Appendix B

Pre-Meeting Packet
of Readings and Handouts

**Participants need to receive this packet at least ten
days before the first session of the study circle**

<u>Contents</u>

- Cover letter: "Information about the Rethinking Instruction and Participation for Adult Basic Education Study Circle"

- Handout A: "What is a Study Circle?"

- Handout B: "What Study Circles Are and Are Not: A Comparison"

- Handout C: "The Role of the Participant"

- Handout D: "Schedule/To-Do Form"

- Reading #1: "Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills"

Dear Participant:

Thank you for registering to participate in the Rethinking Instruction and Participation for Adult Basic Education Study Circle. I look forward to meeting with you. This study circle was developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), through its Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research (CPPR) initiative. The CPPR initiative builds on NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) and responds to the need to find better ways to have research in the field of adult education and literacy inform practice and policy, and for practice to guide research.

We will meet three times. The first meeting is at _____
on_____ from _____.

At each session, we will be discussing readings relating to issues of instruction and participation in adult basic education. We'll discuss some findings from NCSALL's Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning on adult participation and self-study learning; NCSALL's research on Adult Student Persistence; examine articles from NCSALL's quarterly magazine for practitioners, *Focus on Basics*; and other research examining these topics.

Before the first meeting, please read the three handouts on study circles. Also, please read Reading #1 and consider how it relates to instruction and participation. We will be discussing all of these things at the first meeting.

I have enclosed a folder for you to keep all of the materials for this study circle. Please bring this folder and all the materials with you to each of our meetings. Additionally, at our first meeting we will be addressing the following questions related to this first reading:

- Why might longitudinal research be used to examine the self-study efforts of adult students?

- Why do you think "patterns of participation" are important when studying adult students?

- Why do the authors recalculate the participation hours and how does this affect the way participation is understood?

If you have any questions about the study circle in general or about what to do before our first meeting, please call me at _____or send me an email at _____.

I'm looking forward to some great discussions with all of you.

Sincerely,

[facilitator's name and title]

Handout A

What is a study circle?

A study circle:

- is a process for small-group deliberation that is voluntary and participatory;

- is a small group, usually 8 to 12 participants;

- is led by a facilitator who is impartial, who helps manage the deliberation process, but is not an "expert" or "teacher" in the traditional sense;

- considers many perspectives, rather than advocating a particular point of view;

- uses ground rules to set the tone for a respectful, productive discussion;

- is rooted in dialogue and deliberation, not debate;

- has multiple sessions which move from personal experience of the issue, to considering multiple viewpoints, to strategies for action;

- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concern;

- provides an opportunity for citizens to work together to improve their community.

Handout B

What study circles are and are not: A comparison

A study circle IS:

- **a small-group discussion** involving deliberation and problem solving, in which an issue is examined from many perspectives; it is enriched by the members' knowledge and experience, and often informed by expert information and discussion materials; it is aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

A study circle is NOT the same as:

- **conflict resolution**, a set of principles and techniques used in resolving conflict between individuals or groups. (Study circle facilitators and participants sometimes use these techniques in study circles.)

- **mediation**, a process used to settle disputes that relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement. (Mediators often make excellent study circle facilitators, and have many skills in common.)

- **a focus group**, a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Respondents (who are sometimes paid) are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.

- **traditional education with teachers and pupils**, where the teacher or an expert imparts knowledge to the students.

- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome**, such as a committee or board meeting, with goals established ahead of time. A study circle begins with a shared interest among its members and unfolds as the process progresses.

- **a town meeting**, a large-group meeting which is held to get public input on an issue, or to make a decision on a community policy.

- **a public hearing**, a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

APPENDIX B – Pre-Meeting Packet: Handout B

Handout C

The role of the participant

The following points are intended to help you, the participant, make the most of your study circle experience, and to suggest ways in which you can help the group

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.

- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.

- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you. Your** own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.

- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.

- **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.

- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

Handout D

Schedule/To-Do Form
What to Do to Get Ready

Session	What to Do Before Session
Session One	• Read Handouts A, B, and C and Reading #1, which you received in the Pre-Session packet. • Highlight interesting points and jot down any questions that come to mind. • Consider the questions listed in the opening letter and prepare to discuss these questions as well as others.
Session Two	• Read Reading #2. You will receive this reading during Session One. • Choose a passage that speaks to you in some way and prepare to talk about it with the group. • Think about how the concepts presented in the reading might apply to the adult students you work with.
Session Three	• Read Readings #3, #4, #5, #6, and #7. You will receive these readings during Session Two. • Note some of your impressions and questions as you critically read the article(s) you chose. Consider how this research might apply to your program and/or practice.

Reading #1

Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills

Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn

An analysis of baseline data collected by the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) offers a tantalizing glimpse of the formal and informal learning activities underlying adults' literacy development. Few adult educators will be surprised to hear that many in the LSAL population participate in adult basic or secondary education programs to improve their reading, writing, and math skills. After all, that's why these programs exist. More surprising is the finding that substantial numbers of adults in the LSAL population engage in self-directed learning activities to improve their basic skills or prepare for the tests of General Educational Development (GED). This is true both for individuals who have previously participated in adult education programs and for those who never have. A better understanding of the relationship between program participation and self-directed study for basic skill improvement could offer some interesting new ways to think about program design and outreach, student retention, and lifelong learning.

The Design of LSAL

The design of NCSALL's Longitudinal Study helps us to investigate these and a range of other important issues in adult literacy and education. Two features of the LSAL design are particularly relevant here. First, the LSAL is a *panel study*: it closely follows the same group of individuals over time. They are periodically interviewed, their literacy assessed, and information is collected about their program participation, informal learning activities, uses of written materials, employment, social networks, personal goals, social and economic status, among other information. The LSAL panel consists of approximately 1,000 individuals randomly sampled from its target population: individuals who, at the time the study began, lived in the Portland, OR, area; were aged 18-44 years; did not have a high school diploma or GED; were not still in high school; and spoke English proficiently. A second major feature is its *comparison group* methodology: approximately equal numbers of the target population were sampled who had or had not recently enrolled in local adult education programs. The design allows us to make important comparisons between those in the target population who participate in programs with those who do not. These comparisons provide new and important views of the distinctive characteristics of participants and of the contributions that program participation makes to adults' literacy and life development.

Self-Study and Program Participation

Most American research on adults' self-directed learning has focused on professionals and others with relatively high levels of formal education, who

are presumed to have "learned how to learn" through their years of formal schooling (e.g., Aslanian, 1980). Few studies have investigated the self-directed learning activities of adults who dropped out of high school. We know little about their self-directed learning, especially among those who never participate in adult education programs. Can they improve their skills on their own? Do they need to participate in formal programs to develop their literacy abilities?

We explored some of these issues a number of ways in the first (or baseline) interviews. For example, individuals were asked about many aspects of their preceding life histories, including whether they had, after leaving school, ever studied by themselves to improve their reading, writing, or math skills or to prepare for the GED. We were careful to differentiate such self-study from homework activities associated with any adult education classes they might have taken. When individuals responded affirmatively, we asked further questions for details about when and how intensively they had studied by themselves to improve their skills.

Although we need several years of data to observe literacy development directly, the LSAL baseline data already indicate that informal, self-directed learning may be an important part of adult literacy development. This component has largely been overlooked by both researchers and programs. One in three (34%) of those who have never participated in adult education programs have studied by themselves to improve their skills. Nearly half (46%) of those who have previously participated in programs have also self-studied to improve their skills or prepare for the GED.

Adult educators are often challenged and sometimes frustrated by the high turnover in classes. Data from the LSAL may help us to reconceptualize such sporadic participation in ABE programs as part of a broader process of cumulative skill development over time. Most program administrative data use 12 hours of seat time as the standard for minimum participation (and funding). LSAL quantifies participation in finer detail, recognizing a minimum of one class session as a period of participation. By "period of participation" we mean one or more sessions with the same teacher that ends because the student leaves or the class ends. Periods of participation may or may not conform to the standard number of weeks per term. This focus helps us see more varied and complex patterns of participation. Among those in the LSAL population who have ever participated in classes, more than half (58%) have done so in more than one period of participation. Individuals attending programs in multiple periods of participation often go to different programs, with varying intensities, duration, and reasons for starting and stopping during each period of participation.

APPENDIX B – Pre-Meeting Packet: Reading #1

Table 1. **Two ways of counting participation**

Class 1	Program count	LSAL count
Hours	—	4 hours per week
Weeks	—	2 weeks
Total time in class 1	—	8 hours
Class 2		
Hours	4 hrs per week	4 hrs per week
Weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks
Total time in class 2	32 hours	32 hours
Total participation time counted	1 class, 32 hours	2 classes, 40 hours

This complex, sometimes fragmented process of participation is best captured and understood from the learner's perspective rather than through the lens of administrative data in which students' participation is studied only in relation to the outreach, recruitment, and retention of students in the current program. When analyzing the same LSAL data from two different perspectives, that of cumulative participation hours and that of hours accumulated in individual program attempts, we get two different representations of participation. Framed as individual program attempts, stopping in and out of different classes might be interpreted as a series of failures. Students, however, experience moving in and out of programs as a process of accumulating participation and development over time. In the LSAL survey, students were asked how many classes they had participated in, how many hours per week the class met, and how many weeks they stayed in the class. Table 1 illustrates how the math works out differently if you only start counting class hours after 12 hours of seat time.

We used the initial LSAL data to compare these data and learner perspectives, illuminating somewhat different patterns of participation. If we look at periods of participation prior to the baseline (first) interview,[1] on average, learners experience 54 hours (median) of instruction per period of participation. Using the 12-hour threshold common in administrative data, however, we would report only 27 hours. When we look at cumulative hours over periods of participation, on average, 10% of learners stop participating before completing 12 hours of instruction. However, that increases to 22% of students who leave when the 12 hours of participation are limited to one attempt. Instruction appears to have longer duration in the learners' perspective than from the program's frame of measurement. In future reports, we will be able to compare the actual administrative data collected by the state to the self reports of students. When periods of focused study outside of program participation are added to this picture, programmatic perspectives on skill development may shift significantly to reflect learners' experiences more closely.
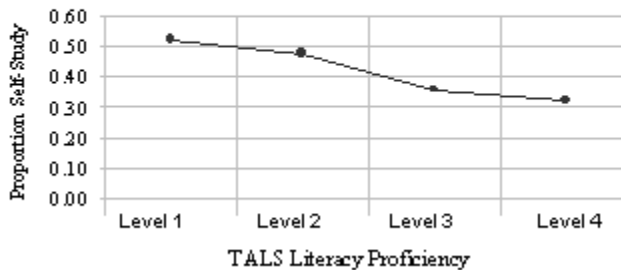
Learning without Program Participation

Although it is perhaps not surprising that so many individuals who participate in programs also engage in self-directed efforts to improve their basic skills and prepare for the GED, it is somewhat unexpected that such a large proportion of those who never go to programs also engage in such self-study. This suggests that a substantial reservoir of individuals may be actively trying to improve their skills, and that programs are not reaching or are unable to serve them through their current offerings. Perhaps new conceptions of how to support and enhance such independent learning (through the use of distance technologies and new media, for example) will better connect these learners with adult education programs.

Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency

The ability to study on one's own may depend on having certain levels of basic skills. The surprisingly high rate of self-study found in the LSAL population may be related to the study populations' relatively high levels of literacy proficiency. The LSAL population, by definition, is comprised entirely of high school dropouts who have not passed the GED. They do, however, have relatively high levels of literacy proficiency as measured by the Test of Adult Literacy Skills (TALS), which are the scales used in many familiar state, national, and international adult literacy assessments (Kirsch et al. 1993; OECD, 1995). Figure 1 plots the percentage of individuals reporting previous self-study as a function of their assessed TALS literacy proficiency.[2] Instead of the expected finding that individuals with higher skills are more likely to engage in self-study, the figure shows the opposite. Individuals with higher skill levels are less likely to have engaged in self-study efforts to improve their skills or prepare for the GED. Individuals at the lowest levels of skill are the most likely to engage in such self-study efforts; about half of the LSAL population functioning at the lowest proficiency level (level 1) has previously engaged in such self-study activities.

Figure 1. **Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency**

Program Participation and Literacy Proficiency

Literacy proficiency may affect not only self-directed learning of basic skills but also participation and learning within basic skills programs. LSAL data show a clear negative association between students' assessed literacy proficiency and their evaluations of program effectiveness. Table 2 shows that those who are most satisfied with their adult education have lower literacy proficiency scores than those reporting that programs did not help to improve their skills.

Our interpretation of such data will be more definitive after we have directly measured changes in individuals' skills over time. Until then, a tentative interpretation of these baseline data is that local adult education programs appear to assist students within a relatively narrow range of literacy proficiency. Students coming in with skills above this range may not be well served.

Table 2. **Program satisfaction and literacy proficiency**

Extent to which programs helped improve skills	%	Literacy Proficiency*
Not at all	25	290
Somewhat	44	281
A great deal	31	267

* TALS scores. [2]

Is there a relationship between the lower satisfaction with programs and the lower rates of self-study we observed among people with higher literacy proficiency? We might reasonably surmise that dissatisfaction with programs leads people to build on their established skills by studying on their own as an alternative to formal education. However, the data show that those who said that programs helped "not at all" were significantly less likely to engage in self-study than students who answered that programs helped improve their skills "a great deal." Even after we take literacy proficiency into account,[3] there is a positive relationship between self-study and program satisfaction: those students who have also self-studied report that formal programs assisted them more in improving their skills. To understand what this relationship is about, we need to examine data from subsequent years, in which we will have additional information about changing patterns of self-study, program participation, and assessed literacy proficiencies.

Implications

Data from the LSAL may encourage new ideas about adult education students and new models of programs to serve them. Increasing our

knowledge about the extent to which individuals who never attend formal programs undertake self-study to improve basic skills and prepare for the GED is part of what we have to learn. These results bring to mind learners who are already engaged and might be served by programs through distance technologies and new media, even though they may not be able or interested in attending programs. As the LSAL continues to document changes in individuals' literacy proficiency and practices over time, the contributions of program participation and self-study to literacy development should become clearer. By measuring development over time, it will be possible to determine whether individuals with higher literacy proficiency choose different methods of skill development than those with lower scores and which strategies for development are more effective than others. Feedback from *Focus on Basics* readers about your interpretation of these findings is welcome, as we continue to design and analyze future waves of data.

Notes

[1] This particular analysis excludes periods of participation current at the time of the first interview, since such periods by definition would not yet be complete.

[2] The TALS Document Literacy proficiency is plotted in the proficiency ranges typically reported, with level 1 the lowest and level 5 the highest. On a 500 point scale, level 1 is 0-225, level 2 is 226-276, level 3 is 276 to 325, level 4 is 326 to 375 and level 5 is 376 to 500. See Kirsh et al., 1993, for a description of these proficiency levels.

[3] Statistical models were used to examine the three-way relationship among literacy proficiency, self-study, and program participation.

References

Aslanian, C. (1980). *Americans in Transition: Life Changes as Reasons for Adult Learning*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Kirsch, I.S., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L., & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Washington, D.C: Educational Testing Service.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (1995). *Literacy, Economy and Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey*. Ottawa, Ontario: Statistics Canada.

About the Authors

Stephen Reder is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University, Portland, OR. Reder is principal investigator for two of NCSALL's research projects, the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning and the National Labsite for Adult ESOL.

Clare Strawn is the Project Manager for the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning and a doctoral candidate in Urban Studies at Portland State University, Portland, OR. She holds a Masters Degree in Education and Community Development from the University of California, Davis. Her research interest is in the intersection of adult learning and community.

APPENDIX B – Pre-Meeting Packet: Reading #1