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ABSTRACT

An adult educator at an all-male maximum-security correctional center in Virginia conducted a research project to learn her students' attitudes toward the computers that had recently been introduced in their classroom. She used the following data collection tools and activities: a nine-question survey that was administered to the students in all four periods that she taught; opinion essays that students wrote on technology uses in the classroom; one-on-one interviews with five students with differing attitudes toward computers; interviews with one academic instructor and one vocational instructor at the correctional center; and a journal in which she noted her observations of the students for 2 months. Most students liked the computers because they made learning easy, provided instant feedback, and allowed students to experience the joy of independent learning and build bridges to the future. Although most students enjoyed using computers, they also felt limited because they had to use "canned" programs and because security restrictions made it impossible for them to use the Internet. Many students also requested more training on computers to increase their comfort with the machines. The teacher has since developed personalized goal sheets to give students who opt to use computers more direction in doing so. (MN)

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Inmate Perspectives on Classroom Technology

Tina Spradling

Virginia Adult Education Research Network
Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Inmate Perspectives on Classroom Technology

Tina Spradling, Virginia Department of Correctional Education

Background

I am a female adult educator in an all-male maximum-security correctional center. The adult programs at Keen Mountain Correctional Center include the Literacy Incentive Program, Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Education Development (GED), and varied vocational programs. The classes I teach meet for a total of six hours each day (four one and one-half hour periods). Our school is open year-round and the classes are very traditional except that students work at tables instead of desks. Recently, my classroom received five new computers for educational purposes. In December, we purchased some software that was network compatible and by January the computers were up and running.

Department of Correctional Education (DCE) curriculum is often developed into competencies and sent to the teacher for delivery. Because teachers' interests and delivery styles differ, the computers provide a brand new modality for introducing and producing curriculum materials. However, if the students do not "buy into" this new approach for delivering curriculum, the program is bound to fail.

I began to wonder how students participating in my classroom would respond to the introduction of computers into a traditional paper and pencil classroom. Would the students readily accept this as an additional method for receiving instruction? What are the attitudes of students towards computers in a classroom? What if the students would not be interested in using the computers? With all of these questions in mind, I decided to investigate.

Inquiry

How do the GED students view the computer as an additional tool for learning? What happens when computers are introduced into the classroom as a resource and multi-media tool?

Action

The students were divided, almost evenly, between those that had previous experience with computers and those that had none. While bearing this in mind, I introduced the students to the computers. The software programs on the computers are Contemporary's Pre-GED, GED, and EASy's Work Based Learning and Employability Skills. The students learned how to invoke the programs by double clicking on the icon, entering their name and password and then clicking on screen arrows to progress forward or review.

Since the only training I had on the new software was when an EASy representative came to the prison and provided a half-day training opportunity for the teachers, I did not make the computers mandatory for all students. We began with those students who were interested and volunteered. I felt this would be a better pace for all involved. I encouraged those who preferred using books to at least try using the computers, but I did not require it.

Data Collection

After spending a few weeks becoming familiar with the computers, I produced a nine-question survey dealing with students' attitudes, impressions, and feelings about the computers. The students in all four periods completed the questionnaire. Additionally, the students wrote opinion essays on "Technology Uses in the Classroom." These were collected and reviewed. Specific excerpts were extracted. I then chose five students, ranging in age from 22-70, for one-on-one interviews. Four of the students were African-American and one was Caucasian. Of the five, two were enamored with computers, one was reluctant, one was frustrated, and one had an open

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dislike of the computers.

I then conducted two interviews with colleagues. One was an academic instructor; the other was a vocational instructor. The teachers were interviewed about the students' acceptance of computers and the impact computers were having in their classes.

Finally, I kept a journal in which I wrote observations and reflections. The journal covered the dates of January 17th through March 24th. The observations covered students' acceptance, continued use, and hesitancy.

Findings

The majority of the students feel that the computers are a great tool for learning. There were a few themes that appeared predominantly throughout the data collected. Those appearing most frequently were: ease of learning and instant feedback; the joy of independent learning; building bridges to the future; and environmental limitations.

Computers make learning easier. This was a prevailing sentiment and when questioned more about it, a student replied,

"Computers help with school work. Computers are a whole lot easier than doing it on paper. It shows you where you make the mistake so that the next time you do the work you will know how to do it right. Computers are real helpful with me because if I don't know something, then the computer will work with me and show me what I'm doing wrong."

Being less dependent on the teacher and tutors was also viewed as a benefit. The students feel more independent working with a computer. There is less embarrassment over material not known. One student felt that the computers, "will allow the teacher to work with those who can't work alone. The ones that are able to work on their own can move at their own pace; the teacher can concentrate on slower inmates."

Besides learning how to turn them on, use a mouse, exit, and power down, most see computers beneficial to their future and for reintegration into society. They feel that the world is dependent on computers and once released, if they want to have a chance of making it, they need to feel comfortable working with a computer.

Although the students enjoy using the computer, they also feel limited. They would like to be able to create more with the computer instead of only using "canned" programs. They also think the Internet would be a great educational tool. However, due to security restriction, this is not feasible. Students also feel that they should have more adequate training on the computers to help provide a level of comfort.

Implications and Future Directions

The students have several reasons for preferring computers above the use of books. Besides being easier, providing independent learning, and building brides to the future, they feel that the computers are less boring and motivational. Many students like a combination of computer time and book time. This too is my preference. It is easier, as a teacher, to gauge comprehension on written work turned in, rather than on scores reported from completed computer assignments. Even though a large amount of money has been spent outfitting the classroom with computers and software, I still have to allow students to decide how they prefer to learn. As a teacher, I feel my job is to encourage, promote, and question, not only my beliefs and attitudes, but also those of my students.

If I were to introduce another innovation into my classroom I would take more time with the introduction. I believe I may have added to the frustrations and anxieties of some of the students with my own attitude and assumptions. I would not "throw the students" onto the computer, for instance. I would provide better training and allow the students to gain more confidence. I think this would have helped with the intimidation I believe some of the students felt. Communication is the key. Teachers should not assume or assign reasons for students' interest or lack of interest. Even when a student has exhibited certain attitudes, allow opportunities for them to change their mind or alleviate inhibitions.

I have since developed a personalized goal sheet for all new incoming students and all current students. I feel this will help provide students with more direction. Together, the student and I will take their diagnostic TABE sheet and choose four objectives to accomplish in each subject area. After we have written them down, we will then decide how the student could best achieve these goals. If the student chooses the computer, I will tell him which program specifically deals with the objective and what unit it is in.

If they prefer to use a book to achieve their goal, I will choose one and they will write the title and page numbers on their sheet. The student will then be able to choose on, a daily basis what they would like to work on and they will know specifically what tool they will be using to meet their goals.

The students have shown a great interest in using the computers as an additional tool for learning. Any time you are able to see an appreciation for learning, you need to take advantage of that moment. I believe the only way to maintain this interest is to continue adding programs and updating old ones while providing new challenges. ❑

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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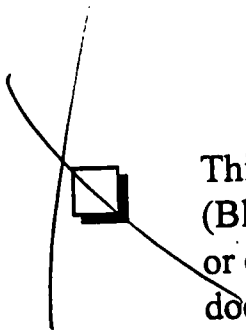

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