practitioner who asks for it. So too are those of the students who are still struggling. Learners' perspectives can and should inform our practice, policy, and further research in meaningful and substantive ways. 

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### About the Author

**Alisa Belzer** is an assistant professor of adult literacy education at Rutgers University. She began working in adult literacy education in 1987 and has been a program coordinator, tutor trainer, classroom teacher, and tutor. Her research interests have been in the areas of authentic assessment, professional development and teacher research, policy, learner beliefs, and adult reading development. ❖

# What Factors — Internal and External — Have an Impact On Service Delivery?

by Patsy Medina

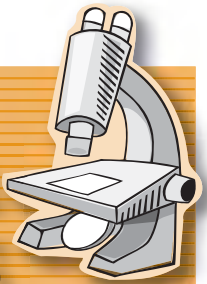
**A** *adult literacy administrators make numerous decisions regarding the literacy programs they manage. Those decisions help shape the culture of those programs and influence everything from the curricula implemented to what gets hung on bulletin boards. The decisions directly affect how programs are configured in terms of methods of instruction, the content of instruction, and their learner support systems. Program configuration has an impact on how learners participate in programs and the learning options available to them.*

research project. PAPA is seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What are the major inputs to decisions about service delivery at the program level?
2. How do those inputs influence decisions about service delivery?
3. What are the consequences for service delivery?

The unit for analysis for the study is the adult literacy education program. A program is defined as an organizational unit that enrolls students,

**NCSALL  
Research  
In Progress**




conducts adult literacy education instruction, hires and supervises teachers, and fulfills grant-reporting requirements. A total of six programs were selected to participate, from six different states. The states were identified in consultation with a six-member panel of advisors of experts in the field of adult literacy. Three states were selected from those that had significantly transformed their policies within the last three years and three from states in which policy had been relatively stable for the last several years. To maximize the variability among the programs, the programs we selected were different from each other in size and type (affiliated with public



schools, community-based agency, or community college).

The data were collected from two or three administrators, each with at least three years in their positions, per program. All our data were collected via telephone and onsite interviews; we used a semi-structured interview guide as our primary protocol. After acquiring background information, we asked the program administrators to think of five critical incidents that have happened in the past five years that have affected, or could have affected, how they provided services to learners. These could have been one-time events, such as a funding crisis, or recurring events, such as the issuance of requests for proposals for grant funding. We continued to ask probing questions until each critical incident was fully described to our satisfaction. We also asked questions about specific federal, state, and local policies.

As of the writing of the article, data will be collected for another month. The data analysis phase of PAPA has yet to take place. We expect to publish a report on the NCSALL web site in the fall of 2006 (<http://www.ncsall.net>). 

### About the Author

**Patsy Medina** is an assistant professor at Buffalo State College, where she teaches graduate courses in adult education and literacy. Prior to that, she worked at Rutgers University, from which she received her doctoral degree and was a member of the research team on research projects sponsored by NCSALL. She spent 14 years as an adult literacy practitioner in a community-based literacy organization in the South Bronx, New York. ❖



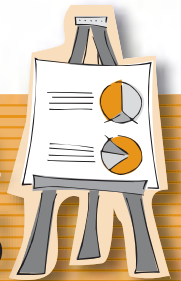
## Adult Literacy Research Network

**I**n September 2002, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), and the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) of the US Department of Education awarded six research grants to institutions and principal investigators to study the effectiveness of adult literacy interventions for low-literate adults. An additional grant was added to the network with funding from the Institute for Education Sciences (IES), bringing the total to seven.

*These projects seek to improve the reading instruction of adult basic education (ABE) students whose reading is between grade equivalent 4 and 8. Classified as intermediate adult readers, these students currently make up 60 to 70 percent of the ABE population. Based on descriptive studies, a consensus now exists that their reading difficulties are caused by dysfluent word recognition and/or lack of a literate meaning vocabulary. As a result, they make slow progress toward high school levels of comprehension. Each of the network's projects has been*

*making significant strides in understanding the constellation of factors that influence adult literacy learning and in using that knowledge to create effective and sustainable adult and family literacy programs. Short descriptions of these studies are included here. Although the studies are not yet completed, Focus on Basics would like to familiarize you with them. Their findings will be important to your work.*

## Research In Progress



### Research on Reading Instruction for Adults

This three-component study focuses on adult learners whose word reading grade equivalency levels range from 3.0 to 5.9. The first component evaluates the degree of explicitness necessary in teaching reading to adults. Learners (60 per approach) are being taught using one of the following instructional approaches: decoding and fluency; decoding, reading comprehension, and fluency; extensive reading; decoding, reading comprehension, extensive reading, and fluency. Outcomes on reading measures of individuals in each of these groups will be compared to each other and to a control group of adult literacy learners who are taught using other approaches. All

reading instructional approaches are of equal length (100 hours), similar format, and independently monitored for integrity. Students are encouraged to attend each class. Absent students are contacted frequently by phone, and students receive motivational certificates after one month of class attendance, 50 hours of class attendance, and at the final day of scheduled class sessions. To date, 263 learners have been pretested, and 157 learners have completed class sessions.

In the second component of the project, data will be analyzed to identify subtypes of adult literacy learners and whether these subtypes respond differentially to the different instructional approaches. The third component, which has two aspects, includes using brain imaging (fMRI) technology. The first provides a systematic evaluation of the different components of the neural circuitry of adult poor readers compared to adult expert readers. Adult expert readers and adults who have difficulty reading will undergo fMRI studies of basic reading processes. The second aspect is to evaluate whether fMRI may provide a neurobiological index of the impact of instruction on adult learners. At the end of this study, results will be shared in journals and at conferences in the field of adult literacy.

Daphne Greenberg,  
Georgia State University

## Testing Impact of Health Literacy in Adult Literacy and Integrated Family Approach Programs

This research compares the relative impact on adult literacy gains of the integrated family approach (IFA) Even Start programs with those of adult literacy (AL) programs. This study uses a randomized design across more than 50 sites in Illinois. The study includes all sites in Illinois that offer a classroom-based adult literacy program in which adults have a choice to par-

ticipate in all four components of a family literacy program or just an adult education component. The study also tests the effects of exposure to an explicit, research-based health literacy curriculum on both literacy and health literacy outcomes in Illinois participants.

Separate, but content-equivalent, adult health literacy curricula were created based on 13 priority objectives for health established by national experts and are being tested, under both the AL and IFA conditions for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and native English speakers. More than 2,000 adults have participated in the study. These include native English speakers from six educational functioning levels, ranging from 0 to 12.9 grade level equivalency; and ESOL speakers from six educational functional levels, ranging from 0 to 10 student performance levels.



The literacy measures required by the state of Illinois (TABE, BEST Literacy, and CELSA) are used to measure literacy gains. Adults are tested at the beginning of the study, and again after 42 hours of instruction. Other instruments created from the Health Literacy curricula based on the theory of planned action, social cognitive theory, and process measures of curriculum fidelity and implementation are used to chart learners' health knowledge and behavior change. Four fundamental assumptions are being tested: (1) the IFA will prove more effective in addressing adult literacy needs than AL programs; (2) adult literacy curricula that include a health literacy component will prove more effective in improving adult literacy than adult literacy curricula that do not include a health literacy component; (3) IFA programs using a health literacy curriculum will be more effective in improving literacy than AL programs using the same curriculum or programs using a standard AL curriculum, and (4) in ESOL programs, the

IFA will prove more effective in improving adult literacy than traditional AL programs when using the same health literacy curriculum. Other important outcomes include gains in adult perceived health knowledge, behaviors, and beliefs.

Preliminary results indicate that in all conditions in which the health literacy curriculum has been used there has been a significant impact on learners' health knowledge and self-efficacy belief/behavioral intention. The literacy differences have been positive in all conditions, showing no harm in literacy gains as a result of the use of the curriculum. The last wave of participants will finish in late spring 2006. Results will be available in early 2007. For additional information on the design of the study, see: Levy, S.R., Rasher, S.P., Mandernach, J.B., Bercovitz, L.S., Berbaum, M.L., Deardorff Carter, S. (2004). Adult literacy research and field-based practice: Piloting an experimental health literacy curriculum for full-scale field implementation. *Family Literacy Forum*, 3 (1), 32-35.

Susan Levy,  
University of Illinois

## Building a Knowledge Base for Teaching Adult Decoding

The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge base about the design of effective instruction in decoding for adults reading at the low-intermediate level (4th to 7th grade equivalent levels). This study is examining the efficacy of teaching decoding using structured approaches derived from K-12 instruction and customized for use with adults. During the first two years of the study, we designed and pilot-tested instructional methods based on theories about language learning and methods created for K-12 education. Based on the results of these design studies, we formulated an enriched and accelerated decoding curriculum that teaches metalinguistic concepts about phonology and orthography,

includes both spelling and decoding, applies decoding skills to multisyllabic words from the beginning, and teaches cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support application of new skills in reading. This curriculum is being assessed in an experimental study involving 45 adult reading classes in 23 adult literacy programs in 12 states across the United States. Of these classes, 16 were randomly assigned to receive either the enriched curriculum or to continue their existing reading instruction. Seven of the 23 programs were selected because they were already using published decoding curricula; these programs serve as an alternate treatment group. In addition to reading measures, the project is collecting extensive information about the learners, instructors, and the operation of the adult basic education (ABE) programs to enable analysis of the relationships among learners' characteristics, instructional methods, ABE program characteristics, and learners' development of reading skills. The results, which we anticipate will be ready for dissemination in 2007, will contribute to knowledge about effective reading instruction for adult learners with low skills.

Charles MacArthur,  
University of Delaware

Judith Alamprese,  
Abt Associates

Deborah Knight,  
University of Delaware

## Improving Literacy Instruction for Adults

This study applies the knowledge garnered with younger populations to address adults' literacy needs. The goal is to validate the use of instructional reading strategy interventions proven to be effective for children and adolescents with adults with limited literacy proficiency. The project employs a multidisciplinary, systematic, and programmatic research plan with three aims. The first used multiple predictors of reading proficiency, three outcome measures, and a background question-

naire to assess 319 adult education students to determine the learner characteristics and the reading skills needed for success on the outcome measures and researched what component skills for reading are incorporated within CASAS, NAEP and GED, which are common assessments of literacy (see Hock, M., & Mellard, D. 2005. Reading comprehension strategies for adult literacy outcomes, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(3), 192–200). This aided in the selection of effective reading interventions linking reading components and interventions to global adult literacy outcomes. The investigators are specifically interested in enhancing adult learners' component skills of word analysis, fluency, and reading comprehension.

In the second aim, the investigators adapted interventions from the University of



Kansas Center for Research on Learning's reading strategies to the adult learner and adult instructional settings. Rigorous tests of these interventions are occurring under randomized control group trials. Eight adult education programs provide the setting for the study. The intervention is taught in small groups with class sizes averaging three students. Intervention classes are taught three to four days a week for one to two hours each day, depending on the site. All the control students receive instruction as they normally would. The total number of students who have participated in the study to date is 162. Participating students are provided a monetary incentive for pre- and posttesting as well as when they reach specified attendance milestones.

The final aim addresses the issue of successfully translating research findings into practice by using adult education staff to implement the interventions. These studies will examine the effectiveness of these interventions

on learners' outcomes when the research controls and supports are reduced from what was available in the second aim. In addition, researchers are looking at the relationship of program characteristics to learner outcomes.

The data from all aims provide an opportunity to answer a wide variety of questions regarding adult literacy skills, reading instruction, and adult education. Articles are currently being written to address some of those questions and readers may find them in journals relating to reading instruction, adult education, and health literacy within the next year.

Daryl Mellard,  
University of Kansas – Lawrence

## Relative Effectiveness of Reading Programs for Adults

In this project currently underway, supplemental instructional programs that directly target decoding and fluency are being compared with regard to their effectiveness in improving foundational reading abilities of adult learners. The interventions are all adult-appropriate adaptations of programs with demonstrated value for enhancing reading abilities of children with skill levels equivalent to those of low-intermediate adult readers. The programs vary primarily in the relative emphasis given to the teaching of decoding and fluency. The participants are being drawn from the population of native English-speaking adults who have word recognition skills at the 2nd to 6th grade equivalent level. The population also includes native Spanish-speaking adults whose oral language proficiency in English is considered low-advanced. All participants have sought assistance at large, urban adult education centers; the reading tutorials supplement their classes. The various sites have enabled the researchers to yield a sample of approximately 400 learners who have been assessed to date, and about 100 learners who have completed tutorials. The final sample size of those com-



pleting the instructional programs is estimated to be approximately 300 socioeconomically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse learners. Instructional sessions may last up to 60 instructional hours, but learners are evaluated at various intervals throughout the instructional period. To examine gains resulting from the interventions, numerous reading skills and related cognitive-linguistic abilities are being assessed before, during, and after the instructional period. The findings will provide valuable information about what kinds of literacy instruction are most effective for raising the reading abilities of low-intermediate adult readers, how to identify these adults' instructional needs accurately and efficiently by using an appropriate battery of assessments, and how literacy instruction might be tailored to the specific needs of individual adults in the target population.

John Sabatini,  
Educational Testing Services

## Improving the Instruction of Adult Basic Education Intermediate Readers

Accelerated growth in reading has been documented with older adolescents reading at the 4th to 8th grade level, using an approach developed at Girls and Boys Town. (See <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=466> "Reversing reading failure in young adults" in *Focus on Basics* 1B for more on the model.) We have adapted this approach for use by adult intermediate readers, and refer to our adaptation as Adult Fluency and Vocabulary. This research represents the first systematic attempt to assess the program. Because lack of practice time is a persistent problem for ABE students, the effectiveness of Soliloquy Learning's Reading Assistant, a speech recognition reading tutor, is also being evaluated as a means of providing distributed practice in fluency and vocabulary (for more on Soliloquy Learning, see <http://soliloquylearning.com/product/dr.ager.html>).

We have employed a quasiexperimental longitudinal research design in which 24 intermediate ABE classes (totaling about 300 learners) have been randomly assigned to one of four instructional conditions at seven sites in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. The study lasted only one semester to minimize the effects of student dropouts, which occurred at an acceptable rate of about 25 percent. The four instructional conditions are: Adult Fluency and Vocabulary and Reading Assistant practice; Adult Fluency and Vocabulary and hard copy practice (same texts as used by the Reading Assistant); traditional curriculum and Reading Assistant practice; traditional curriculum and hard copy practice (same texts as used by the Reading Assistant). Students have been pre- and posttested in word recognition, fluency and rate, oral



vocabulary, and reading comprehension. A similar battery will be administered in a follow-up interview in the fall of 2006.

Teachers in all four conditions received comparable amounts of training, and classrooms in all four conditions were observed regularly to monitor accuracy of the intervention and to document activities. After 10 months, follow-up observation and interview with each teacher will also be conducted (in the fall of 2007) to assess any possible impact of the interventions on instructors' practice.

Data are being analyzed using a hierarchical nested design combined with individual growth curve analyses. In addition to investigating the effectiveness of Adult Fluency and Vocabulary and the Reading Assistant, we also expect to shed some light on how fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension occur and interact in this underresearched, yet numerically

and socially significant, population of adult learners.

John Strucker,  
Harvard University Graduate  
School of Education

Mary E. Curtis,  
Lesley University, Center for  
Special Education

Marilyn Jager Adams,  
Soliloquy Learning

## Young Adult Literacy Problems: Prevalence and Treatment

Functional illiteracy in the young adult population (ages 18-35) is not only a drain on the nation's economic productivity but also documented as a major obstacle to access to adequate health care and a major independent risk factor for depression and suicide. This project has two major phases: to determine the prevalence of poor reading skills in the young adult population, and to compare treatment regimens for efficacy. The latter is accomplished by a design that will permit the isolation of effective types of instruction in areas known to be crucial to reading outcome in children, and suspected to be so in adults: phonological decoding (sounding out words), vocabulary, and text comprehension. It is expected that the direct types of instruction will be differentially effective for persons with different skill profiles.

Frank Wood,  
Wake Forest University of the  
Health Sciences

### Web Resources

For a review of extant literature on adult literacy, go to [http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/adult\\_reading/intro/rrwg.html](http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/adult_reading/intro/rrwg.html).

For a discussion of research needs and future directions in adult and family literacy, see [http://www.nichd.nih.gov/crmc/cdb/AFL\\_workshop.htm](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/crmc/cdb/AFL_workshop.htm).

The Adult Literacy Research Network is introduced on <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/readingabs.html> ♦

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## NCSALL Books

**Review of Adult Learning and Literacy: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice, Volume 6**, edited by John Comings, Barbara Garner, and Cristine Smith. Published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Contents: J. Oxenham, *Foreword*. N. Lopez, *The Year 2003 in Review*. B. Edmondson, *Demographic Change and Low Literacy Americans*. M.E. Curtis, *The Role of Vocabulary Instruction in Adult Basic Education*. D.J. Sawyer & M.T. Joyce, *Research in Spelling: Implications for Adult Basic Education*. K.M. Bailey, *Issues in Teaching Speaking to Adult ESOL Learners*. M.C. Smith, *The Preparation and Stability of the ABE Teaching Force: Current Conditions and Future Prospects*. I. Bailey, *Overview of the Adult Literacy System in Ireland and Current Issues in Implementation*. M.A. Cowan, *Beyond Single Interests: Broad-Based Organizing as a Vehicle for Promoting Adult Literacy*. M.A. Cowan, *Resources on Community Organizing*.

Visit the NCSALL Web site for chapter summaries. Order your copy online; available in hardback (\$99.95) and paperback (\$32.50).

## NCSALL Research Reports

**An Evaluation of the NCSALL Publication Focus on Basics** by Barb Garner, Marco Boscolo, John Comings, Donna Curry, Kelly McClure, and Cristine Smith (<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=29#27>)

The results of a survey on the impact of *Focus on Basics* on its readers are available.

The findings were overwhelmingly upbeat. The 292 readers who completed the survey report that *Focus on Basics* has had a positive impact on practitioners in these ways:

- It has influenced their beliefs about adult basic education.
- It has helped them feel connected to the larger education community as professionals.
- It has contributed to the development of

communities of practice.

- It has enabled them to make a connection between research and practice.
- It has provided them with concrete ideas they have used to change their programs and practice.

The report provides ideas on how the publication can be used as a professional development tool. A Research Brief is also available, at <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=27#fob>

**Learners' Engagement in Adult Literacy Education** by Hal Beder, Jessica Tomkins, Patsy Medina, Regina Riccioni, and Weiling Deng (<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=29#28>)

This qualitative study, conducted by the NCSALL research team at Rutgers University in New Jersey, examined the contextual factors that shape engagement in adult literacy education in classrooms that used individualized group instruction. Turn to page 6 for an article excerpted from the full study; a Research Brief is also available at <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=27#engage>

## NCSALL Occasional Paper

**An Evidence-based Adult Education Program Model Appropriate for Research** by John Comings, Lisa Soricone, and Maricel Santos (<http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=26#ebae>)

This paper reviews the available empirical evidence and professional wisdom in adult basic education and uses it to define a program model that meets the requirements for good practice.

## NCSALL Teaching and Training Materials

**Skills for Chronic Disease Management** by Rima Rudd with Lisa Soricone, Maricel Santos, Charlotte Nath, and Janet Smith (<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=1058>)

This study circle prepares participants to help their students acquire basic literacy skills needed for the management of chronic disease. These skills include reading medicine labels, following directions, and measuring dosages correctly; using measurement tools to monitor health; monitoring symptoms and talking to health care professionals; and making critical decisions about health care.

**Skills for Health Care Access and Navigation** by Rima Rudd, Rima Rudd, Lisa Soricone, Maricel Santos, Emily Zobel, Janet Smith, and Winston Lawrence (<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=891>)

This study circle prepares participants to

help their students acquire basic literacy skills needed for accessing health-related services and for navigating health care systems. These skills include filling out forms, reading signs, and interpreting rights and responsibilities.

**Program Administrators' Sourcebook: A Resource on NCSALL's Research for Adult Education Program Administrators** by Jackie Taylor, Cristine Smith, and Beth Bingman (<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=1035>)

This sourcebook presents NCSALL's research findings in short sections related to key challenges that program administrators face in their work as managers of adult education programs. It also presents the implications of these research findings for program structure and services, as well as some strategies for implementing change based on these implications.

## NEW on the Web Site

**Practitioner Research, Practitioner Knowledge**

(<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=967>)

This new section in *Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research* shares what NCSALL has learned through its practitioner knowledge and practitioner knowledge initiatives. Teachers in the Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute studied research on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), made changes in their own practice, and documented the results. Teachers in the Minnesota Practitioner Research in Reading Project and the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network studied the research of others and also conducted research of their own.

**NCSALL by Role**

(<http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=787>)

This section offers a variety of professional development ideas on adult multiple intelligences, adult student persistence, authentic context, General Educational Development (GED), and reading. Professional developers and program administrators can access guides for facilitating half-day seminars and multisession study circles. Policymakers can read relevant research articles and reflect on policy-related questions. Teachers and tutors can access self-studies that invite them to (1) read the related research, (2) reflect on this research and their practice, and (3) focus on an aspect of their practice. ❖

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## All About **NCSALL**

- NCSALL works to improve the quality of practice in adult basic education programs nationwide through basic and applied research; by building partnerships among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; and through dissemination of research results. A joint effort of World Education, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Portland State University, Rutgers University, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, NCSALL is funded by the US Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences.

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