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ABSTRACT

The strategies used by practicing adult basic education (ABE) teachers to retain students with poor self-esteem were examined through an Internet survey that was sent to 115 ABE instructors at community colleges in Washington. The survey, which contained questions about the prevalence of poor self-esteem among ABE dropouts, specific behaviors indicating poor self-esteem, useful strategies for retraining learners, and strategies to avoid, elicited 23 usable responses (response rate, 20%). The 51 effective strategies offered were clustered into the following general strategies: (1) create a positive classroom environment; (2) encourage your ABE learners; (3) know your learners; (4) encourage interaction with other learners; (5) structure learning to be supportive and flexible; and (6) help your learners acknowledge success. The following were among the specific strategies offered: try to promote a relaxed atmosphere; use humor where possible and appropriate; congratulate students for deciding to return to school; encourage patience; respect students and never patronize them; and conduct ice breaker activities to help new students get to know current students. The strategies were incorporated into a pamphlet on retaining ABE learners that was designed to assist beginning ABE teachers (The bibliography contains 31 references. Copies of the survey tool and pamphlet for new instructors are appended.) (MN)

Adult Basic Education and Self-Esteem:

Practical Strategies for Addressing Self-Esteem Problems Among Basic Skills Students

ED 455 391

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Abstract

Retention among Adult Basic Education (ABE) students remains a problem, as attrition rates are believed to be as high as 70 - 80%. One of the prevalent problems that impacts instructors and students of ABE courses is the low self-esteem that many students bring to basic skills programs. Effective strategies must be discovered and employed to address issues of poor self-esteem so that students will feel confident in their ability to be successful academically.

This report describes a project designed to gather information regarding classroom strategies employed by current instructors to retain students with poor self-esteem. This information was gathered through an Internet survey that was sent to 115 Washington State community college ABE instructors. This survey contained questions about the level of ABE attrition, the prevalence of poor self-esteem among ABE dropouts, specific behaviors that indicate poor self-esteem, useful strategies for retaining learners, and strategies to avoid.

The list of effective strategies that was offered by the survey respondents was clustered into six categories based on similarity. These categories are described in this report and in an associated pamphlet that would be made available to new ABE instructors and tutors. The responses to the other four survey questions are presented and analyzed in the report to establish relevance to the results of preceding research in ABE retention and participation. At the end of the report, several conclusions drawn from the survey data are presented and discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1

Project Overview

Introduction

Upon completion of my coursework in a program of Adult Education, I recently had the opportunity to serve as a volunteer at a local literacy center. My job was to help students who had come to the center for individualized computer-based study. In most cases, students with poor literacy skills had almost no experience with computers and needed help with even the most basic functions just to get started.

The center had a limited, yet useful, library of software designed to teach basic and advanced level reading, writing, and math. The purpose of the computer lab was to give students the opportunity to study these topics by themselves at their own pace. The success of these students, however, was severely impacted by the lack of a designated instructor who could focus his or her time on their needs. The use of individualized computer-based tools didn't appear to be well matched to the abilities or needs of low literacy students and the center needed someone to bridge this gap. This is where I came in. With fourteen years of experience in technical positions and recently completed course work in basic education, I was to be the computer lab coordinator.

I was responsible for helping students find software packages that were designed to teach the skills the students wished to focus on and also for assisting them if they ran into technical difficulties. In most cases, extremely limited computer skills required me to spend hours providing one-on-one assistance just to get these students through the programs. The majority of these sessions included time spent helping students on

whatever basic skills instruction they were working on at the time. The technical assistance I offered almost always turned into individualized basic skills instruction.

Our students were varied in their backgrounds and experience. Some held professional jobs, many were younger with families, and most were women. Their perceived need in regards to basic skills instruction was also varied. As their “default” instructor, I was prepared to help them work on their basic skills assignments and was able to draw from the center’s resources to meet their academic needs. Many of these students, however, came to the center with non-academic issues that I was not prepared to address.

Many of the students I worked with appeared to lack confidence primarily as a result of their poor literacy skills. These students frequently appeared embarrassed by their illiteracy and some even felt the need to apologize to me for taking up my time. Frequently, these students were withdrawn and unwilling to ask for help. It was not uncommon for a student who was having trouble to simply walk away from his or her computer rather than seek my assistance. Nearly every student who demonstrated these behaviors came to the center only a few times. Despite the fact that they initially showed a high level of interest and had reserved computer time weeks in advance, they would simply stop coming to the center.

As a new instructor, it was important for me to review these sessions to discover what I might have done to contribute to the student’s decision to drop out or, conversely, how I could have encouraged him or her to stay. In my short time as a volunteer for this literacy center, I was able to discover a pattern that was demonstrated by many of the students that I worked with. Those who were severely limited in basic skills would come

to the center only a few times during which they would appear to become overwhelmed by the effort it was going to take to achieve their goals and would quietly drop out. It seemed that the best way to retain students would be to get them to believe that they could do the work and that their effort was worthwhile, however, at the time, I did not know how to address their negative self-perceptions.

My inability to effectively handle the student situations described above is the primary reason for doing a project that analyzes the impact of negative self-esteem on ABE students. As a result of having experience as a volunteer, I wanted to learn how to effectively address and even prevent student dropout that results primarily from low self-esteem. I am interested in finding answers to such questions as how can new instructors or tutors identify and address self-esteem problems in ABE students? What might they do to encourage students to remain in programs despite severely limited literacy skills and the prospect of months of work just to see any measurable progress? What strategies do experienced instructors employ and what can novice instructors learn from these strategies?

Problem Definition

In my brief work with ABE students, I have repeatedly encountered a problem that I believe is prevalent among this population. This is the belief on the part of students that they are incapable of mastering basic skills because such skills have remained beyond their reach despite years of schooling. This belief frequently manifests itself in the form of shame and embarrassment during the learning activity, ultimately proving subversive to the learning process and leading most learners to give up after the first

couple of weeks. In every case where I encountered this doubt on the part of the learner, I was unable to prevent this outcome. I could see it coming, but I could not stop it.

Based on the writings of Quigley, Beder, and others, it would seem that my experience with the students at our literacy center was not unique. In fact, the attrition rates for ABE programs are assessed to be as high as 70% in the first three weeks of the program (Quigley, 1997). Understanding what causes a student to choose to participate as well as understanding what causes him or her to leave is important to any effort to improve retention.

A student's self-esteem is only one of several things that might keep him or her out of literacy courses. It is also only part of the decision process when a student decides to drop out. The impacts of a student's self-image, however, should not be underestimated and cannot be ignored. If an instructor or an institution is committed to retaining ABE students, attention must be paid to how the student views himself or herself and how that view is likely to impact his or her academic success.

This is the reason for this project. As a new instructor, I feel ill prepared to respond to the doubt and even shame of adults who are dealing with a lack of basic skills. Sometimes, the biggest problem is discovering the many forms such feelings will take, which can differ from student to student. The instructor must be able to identify such issues and tailor instruction to address them or risk losing more students who cannot get past their own self-doubts. In looking over the literature, though, I found little information that can be used by the new instructor to work through such challenges. I suspect that most ABE instructors depend on experience and "tribal knowledge". I also

suspect that mistakes caused by a lack of such experience and knowledge lead many adults who try ABE programs to fall victim to their own self-doubts and give up.

For the new instructor, identification of symptoms that indicate low self-esteem is only the first challenge. Many of these symptoms may or may not be indicative of a self-esteem problem and the instructor must be careful not to make premature assumptions about the nature of his or her students. If such students are identified, what can the instructor do to address their poor self-image and encourage the student to continue working through the program? Where does the new instructor learn these techniques? In short, the question that needs to be addressed is:

How can a new instructor identify students who suffer low self-esteem and what can he/she do to prevent these students from leaving ABE programs for reasons primarily associated with a poor self-image?

Throughout this project, I intend to discover the methods that ABE instructors have used in the past and are using today to address the issues of self-esteem and doubt on the part of their adult learners. I will first try to discover how ABE instructors identify self-doubt on the part of the learner. Once identified, how are they able to convince their students that they are capable of learning skills that have eluded them throughout their lives? How are they able to help their learners set aside their shame and work toward successful academic achievement? These questions will be addressed through this project and will be described in the remainder of this report.

Project Description

The primary goal of this project is to help new instructors understand the relationship between self-esteem and participation in ABE programs. In order to

accomplish this goal, it will be necessary to examine both self-esteem and ABE participation patterns individually. This is done in the next chapter.

An understanding of the existing literature is useful to become familiar with the relationship between self-esteem and low literacy, but most of these sources approach this topic from a theoretical perspective. This project is designed to focus on practical aspects and to provide new knowledge that can be applied directly to the basic studies classroom. To this end, a survey of community college instructors across the state of Washington was conducted to gather information on specific strategies that have proven useful and effective when working with ABE students who exhibit signs of low self-esteem. The information that was gathered from this survey was used to create a "new instructor's" pamphlet, which is intended to allow novice ABE instructors to benefit from the practical experience of current instructors in the Washington State community college system.

Another goal of this project is to address the fact that there is a rather small amount of relevant literature available that covers the impact of low self-esteem on student participation and retention in basic studies programs. A review of general ABE literature yields several sources that discuss a causal link between ABE and self-esteem signifying how student self-confidence is enhanced by academic success. Literature that approaches this relationship from the opposite perspective, however, is sparse and theoretical so as to make its application to the classroom difficult. It is rare to find studies that have been conducted, or articles that have been written, that address the many ways a student's self-esteem will impact his or her decision to participate or remain in a course of basic studies. One of the goals of this project will be to examine this

relationship and attempt to contribute to our understanding of it in a meaningful and practical way.

Project Report

This report is a summarization of the steps that were taken to complete this project. It contains five sections that describe the different parts of the project. Chapter two contains a review of recent and significant literature on the topics of self-esteem and on adult participation in ABE programs. Since little data is available that ties these two topics together, a careful analysis of what is meant by self-esteem is provided, which then leads to a discussion of the impact of negative self-esteem on a student's academic participation and achievement.

Chapter three describes the methodology that was used to design and distribute the survey as well as the process of gathering the results. Chapter four summarizes the information gathered from the surveys and provides an analysis of this information in light of the theories discussed in chapter two. The report concludes with an explanation of some of the conclusions that can be drawn from the project overall. Two appendices are included at the end, which contain a copy of the survey tool and a copy of the new instructor's pamphlet.

The following section contains a review of selected ABE and self-esteem books and articles that were discovered using various database and web searches and also by reviewing the reference lists of some of the more relevant articles. Most of the material has been written in the last twenty years, yet a large portion of it is over ten years old, which precedes many of the recent developments such as the NALS study or the establishment of the EFF framework. All selected material, however, was relevant in

some way to the theme of this project and collectively gives the reader a good review of the available literature on the impacts of poor self-esteem on academic progress in ABE.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

A review of the literature on the relationship between self-esteem and participation in adult basic education (ABE) yields three types of sources. First, there is the literature on the topic of self-esteem and there is a great deal of material available. Much of this material has been published in the last twenty years and is intended to appeal mainly to an audience of self-help readers. Other material, however, is intended to make serious and significant contributions to the psychological community's understanding of this concept (Mruk, 1995). The literature review for this project focuses on the latter type.

The other two types of sources include articles on ABE participation and ABE student retention strategies. Most of these articles refer to self-esteem in relation to ABE as only a part of a larger analysis. This makes a review of the literature more difficult, but underscores the need for a project that will examine this relationship.

What follows is a synthesis and analysis of the existing literature covering the impacts of low self-esteem on the participation and retention of ABE students. It is drawn from over 30 sources either directly or indirectly related to this subject. Much of the existing material is between ten and twenty years old and, as a result, does not reflect significant changes or shifts in the practices of ABE that have occurred in recent years.

Understanding Self-Esteem in Relation to Adult Learning.

In order to have a fuller idea of the ways in which a person's self-esteem will impact his or her ability to successfully participate in ABE, it is important to have a broad understanding of what is meant by self-esteem. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a comprehensive or unified definition that can be applied to the process by which a person comes to understand and value him/herself (Mruk, 1995). The literature is full of diverse and sometimes conflicting definitions, some of which are included and described in the sections that follow.

It is also important to understand what is meant when referring to successful participation in ABE. How are non-participants different from dropouts? What factors impact decisions to participate in ABE and which of these factors are important in student retention?

The existing literature on topics relating to the relationship between self-esteem and ABE is largely theoretical and primarily addresses issues of student participation and retention. Discussions of causal links between self-esteem and student retention are common, but few authors discuss specific strategies that an instructor might employ to prevent ABE students from leaving programs for reasons primarily associated with a lack of self-confidence.

In the sections that follow, several definitions of self-esteem are offered and analyzed. These definitions are followed by various explanations of how self-esteem impacts the participation and retention decision on the part of the ABE student. Finally, some suggested courses of action for handling students with poor self-esteem are reviewed.

The Psychology of Self-Esteem

Beyond his immediate needs, man has the volitional capacity to think or not to think regarding the way he will conduct his life. A rational man will choose to take purposeful action to sustain and protect those things that he values. Such action is always a choice, which begins by identifying the values themselves. Failure to identify values or take action to support them is always an option and each man must choose to accept or evade the mental and moral work required to complete this process (Branden, 2000).

Values and actions are inextricably tied together. Values lead to actions, which reinforce values, yet neither is innately defined. Each person must decide for himself, those actions and values, which are ultimately supportive of his own survival and well being. This can only be done through a conscious, thoughtful process of focusing, examining, and integrating new experiences into a person's overall approach to his world. Basically, it is done through thinking (Branden, 2000).

To engage in thinking is to require one to infer, abstract, relate, conceptualize, and to reason. Directing thought toward activity that leads to cognitive awareness is necessary for survival, but is not instinctive. It must be learned and refined over the course of a lifetime. As a child grows and is confronted by ever increasingly complex choices, however, thinking becomes a more difficult task and the decision to engage in or to evade a reasoned thoughtful process becomes an integral part of his identity (Branden, 2000).

If a man takes the initiative to make rationally-based, conscious decisions about the manner in which he will interact with his world, he maintains a level of control over the actions he will take and the attitudes he will maintain when confronted with the events

that will occur in his life. Failure to take such initiative leaves a man subject to external forces that determine his course of action. This failure undermines a person's efficacy and the self-respect that is derived from it and ultimately subverts his self-esteem (Branden, 2000).

Nathaniel Branden (1994, 2000) proposed the arguments above when presenting his theories on self-esteem. His basic premise is that each man and woman must make choices regarding a rational, conscious approach to his or her world and the decisions involved in his or her life. Each person must undertake the effort required to approach the challenges of his or her life in a rational and thoughtful way that is supportive of individual values. Failure to do so results in a compromised sense of self-esteem (Branden, 2000).

Branden defines self-esteem in the following way:

I define self-esteem as the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. It consists of two components: (1) self-efficacy – confidence in one's ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions, and, by extension, to master challenges and manage change – and (2) self-respect – confidence in one's right to be happy and, by extension, confidence that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love and fulfillment are appropriate for oneself (pp. 252).

He goes on to say:

"Self-efficacy and self-respect are the dual pillars of healthy self-esteem. If either is absent, self-esteem is impaired" (pp. 252).

Self-esteem is a fundamental part of every person. It defines how we will react to every situation we encounter. Each person will spend a lifetime making decisions based on how competent and worthy he/she regards himself or herself to be. Branden (1994) states: "of all judgments [men and women] pass in life, none is more important than the judgments they pass on themselves."

Other authors offer definitions of self-esteem that are fairly supportive of Branden's. Corey (1996) defines the process of acquiring self-esteem as choosing behaviors that provide us what we want and meet our needs in a responsible way. This definition supports Branden's ideas of choice and self-efficacy. Wlodkowski (1999) stresses the importance of efficacy in an adult's motivation to learn. He refers to it as "engendering competency" and his definition is also directly supportive of Branden's:

The relationship between competence and self-confidence is mutually enhancing. Competence allows a person to become more confident, which provides emotional support for an effort to learn new skills and knowledge. Competent achievement of this new learning further buttresses confidence, which again supports and motivates more extensive learning (pp. 79).

There are, however, a few items in Branden's definition of self-esteem that seem to be out of alignment with adults in general and especially with students in ABE. First, Branden (1994, 2000) puts a heavy emphasis on the role of the individual. This is to the exclusion of nearly every other factor including societal norms, which, as Quigley (1993) points out, has a dramatic impact on the way ABE programs are organized and offered. They also have a significant impact on how the illiterate sees himself or herself (Beder, 1991). Branden would argue that to be mindful of societal norms is to act in a manner that is supportive of social ideals rather than those held by the individual. There is some personal satisfaction for the student in meeting social norms, but since it is not rooted in his or her identity, it will fade as soon as the external approval is gone (Branden, 2000). Fulfilling such requirements is what Branden calls pseudo-self-esteem because, while they may make a learner feel good about his or her accomplishments, they are not initiated by the individual and are not supportive of self-efficacy (Branden, 2000).

Despite Branden's arguments that we must rationally and consciously establish our own, individual value systems, it would seem that his argument that such systems are, or should be, independent of society as a whole is not realistic. Much of who we are as adults, including the values and morals we establish, is in direct relation to our social interactions (Mruk, 1995). Part of our efficacy to act rationally and consciously is defined by how well we meet societal norms. This can be seen in how the stigmatization of low-literate adults impacts participation and retention. (Mruk, 1995, Beder, 1991).

Another issue with the way that Branden structures his arguments is the emphasis he places on the responsibility of the individual. In most of the examples he cites he consistently points out how the actions of the individual are responsible for his or her problems with self-esteem. Excepting cases of abuse or illness, Branden indicates that it is a personal choice to either encounter life rationally and consciously or not and this choice impacts both self-efficacy and self-respect, which make up self-esteem. In opposition to Branden's strict humanistic approach, it can be argued that there are many instances, outside of an individual's control, that have a powerful influence over his or her ability to act in an efficacious manner resulting in a negative impact on both self-respect and self-concept (Beder, 1990, Mruk, 1995).

Despite the shortcoming of his arguments, Branden presents a concise definition of self-esteem that is easy to apply to ABE. His emphasis on self-efficacy and its interrelationship with self-respect are well suited for understanding how success or failure in basic education might impact a person's overall self-concept if, in fact, education is a valued goal.

Other Views of Self-Esteem

Chris Mruk (1995), in Self-esteem: Research, Theory, and Practice presents alternative definitions of self-esteem. These definitions, while similar to Branden's, offer additional perspectives on the subject of how the field of psychology has evolved regarding the understanding of self-esteem. Additionally, she presents an argument that defining self-esteem is problematic because some believe that it is nothing more than a constructivist notion whose definition conveniently changes to fit each different scenario. As a result, there is no value in studying it from a scientific perspective. She counters this argument by stating that while there might be no universal quality of self-esteem, shared by all, a phenomenological study of the signs or symptoms of a person's self-esteem is warranted and worthwhile as long as researchers remain aware of the fundamental differences in the varied approaches to this topic (Mruk, 1995).

In addition to an analysis of Branden's theories, she provides a review of the definitions provided by Robert White, Morris Rosenberg, and Stanley Coopersmith. These three theorists, as well as Branden, first proposed their ideas regarding self-esteem in the 1960s. White's definition centers on efficacy. Self-concept is based upon how effective or competent people believe they are across the many experiences they encounter in their lives. This supports half of Branden's theory. Rosenberg noted that in judging self-worth, there are both cognitive and affective processes involved. He also noted that there is an evaluative element involved in which a person must develop standards and values and then compare him/herself against them. Such standards would always include a social aspect, which broadens the definition of self-esteem to include both a cognitive and an evaluative assessment of the individual against personal and

social standards. Finally, Coopersmith included both efficacy and a personal judgment of worthiness. He was the first theorist to propose a definition that includes both (Mruk, 1995).

Branden's work, however, is unique and important because, like Coopersmith, he included efficacy and worthiness, but unlike all the theorists that preceded him, he pointed out that the two were interrelated (Mruk, 1995). If a person feels efficacious, this will contribute to his or her self-respect or worthiness. At the same time, a sense of self-respect will help the person to feel efficacious when confronting challenging situations (Branden, 2000).

Self-Esteem and Adult Basic Education

Generalized Self-Esteem Assessments Among Literacy Students

Understanding the theoretical perspectives is useful when examining the relationship between self-esteem and participation in ABE. One of the first things the theorists help to explain is the frequent lack of a causal relationship between illiteracy and low self-esteem (Garrison, 1985, Malicky & Norman, 1996). Despite the claims of such works as Kozol's (1985) Illiterate America, those individuals that would be considered functionally illiterate by most widely accepted standards do not collectively or universally suffer from poor self-esteem. In fact, several studies have found that many of these individuals actually have above average self-esteem (Garrison, 1985).

This is due to values. As both Branden and Rosenberg point out, each person evaluates himself or herself based on what he/she values (Branden, 2000, Mruk, 1995). If literacy is not valued, its absence is not a factor in limiting self-worth or efficacy. Consequently, it is commonplace for an illiterate person to base his/her self-worth on

those talents that he/she does value and suffers no problems with self-esteem (Quigley, 1993). Many authors do point out that it is becoming increasingly difficult to live independently without functional literacy skills and point to examples where illiterate adults must rely on a support structure such as family and friends to accomplish even simple daily tasks. It is, however, important to dispel the rumor that low literacy equals low self-esteem. For many, this is simply not the case.

This is not to say that no illiterate adults suffer from poor self-esteem as a result of their lack of basic skills. Every adult basic educator knows better. Those students who enroll in literacy classes do so because the acquisition of basic skills holds value for them. These students care whether they are successful and the results of their participation will necessarily have an impact on their self-esteem (Branden, 2000).

Importance of Past Schooling

The sources of self-esteem problems are as varied as the problems themselves. Both Branden (2000) and Mruk (1995) cover a wide array of societal and familial elements that can diminish self-esteem if not faced directly in a rational and conscious manner. They include in their lists parental attitudes, respect from family and friends, success in school, and social interactions. Much of the attitude that an adult maintains regarding his or her self-esteem is formed based on the way he/she navigates through these early experiences. Once a negative self-concept is formed and carried into adulthood, it can limit an adult's possible choices and options by serving as the justification for a lack of action or for feelings of helplessness (Mruk, 1995).

This point is especially important when examining the relationship of past schooling experiences to the attitudes of many low-literate adults. In several studies, past

educational attainment has been highly correlated with persistence in ABE programs (Quigley, 1993, Krup, 1994, Kerka, 1995). Even Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) point to a relatively strong relationship between past educational success and participation in adult education in a study that was not based exclusively on ABE students.

Past schooling experiences impact adult illiterates in two general ways. Many adults who choose not to participate in literacy programs cite reasons associated with negative experiences relating to a teacher or the schooling environment. These adults could frequently point to a single experience or instructor that contributed significantly to their eventual decision to leave school. Many of these adults still valued education for their children, but did not see enough value for themselves to motivate them to return to school (Quigley 1993). Another way that past schooling impacts ABE students is to heighten fears and doubts in those adults who have chosen to return to school. In this way, past schooling experiences play a significant role in subverting both the efficacy and self-respect required for positive self-esteem (Quigley, 1992).

This is an important point underscored by several ABE researchers. Negative experiences in past schooling were frequently cited as the primary cause of both a lack of value and participation in basic skills programs (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Those who did participate frequently had a "past schooling" barrier to overcome. These barriers were severe enough to be cited by several authors as a primary driver in the decision to quit ABE programs. Students could not get past the feeling that they were back in "school" which brought back feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Unless directly addressed by the instructor or the institution, the resurrection of such feelings would

frequently lead the student to, once again, give up on himself or herself and drop out (Quigley, 1993, Knox 1979).

The link between past schooling and self-esteem is an important one especially when considering the importance of efficacy. Many of the authors who research participation and retention in ABE focus on past schooling yet do not make direct reference to self-esteem. It can be argued that by examining past schooling, they are, in fact, examining self-esteem. As Kerka (1988) states:

The literature on retention of adult learners strongly suggests that previous educational attainment is closely tied to participation and persistence. Educationally disadvantaged adults are more likely to lack self-confidence and self-esteem, have negative attitudes toward education, and need mastery of basic skills (Kerka, 1988).

Stigmatization

In addition to the problems resulting from past schooling, low literate adults must also confront the problems of societal stigmatization. Beder (1991) points out that in the face of stigmatization, illiterates tend to respond by either attempting to "pass" or trying to "cover." Passing requires illiterates to hide their illiteracy by pretending they can read and write. They live as if they are literate by building up compensation strategies such as a dependence on memorization or symbol recognition. Illiterates may also avoid stigmatization by covering, which is to reveal their secrets to a small inner circle from whom they can seek support and assistance (Beder, 1991).

The theorists do not agree on the role of society in determining self-esteem. As stated above, Branden (1994, 2000) suggests that a life built on rationality and conscious thought would sufficiently discredit the unfounded opinions of others so as to not make them a factor in the determination of the self-concept. Rosenberg suggests, however, that

we determine our worth by comparing ourselves to our values and to society (Rosenberg in Mruk, 1995). While an argument can be made supporting Branden's individualistic humanism, the very power of stigmas seems to suggest that Rosenberg's definition might be more applicable. In fact, if a person suffers from low self-esteem, it is doubtful that he/she would be able to gather the confidence required to make rational judgments about his or her own efficacy and worth to the exclusion of social opinion.

The power of stigmatization, as it impacts illiterates, is important. Adult literacy students who are trying to "pass" or "cover" must find a way to incorporate their educational efforts into their passing or covering strategies. This seems nearly impossible for the person who is attempting to pass as literate, but the student who is employing a covering strategy stands a better chance of allowing the two to co-exist (Beder, 1991). Successful participation in ABE requires that instructors and administrators account for the impact of stigmatization on the individual student and be prepared for the many different forms that a student's coping mechanism might take (Beder, 1991).

The Symptoms of Low Self-Esteem among Low Literate Adults

For those low literate adults who make a return to school, their self-image will play a significant role in both their decision to return and their decision to stay. In order for instructors or institutions to take action to address the needs of such learners, they must first be able to identify what low self-esteem looks like among their students. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the process of identifying and addressing self-esteem problems among adult low literates (Quigley, 1993). This is evident by this topic's sparse coverage in the literature on ABE student retention.

What does low self-esteem look like among low literate adults? What are its symptoms? Knox (1985) quotes Wells and Ulmer in citing five common characteristics of the disadvantaged adult learner with implication for counselors who might be attempting to retain such students. This list includes:

1. The disadvantaged adult often has become apathetic as a result of numerous failures in previous efforts.
2. The disadvantaged adult is likely to suffer from poor self-concept.
3. The disadvantaged adult will often show hostility toward institutions, which can help him, the most because of previous real or imagined experiences in dealing with them.
4. The disadvantaged adult is fearful of authority.
5. The disadvantaged adult trusts neither those around him nor those in a position to trust him.

This list is a good starting point in trying to understand how low self-esteem manifests itself in the behavior of low literate adults. Identifying students who are apathetic, hostile, fearful, or untrusting could prove to be important in an effort to identify those with poor self-esteem. Knox also notes a frequent occurrence of:

1. Age-related doubt where the adult is concerned that he/she is too old to learn -- This concern was also uncovered and discussed by other researchers in similar articles.
2. Loss of efficacy relating to prior negative experiences such as school or work situations.
3. A tendency to set unrealistic goals regarding school and work.

Unrealistic goal setting is cited by several authors as a sign of low self-esteem. Garrison (1985) describes this pattern best in his study where he compares scores on a self-concept scale to scholastic and career aspirations. The unexpected finding that he cites is that students with low self-confidence tended to set unrealistically high goals

when considering their level of scholastic ability and lack of confidence. One reason for this can be found in Branden's work. Garrison's information about the aspirations of his subjects was derived from answers to questions regarding the student's ideal self-image. It would stand to reason, based on Branden's explanations of conscious thought and self-esteem, that those subjects who had little positive regard for themselves are not likely to include existing personal attributes in their ideal selves. As a result, they see an ideal self that is quite removed from the current self. This difference is significant and the low literate adult may be ill equipped to bridge this gap (Garrison, 1985, Kerka 1995, Branden, 2000).

Regardless of their cause, unrealistic goals are a significant problem for ABE students. If personal efficacy in literacy courses is based the achievement of academic goals, it will be difficult to support this efficacy if the student has set personal expectations that are out of line with his or her abilities.

In addition to the symptoms of low self-esteem in adult low literates highlighted by Knox, there are several other symptoms that appear throughout the literature. These include cases where a student:

1. Demonstrates anxiety about joining the program.
2. Believes that he/she cannot do the required academic work.
3. Repeatedly apologizes for lack of basic skills.
4. Demonstrates a high need for approval from instructor and/or other students.
5. Isolate himself or herself socially.
6. Expresses hostility or negativity toward the instructor or the program.
7. Appears overwhelmed in the first few weeks of the program.
8. Appears bored in the first few weeks of the program.

It is important to remember that each of these symptoms may or may not be an indicator of low self-esteem (Quigley & Uhland, 2000, Knox, 1979). It is difficult and unwise for an instructor who notes student behavior to attribute it to a single cause. For many students, there may be multiple factors working simultaneously which only appear as behavior associated with low self-esteem when, in fact, the student may not suffer esteem problems at all. Such a list, however, can be useful in attempting to identify self-esteem issues and how they might impact student behavior as long as the limitations of the list are accounted for.

Participation in Adult Basic Education

Difference Between Non-participants and Dropouts

In regards to adult basic education, non-participants and dropouts may, on the surface, appear similar as both have made choices that keep them away from literacy education. They are, however, quite different. It is important to remember that those who drop out have, at some point, gone through the process of choosing to participate. Each participant, whether he/she complete a program or not, initially perceives value in the program and a possibility for success both of which are part of the motivation to enroll. The non-participants do not share these feelings and have not undergone the introspection required to take even the first step toward a return to school (Quigley & Uhland, 1993).

Most of the literature on participation in ABE centers on one of these two groups. The literature on non-participants focuses on those things that keep them away from education whereas the literature on dropouts examines the process that the student undergoes to reverse their decision to participate.

Why Adult Don't Participate

Many explanations are offered as to why low-literate adults who have opportunities to attend literacy courses that are convenient and free of charge still resist them. Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) offer one of the most frequently cited analyses of deterrents to adult education. This article is not exclusively focused on adult basic education but it does offer six factors that negatively influence an adult's decision to participate in education. These factors include lack of confidence, lack of course relevance, time constraints, low personal priority, cost, and personal problems. Quigley (1997), Beder (1990), and Hayes (1988) also cite similar reasons in studies that focus on participation patterns in literacy courses. In his studies, Quigley stated that a lack of confidence seemed to be a common deterrent, which appeared frequently as a negative impression of school in general. Such feelings were usually a result of the student's past schooling experiences.

In the similar studies by Hayes (1988) and Beder (1990), many of the subjects indicated self-confidence problems when explaining their reasons for avoiding literacy courses. Such explanations included:

"I was afraid I wasn't smart enough to do the work."

"I didn't want to admit that I needed help with reading."

"My friends would laugh at me if I went back to school."

"I don't go back to school because nobody knows that I don't already have an education."

Many adults indicated that they choose not to participate for reasons of low personal priority or lack of course relevance. Frequently, though, these adults still must confront self-esteem issues. Despite the fact that they don't value literacy enough to seek

assistance for themselves, many adults remain limited in their jobs as well as in their interactions with their children and their families. These illiterate parents state that they value education for their children but have a difficult time setting a positive example in this area and this impacts their view of themselves as a parent (Quigley & Uhland, 1993)

Why Adults Drop Out of ABE courses

Nearly every author on the topic of ABE retention quotes statistics on dropout rates. Quigley (1997) notes that most will drop out within the first three weeks. Other theorists quote attrition rates as high as 70 % depending on geographical region (Kerka, 1995, Comings et al, 1999). Despite the fact that the problem of dropout is significant and serious in adult basic education, it continues to receive little attention or research in the literature on participation patterns (Quigley, 1992).

Put simply, adults attend ABE courses when the value of literacy education finally outweighs the costs of participation. A force field analysis can be useful in understanding how positive forces such as the value of literacy or additional job opportunities are compared against negative forces such as fear of the course or impact on the family (Comings et al, 1999). As long as the positive factors are more influential than the negative ones, the student is likely to stay in school. Force field analysis will be reviewed more fully in a section to follow.

The costs of a decision to participate in a literacy program can be great and can come at many different levels. Some of the more tangible costs include loss of wages, less time with family, and additional responsibilities not to mention the work required of the student simply to sustain him/herself in the program. There are less obvious costs as well. When illiterate adults decide to learn to read, they choose to abandon many of the

face saving techniques that they have depended on as a substitute for literacy. The illiterate is exposed as a non-reader and is forced to give up the process of pretending both to himself/herself and to his/her family (Andresen, 1994). The loss of these defenses contribute significantly to the negative forces which, if not offset by equal or greater factors on the positive side, can start a process that could ultimately lead to dropout.

Perhaps the most perplexing change that many ABE students undergo prior to a decision to drop out is a shift in their self-confidence. At some point during the decision to enroll, the student possessed sufficient self-respect and self-efficacy to support a reasonable expectation of success in the program. Otherwise there would have been no point in enrolling; yet, during the first few weeks or months, an event or a series of events occur that cause many students to lose this initial confidence. Understanding these events and finding a way to reduce or eliminate their impact could be a significant factor in addressing the problem of dropout in ABE.

Three Factors that Impact a Student's Decision to Drop Out

Unmet Needs

Quigley and Uhland (1993) cite a study, which includes examples of students who have dropped out of ABE programs because of problems with the program or the teacher. The students left these programs because they felt they needed more/different kinds of attention and were not getting it. "These students started with perceived deficiencies and special needs in their own mind." Such students have frequently lost the belief that they can be efficacious in a standard school environment and the students in this study were common visitors to the counselor seeking help far more often than other students who

remained in the program. Quigley and Uhland also point to a strong correlation between a student's level of field dependence and the likelihood that he/she will leave an ABE program. They define field dependence as a strong need for approval from instructors or other students in the classroom. The study results suggest that failure to meet a student's perceived "special needs" or to provide an appropriate level of encouragement and approval are strong contributing factors in a decision to drop out.

In many cases, ABE programs are not structured to address the special needs of students who want more attention or are highly field dependent. With significant resource limitations, programs must simply attempt to serve as many learners as possible. For many ABE students, this approach feels too much like the school environment where they failed the first time. With little to differentiate current classes from past schooling, the student falls into an established pattern, loses interest, and quietly drops out.

The key points in Quigley's examples are closely related to Branden's definition of self-esteem. The need for approval is evidence of a lack of self-respect and the problems with the classroom environment relate back to efficacy. To place a student in a learning environment where he/she has previously failed requires additional steps on the part of the instructor or institution to offset potential problems with self-esteem. Without such steps, the student has no reason to alter an attitude towards his or her chances of academic success, which have been derived, in large part, from past academic failures.

Negative Forces

As mentioned earlier, a useful tool for understanding the factors that impact a student's decisions about participation in ABE is a force field analysis. Proposed by sociologist Kurt Lewin, the force field analysis takes into considerations all factors that are "supporting or inhibiting action along a particular path" (Lewin in Comings et al, 1999). For ABE students, positive forces (new knowledge, improved efficacy and self-respect, better jobs, etc.) are the drivers that support the adult's decision to remain in ABE classes. Negative forces (time, family needs, money, self-doubt) conflict with the student's desire to continue in literacy classes. When the impact of negative forces surpasses the influence of the positive ones, the desire to participate is overshadowed by the need to drop out.

It is not enough to list both the positive and negative forces that impact an individual's decision to participate. These forces must be appropriately weighted in order to have a full understanding of their influence. The impact of a single negative force can outweigh the combination of several positive ones. For students with low self-esteem, lack of efficacy and self-respect are likely to be highly weighted as negative forces. (Comings et al, 1999).

To use a force field analysis, the student must work to minimize the negative forces while, at the same time, support the positive ones. The first step in a force field analysis is the identification of forces followed by their prioritization. Once the proper weight has been assigned to each force, action must be taken to shift the balance towards the positive factors. Periodic re-examination will allow the student to keep track of this balance.

At some level, each student performs an informal force field analysis when making the decision to participate in ABE courses. It is, however, not possible for students to be aware of every factor on both the negative and positive side. Many of these factors will likely come as surprises and the majority of these are likely to fall on the negative side in the first few weeks or months of an ABE program. If these factors are not countered by positive forces, they could eventually become reasons to leave the program (Comings et al, 1999)

Lack of Progress Toward Efficacy

Part of the process of building self-esteem in ABE students is restoring a sense of academic efficacy, which, in turn, will enhance self-respect. The best way to augment academic efficacy is to allow the student to see some level of tangible progress toward his/her eventual goals.

Comings et al (1999) suggest four ways to address self-efficacy in ABE programs:

Mastery experiences - Allow the adult to be successful in learning and have authentic evidence of that success. This does not mean that instruction should be designed to be easy, allowing for constant success. Students will see less value in acquired skills if there are no obstacles to overcome in achieving them.

Vicarious experiences - Allow learners to come into contact with other adults who are similar to themselves and have succeeded in ABE/GED classes. The adult learner is able to see success in others and also learn strategies for achieving that success.

Social persuasion - Support from teachers, staff, counselors, fellow students, family and friends reinforces self-efficacy. Such reinforcement is needed to help the adult learner overcome the negative self-confidence regarding learning that was built in past schooling experiences.

Addressing physiological and emotional states - Help the student identify and deal with the tension, stress, and other emotional states and health conditions that result from poor self-efficacy. Strategies such as life histories or narrative journals can be effective in this process.

Addressing issues of self-efficacy in literacy programs will help students deal with one of the critical elements of self-esteem. It can contribute to positive forces, remove negative ones, and support a growing sense of self-confidence.

Strategies to Prevent Drop Out Among ABE Students With Low Self-esteem

Given all the factors that impact student retention in ABE programs, what should the instructor or institution do? The literature on this topic is sparse and theoretical. Knox (1979) suggests that counseling must be as much a part of the ABE instructor's focus as teaching. Students need to be encouraged and reassured that they can be successful. Crider (1990) believes that teachers can be trained to identify learners who have poor self-concepts and can help these students by promoting positive self-esteem, which will lead to increased learning. Some of the strategies she suggests are rapport building and methods to help students see themselves as "able, capable learners". She also describes the importance of teacher attitude toward the subject matter. Students will

not want to learn the course content if they perceive it as uninteresting and of little value to the instructor.

Beale (1994) offers a seven-step plan designed to encourage and support adult learners in basic education. It is based on Glasser's reality therapy and can be defined as a humanistic approach to developing success and, ultimately efficacy in adult learners.

The seven steps are:

1. Get involved - Establish supportive relationships with students as a foundation for the steps to follow.
2. Evaluate present behavior - Get the students to think about how they are currently conducting their lives and how they feel about themselves.
3. Develop a learning plan - Student and instructor work together to set goals and develop an action plan for achieving those goals.
4. Get a commitment - After the completion of the plan, get the student to commit that he/she will work toward the goals it contains.
5. Accept no excuses - If the student fails to carry out the steps in his or her plan, the instructor should inquire as to the lack of action and work with the student to avoid any future mistakes.
6. Eliminate punishment - Rather than punishment which is brought by the instructor, have the student realize the consequences of his/her own actions or lack of actions.
7. Refuse to give up - The instructor must let the student know that he/she cares about helping the student become successful.

This plan is only one method for working with low-literate students and it may even be effective for students with low self-esteem. It does not, however, provide sufficient detail for the novice instructor or tutor to make the steps particularly useful.

Unfortunately, specific suggestions to address the problems of poor self-esteem in low-literate adults are rare and any new instructor is likely to lack effective tools or the experience to identify and handle self-esteem problems in ABE students. Experience, however, can be a good teacher. Therefore, it is important to capture and distribute the

knowledge accumulated by current ABE instructors in an attempt to enhance both the skills of the novice teacher and the experience of his or her students.

To this end, a selected group of Washington State community college ABE instructors was surveyed to understand how the ideas of Quigley, Beder, and others relate to their practical experience. Specifically, the survey sought to discover whether the attrition rates were similar to those quoted by Quigley and Knox. Additionally, it was also important to know how many ABE students are leaving programs for reasons primarily associated with self-esteem. Another question that was asked concerned the behaviors listed by Quigley, Knox, and Garrison that are believed to be indicative of poor self esteem. The survey sought to discover the extent to which these behaviors are being seen in community college classrooms. Most importantly though, the survey asked what an instructor can do to respond to these problems? How are current instructors handling these issues today and what information can they pass to the novice instructor to help them avoid potential costly mistakes?

The remainder of this report will describe a project whose purpose was to gather information from ABE instructors in the Washington State community college system and to use it to develop a handbook of useful strategies which could be distributed to novice or even experienced instructors. The following chapters will describe how this information was accumulated and utilized for the handbook as well as what conclusions were drawn regarding the varied aspects involved in the relationship between self-esteem and ABE.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In order to provide new instructors with workable strategies for retaining adult basic education (ABE) students who might be challenged with poor self-esteem, it is first important to gather information regarding these strategies from the experienced instructors who have successfully employed them. The data gathering method chosen for this task was a survey.

It was important, however, that the survey be clear, succinct, and easy to complete. The questions were carefully worded to ensure that they captured the appropriate information in a manner that was neither biased nor leading. The survey was kept to five questions to make it brief and the survey method allowed respondents to easily complete and submit their responses.

The following section describes the survey and its questions, the field-testing process to verify that the survey would accomplish its goals, the list of respondents who were chosen, and the method used to both distribute the survey and collect the responses. A full copy of the survey as it was presented to the respondents is included in appendix A.

The selection of the questions

The first step in designing the survey tool was to decide what information it was to capture. At least one of the questions was decided on early in the project, as it was the primary way to gather useful classroom strategies. The rest of the questions were derived from the original project proposal with significant contributions from the articles that were selected for the literature review. It was important not only to understand the

perspective of experienced ABE teachers but also to see how their experience related to the existing research of authors such as Quigley, Beder, and Knox. Basing the survey questions on some of the important ideas proposed by the theorists was an effective way to create this link.

After several revisions, the survey was designed to gather information about five main points. These points were:

- What percentage of student in ABE courses drop out after one month, two months, three months?
- Of those students who drop out, what percentage quit because of reasons associated with self-esteem?
- How many of the standard signs of low self-esteem are evident in students who might be likely to leave the program?
- What are effective strategies used to retain ABE students who may be experiencing poor self-esteem?
- What strategies are not effective for dealing with this population of ABE students?

In the sections that follow, the intended purpose and rationale for each question is explained.

Structure of Survey Questions

Question One

In the survey, the wording of question one appeared as:

Question 1

Based on your current or past experience as an ABE instructor, please estimate the average percentage of students who will leave an ABE program within the first month of participation:

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 0 - 10 | <input type="radio"/> 11 - 20 | <input type="radio"/> 21 - 30 | <input type="radio"/> 31 - 40 | <input type="radio"/> 41 - 50 |
| <input type="radio"/> 51 - 60 | <input type="radio"/> 61 - 70 | <input type="radio"/> 71 - 80 | <input type="radio"/> 81 - 90 | <input type="radio"/> 91 - 100 |

What percentage will leave in their second month?

- 0 - 10 11 - 20 21 - 30 31 - 40 41 - 50
- 51 - 60 61 - 70 71 - 80 81 - 90 91 - 100

What percentage will leave in their third month?

- 0 - 10 11 - 20 21 - 30 31 - 40 41 - 50
- 51 - 60 61 - 70 71 - 80 81 - 90 91 - 100

This question was selected to understand how the attrition rates experienced by the respondents compared to the attrition rates discussed in the sources selected for the literature review. How could there be a comparison between the causes of student dropout both in theory and practice if, in fact, the actual attrition levels differed to the point of not supporting the theorists?

The wording of the question was carefully selected so as to not be misleading. In particular, phrases such as “In your opinion”, “average percentage of students” and “within the first month of participation” were included to both make the question answerable by the respondent and still provide useful information. The reference to student participation was to make the question specifically address the time that the student actually spent in class as opposed to the duration of the class itself.

The goal of this question was to get a general feeling, on the part of experienced ABE instructors, as to the attrition rates they have seen in current and past classes over the first three months of student participation. Based on the literature, it was expected that a survey would reveal moderate to high attrition rates in the first month and progressively declining attrition in months two and three. The actual results are discussed in the next chapter.

Question Two

Question two appeared as follows on the survey:

Question 2

In your opinion, what percentage of students who leave ABE programs do so for reasons that can be associated with poor self-esteem?

- 0 - 10 11 - 20 21 - 30 31 - 40 41 - 50
 51 - 60 61 - 70 71 - 80 81 - 90 91 - 100

Many of the theorists cited in the literature review were careful to point out that not all ABE students suffer from a poor self-image. This question was designed to compare this research to the findings of experienced ABE instructors and to learn about the trends they have seen in their students who have left programs. Again, the question was worded in a way that makes it answerable by the respondent. It asked them for their opinion and it asked how many students leave ABE programs for reasons “associated with poor self-esteem” which are important distinctions that were intended to keep the respondent from feeling like the survey was asking for statistical information beyond his or her reach.

Based on the literature, it was expected that most of the responses to this question would fall between 20 and 40 %. Yet, this turned out to be a more complex question than originally expected. Many theorists acknowledge that it is difficult to identify the primary driver for leaving an ABE program. There can be a variety of issues that collectively lead to drop out and self-esteem may or may not be a part of these issues. The goal of this question was to try to discover how many program drop outs leave for reasons

primarily associated with self esteem and it assumes that instructors are able to distinguish self-esteem issues from the other reasons that cause an adult learner to quit.

Question Three

Question three appeared as follows on the survey:

Question 3

Which of the following behaviors do you most often see in students who leave programs due to reasons associated with poor self-esteem?

Please indicate how frequently you see the following behaviors by selecting from the list below:

*F=Frequently
S=Sometimes
R=Rarely
N=Never*

F S R N

- The student demonstrates anxiety about joining the program*
- The student expresses a belief that he/she cannot do the required academic work*
- The student repeatedly apologizes for lack of basic skills*
- The student has a high need of approval from instructor and/or other students*
- The student isolates him/herself socially*
- The student expresses hostility or negativity toward the instructor or program*
- The student seems overwhelmed in the first few weeks of the program*
- The student appears bored in the first few weeks of the program*
- The student has unrealistic expectations of the program or of themselves*

In order for an instructor to be able to assist students with poor self-esteem, it is important for them to be able to identify some of the symptoms proposed by the theorists in Chapter Two. Question three is an attempt to validate some of the behavioral aspects mentioned by Quigley, Knox, and Garrison.

The goal of this question was to understand how frequently theoretical symptoms of poor self-esteem appeared in the classrooms of the survey respondents. The question, consisting of nine characteristics, was carefully worded to be clearly understood by the survey respondents while, at the same time, establishing a link back to the theorists. The scope of possible answers was also limited for simplicity and ease of use. Overall, the question was designed to focus on the visible behavior of ABE students and not on their individual qualities. Thus, the first sentence makes specific reference to behavior in an attempt to guide respondents away from a tendency to make assumptions about the qualities of their learners without seeing any evidence of those qualities.

Question 4

The fourth question was the most important part of the survey. It appeared as follows:

Question 4

Do you have any strategies or ideas for new ABE instructors or tutors to help them retain students who appear to exhibit signs of poor self-esteem?

Please list these steps in the section below along with any explanatory information that is relevant.

This question was followed by a free-form text box where respondents could list specific strategies and provide any supporting explanations. Capturing this information

was the primary reason for this project so the proper presentation of this question was very important.

The wording of the question was kept simple and direct. Respondents were to provide tips or strategies to new ABE instructors or tutors to help them retain their ABE students with poor self-esteem. The format was also simple and provided space for respondents to write whatever they felt answered the question.

Using a question of this type assumes some risk, as there is little control over what the respondents will provide. There is also the chance that some respondents will skip the question. Checking boxes is simple but writing requires more time and thought. There was, however, no other way to capture these ideas without limiting the scope of the responses, which would have undermined the purpose of this question and the survey.

Question five

Similar in style to question four, question five appears on the survey as follows:

Question 5

Can you also describe any strategies that you have employed in the past that have not been particularly effective?

In addition to strategies, which might be effective in working with ABE students with poor self-esteem, it was important to know what has not worked. This question was designed to understand some of the mistakes, employed or encountered by experienced ABE instructors, that have either not made a difference or have contributed to drop out.

Formatted in the same manner as question four, this question assumes the same risks yet was also selected to allow for a broad range of answers. In designing this question, it was expected that respondents may provide very little information or may

skip this question altogether as the primary goal of the survey was to accumulate information on working strategies which had already been addressed in the fourth question.

Survey Design

Once decisions were made on the nature of the questions, the next step was to decide how best to present the survey to respondents so they might be more inclined to complete it. As with any survey, the rate of response would depend on clarity and ease of use. The issue of clarity was addressed in the design of the questions themselves but would also be important to remember when deciding on a format. In the interest of simplicity the survey was transferred to a web-based format. That way, respondents could access the survey from an Internet site, respond to the questions, and click on a submit button to send in their responses. It was assumed that the simplicity of this format would yield a higher response rate than the usual mail-in format.

The first item on the web page is a description of the purpose of the survey and the process for its completion. There is also a note indicating that, at the end of the survey, respondents could enter their e-mail addresses and receive a copy of the survey results when they were completed. This was added as an incentive to encourage participation.

The survey was posted on a web site, which had been secured using one of the many web site hosting companies currently available. The site was located at www.seattleugrad.com, with the name of the site having been selected to remind respondents of the purpose of the survey.

Field Test

Once the survey was completed and posted on the web, it was necessary to have it field-tested. Selection of the field testers was difficult as it was important not to detract from the pool of potential respondents. In the end, the field testers consisted of ABE instructors from literacy agencies and graduate students who had studied course evaluation and methods of teaching basic skills.

Feedback from the field test was largely positive and few changes were made to the survey. There was a wording change to question two to add the phrase “in your opinion” which was incorporated. A similar suggestion was proposed for question three but, since this question was focusing on behavior, it was thought that it would be best to avoid any reference to opinion.

Two of the field testers pointed out that question two was too simplistic because there are too many factors that contribute to student drop out. One field tester suggested that the question be revised to account for all of the factors that could lead to drop out but this would be outside of the scope of the survey and this project so the suggestion was not incorporated.

Another significant change, which was easily noted by field testers, was the numeric ranges on questions one and two. Originally, these ranges overlapped. For example, the ranges in question one originally started as:

0 – 10 10 – 20 20 – 30 ...

While it was unlikely that many respondents would provide answers to this question that were so precise as to fall into one of the areas of overlap, the possibility did exist and the ranges for both questions were revised to remove the overlap.

Distribution of the Survey

The original plan for survey distribution was to send letters to potential respondents notifying them of the survey's web site and asking them to visit the site and post their responses. As stated earlier, this was to get around the problems of having to mail responses back. Upon further consideration, however, it was decided that even this was too complex and would limit response rates. Respondents would be less inclined to enter a web address into their browsers by reading it off of a letter. The best answer would be to e-mail each potential respondent a request to participate in this survey that contained a web link directly to the survey. All that the respondent would have to do was click on this link to be presented with the survey, which would take only a few minutes to complete and submit.

This introduced a new problem. It was necessary to track down the e-mail addresses of as many ABE instructors as possible. It was decided to focus this survey exclusively on community college instructors across the state of Washington partly because it would limit the scope of the respondents to a well defined populations and also because it would be possible to find the respondent's e-mail addresses. In the end, this actually proved to be a significantly time-consuming task.

It was easy to find a listing of community colleges in the state of Washington on the Internet. This listing contained links to every college. Finding the ABE instructors at each college and their e-mail addresses was a much more difficult task. Usually, a large amount of time had to be spent on each web site to track down the ABE department just to get the instructors names and, from there, to determine what the e-mail addresses would be from faculty directories. Sometimes, the directories did not contain e-mail

addresses and it was necessary to find the e-mail format that the college was using and “guess” at the e-mail address for the ABE instructors.

The difficulty in tracking down these addresses was outweighed by the benefits in simplicity and ease of survey use. It was necessary, however, to gather enough potential respondents to account for the likelihood that many of the e-mail addresses were either wrong or no longer valid. Overall, a pool of 115 potential respondents was gathered and the survey was sent out to each potential respondent with a request that he/she complete the survey and submit the responses within seven days.

Several of the college e-mail systems provided immediate feedback about the efforts to gather e-mail addresses. Within the first few minutes of sending out the survey, twenty-five “undeliverable” messages were received indicating that the addresses were not recognized. At the same time, forty-six “delivered” messages were received. There was no indication sent from the remaining thirty-four. On the fourth day, a second e-mail was sent to all potential respondents who had not responded and whose e-mail addresses were believed to be valid.

Survey Responses

The specifics of the survey responses are discussed in the next chapter. There are, however, a few lessons to be learned by this process overall.

First, the response rate was disappointingly low considering the simplicity built into the survey. Only 23 out of the 115 surveys sent yielded useful information. Of course, some of this was due to 25 e-mail addresses being invalid but the response rate from the remaining instructors was lower than expected.

Second, the survey questions seemed to accomplish the goal they were designed for. With few exceptions, each one received responses that are useful and can be applied to the goal of this project overall. The responses to question four were surprisingly complete and complex. Many who completed the survey wrote paragraphs in this section. This alone makes the survey successful but could, in part, shed some light on the low response rate. If some of the respondents felt the answer to question four warranted paragraph-long responses, others may have felt that the question was too open-ended and complex and failed to complete the survey for this reason. The simplistic, unrestricted design of questions four and five may have presented a barrier to some of the respondents.

Finally, web-based surveys require careful attention to the web site or the company selected to host the site. Throughout the survey process, the survey site was checked regularly to ensure that it was accessible. On several occasions, the site took longer than expected to present the survey. On another occasion, the entire site was inaccessible for several hours due to server problems at the hosting company. If a potential respondent was not able to conveniently access the survey the first time he/she tried, it is unlikely that a second attempt was made. This could also account, in part, for the low response rate.

Since this was not a survey designed to gather statistical information about trends in ABE, the response rate is less of a problem. The applicability of the information gathered in the first three questions is compromised by the low response rate but these questions were not the central focus of the survey. The responses to all of the questions

are discussed in the next chapter with specific focus given to the responses provided to question four.

Chapter 4

Lessons for the New Instructor

Introduction

This chapter describes the information gathered from the twenty-three survey responses that were submitted by experienced ABE instructors who are currently teaching in community colleges throughout the state of Washington. It is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the responses to the questions about attrition, self-esteem, and learner behavior. The second section focuses on a set of recommended strategies for new ABE instructors or tutors to employ when encountering problems among learners that are a result of poor self-esteem.

Part One: Attrition, Esteem, and Behavior

Attrition

The attrition question had three parts and generated three sets of answers. These answers are plotted in figure one below.

The design of question one proved problematic when it came to analyzing the data as each set of answers spanned a range of percentages (i.e. 0-10, 11-20, etc.), which defied standard analysis methods. Since it was not possible to average these ranges, it was decided to focus on the maximum value in each range and analyze these values using a simple average. Thus, the graph below shows the average maximum number of students that the respondents believed would drop out of an ABE program within their first, second, or third month.

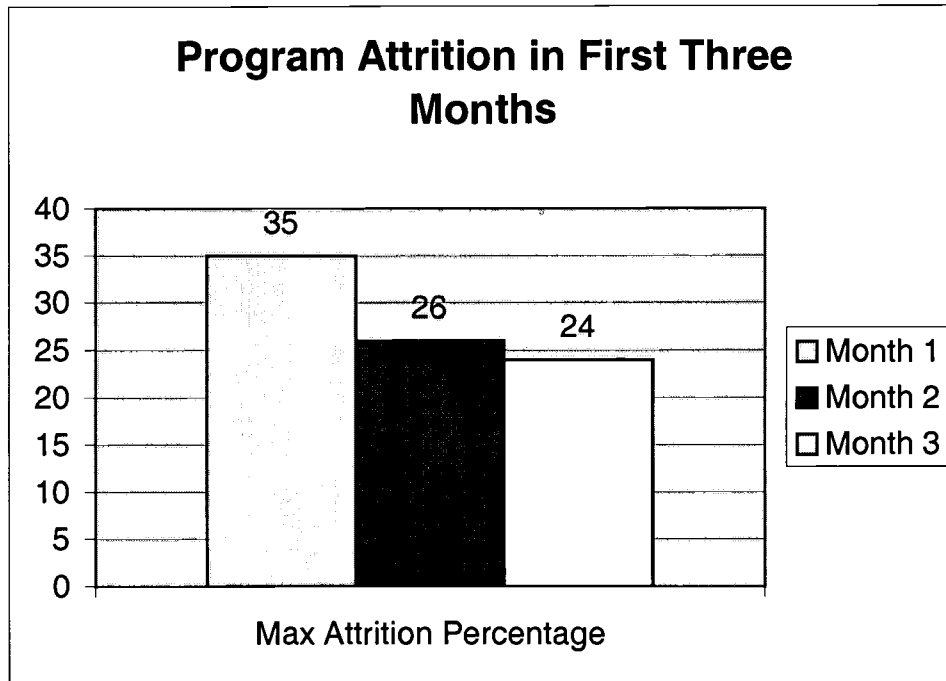


Figure One

This graph shows a declining trend over the first three months starting at an average of 35% in the first month and declining to 24% in the third. It is important to note that the survey question that generated these results was worded in a way to encourage respondents to treat each month's attritions levels individually and not as a cumulative number. Thus, the average attrition for each month is based on the number of students enrolled in programs at that time as opposed to the number of students who enrolled at the start of the program. The raw data provided by the respondents reflects this distinction.

The goal of question one was to establish a level of comparison between the theories found in the articles reviewed for chapter two and the practical experience of community college teachers in Washington state and, in a general sense, a real similarity was found. There is, however, some level of disagreement as to the scope of the attrition problem. Quigley (1997) indicates that he has seen attrition rates as high as 70% and that

most ABE students who drop out will do so in the first three weeks. The rates quoted by other writers vary widely with some quoting attrition rates of up to 80%. The significance of the differences between these writers and the survey respondents must be viewed in light of the low number of responses but they can still be seen as useful in that they indicate an on-going problem with attrition among the ABE students in Washington State community colleges.

Esteem

Question two was designed to determine what percentage of students who drop out of ABE programs do so for reasons primarily associated with self-esteem. The analysis of these data was difficult for the same reason that was encountered in question one but to a lesser extent since there was only one set of answers to analyze. Figure two shows the results of this question broken out by survey respondent.

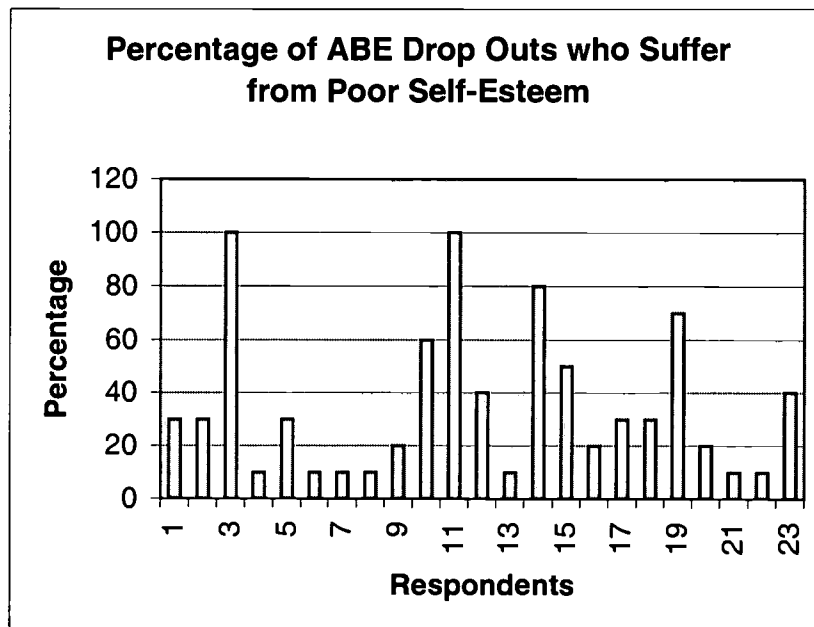


Figure Two

The purpose of including question two in the survey was to, once again, create a link between the theories discussed in the literature review and the practical experience of

community college instructors. Many of the authors cited in chapter two were quick to point out that poor self-esteem, while an important factor in the participation and retention decisions of ABE students was not a universal quality of all ABE learners. The answers to this question reflect this belief. The raw score maximum average was 35.7% meaning that nearly two-thirds of all ABE drop out decisions were believed to be a result of factors other than poor self-esteem.

Another important point illustrated by the responses to this question can be seen in their variability. Some instructors believed that only 10% of students leave for reasons associated with poor self-esteem while others believed that rate to be as high as 100%. This seems to indicate that the reasons for ABE drop out are not easily discernable which is also a belief common to many of the authors quoted in chapter two.

Behavior

During the analysis of the sources reviewed for chapter two, several behavioral qualities that were believed to be characteristic of students with poor self-esteem were suggested. The identification of these behaviors in ABE learners could prove useful to instructors to help them make decisions regarding the best way to approach these students. A list of such behaviors was derived from the theorists and used to design question three. The survey respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they saw each of the behaviors in their ABE students who they believe were challenged by poor self-esteem. The list included:

- Student demonstrates anxiety about joining the program.
- Student does not believe he/she can do the academic work.
- Student apologizes for lack of basic skills.
- Student frequently seeks approval of instructor and/or fellow classmates.
- Student is isolated socially.
- Student is hostile toward the program or the instructor.

- Student appears overwhelmed in the first few weeks of the program.
- Student appears bored in the first few weeks of the program.

A ninth quality was included regarding the tendency of ABE students to set unrealistic goals but a technical problem with the survey prevented the accumulation of these results.

The collective responses to each of the selected behaviors are included in figures three, four and five. It appears from these results that the two most commonly observed behaviors are anxiety toward the program and a belief, on the part of the student, that he/she is incapable of completing the required academic work. Most instructors indicated that they encounter each of these behaviors in at least some of their students. The least frequently noted behaviors were social isolation and hostility toward the program.

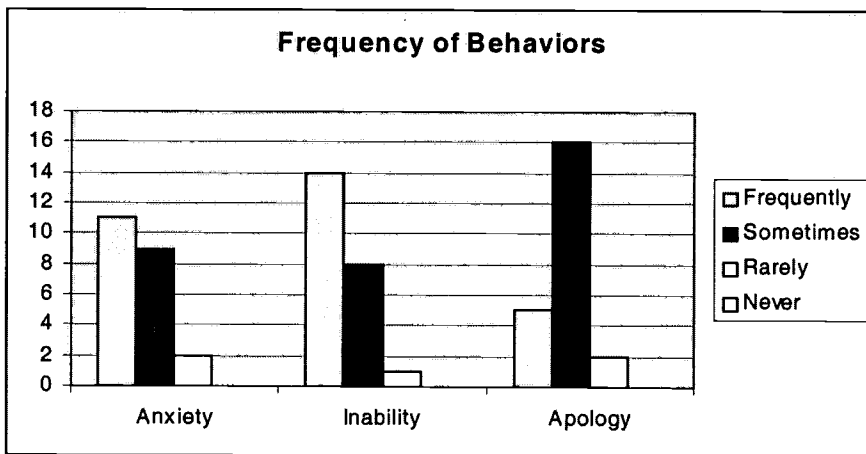


Figure Three

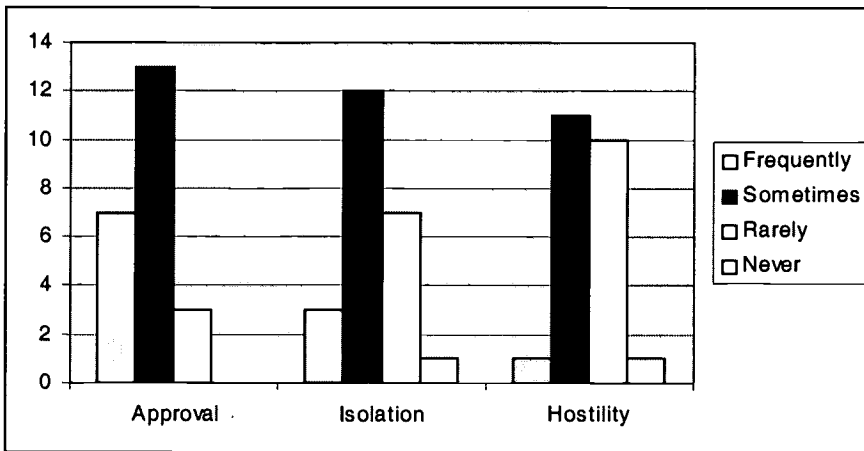


Figure Four

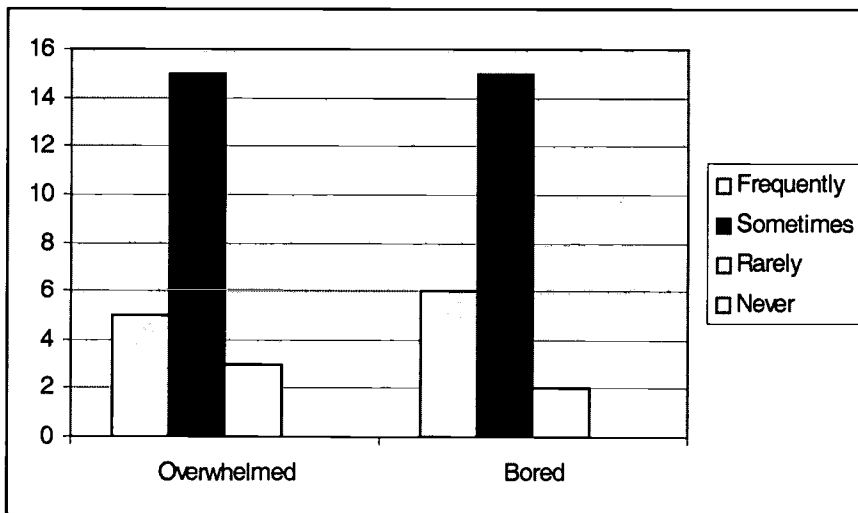


Figure Five

According to the theorists cited in chapter two, none of these behaviors alone are a sufficient indicator of a student’s self image. To some extent, feelings of anxiety, need for approval, and doubts about academic ability are to be expected among ABE students. These behaviors should only be used as indicators to show that a particular student might have a self-esteem problem that warrants further attention only if the symptoms persist or interfere with academic progress. The fact that a large percentage of ABE students don’t

suffer from self-esteem problems requires an instructor to use caution when applying any type of behavioral metric to determine learner disposition.

Once an instructor suspects self-image problems in a learner, whether it be through the behaviors listed above or some other means, what can be done to minimize their influence on the factors that will impact a student's decision continue with the program? An ABE student who suffers from poor self-esteem faces an extra burden, which must be properly addressed if he/she is to stay in the program and frequently, this added burden, becomes insurmountable. If the instructor, through his/her own personal interactions, teaching style, or classroom strategies can help minimize the impacts of low self-esteem, it stands to reason that the student has a better chance of staying in the program long enough to achieve a level of academic progress which can begin to change the student's self perception. Specific strategies to minimize the impacts of poor self-esteem are discussed in the next section.

Part II: Strategies for the New Instructor

The main purpose for both the survey and this project overall was to gather information about classroom practices and strategies that could be provided to the new ABE instructor or tutor to help him or her in his/her efforts to retain students who exhibit signs of poor self-esteem. Survey questions four and five address this issue from opposing perspectives. The content of the responses to question four was impressive. Many respondents provided lists and detailed descriptions explaining strategies and the best ways to implement them. Question five drew a much smaller response but still provided useful information. The sections to follow provide an analysis of the responses to both questions.

The information regarding effective strategies was divided into six sections. These sections were established by clustering the strategies according to their similarity. Suggestions that were represented multiple times were merged into a single item by drawing from the best points of each contributing strategy. During this process, any strategies that were not specifically geared toward self-esteem were eliminated.

The six categories that came out of the clustering process were:

- Establish a positive classroom environment.
- Encourage your learners.
- Know your learners.
- Encourage interaction with other students.
- Approach learning in a way that is supportive and flexible.
- Help your learners acknowledge success.

The list of strategies that make up each of these categories is described more fully in the sections to follow. Each section includes a description of the category along with a list of actions that instructors have taken to address problems associated with poor self-esteem.

It is important to remember that the information gathered from the survey is based on the opinions and best practices of community college instructors. It has not been empirically validated and the discussions to follow make no claims of general applicability based on any type of scientific method. That was not the intention of this project. This information was gathered to give new instructors a toolkit of ideas to draw from when working with ABE students with poor self-esteem and the ideas must be tailored to the specific needs of the instructor or students. Some experienced or even novice instructors may disagree with these strategies. This is to be expected. They are only suggestions.

Several of these strategies have been assembled into a pamphlet for easy distribution to basic skills instructors. A copy of this pamphlet can be found in Appendix B.

Establishing a Positive Classroom Environment

The first cluster of suggestions from the survey includes those steps that an instructor can take to create a positive classroom environment. A positive classroom environment is one that fosters learning among students. It must not only be conducive to learning but must also account for the likelihood that many of these students will come to class with special needs that must be addressed to keep them in the program. Several of these needs can be met in the way the classroom is run.

The suggestions included in this category are primarily meant to address the anxiety caused by a return to “school.” In order to get past this anxiety, the student must feel that the learning environment is safe. The student will also benefit if he/she believes that the environment they are entering is substantially different from those where he/she has failed before.

The list of suggestions for a positive classroom environment include:

- Try to promote a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.
- Use humor where possible and appropriate.
- Always respond directly to student questions.
- Let each student know, from the beginning, that his or her presence is valued.
- Don't make ABE look and feel like “school”. Make sure the students are aware of and experience alternative teaching methods. Traditional school formats have not worked for many of these students so it is important that they have the opportunity to experience something different.

Unfortunately, as is the case with many of the suggested strategies found in all six categories, the respondents who offered these suggestions were not specific. In regards

to classroom strategies, the survey responses did not suggest the best way to promote a relaxed atmosphere or to use humor. In most cases, only general ideas are suggested and specific classroom strategies are left to be individually implemented by the instructor.

Encourage your Learners

As discussed in Chapter Two, students with poor self-esteem are likely to come to ABE programs with low self-confidence. They may need encouragement to feel like they can enroll and be successful in a basic skills program and much of this encouragement can initially come from the instructor.

Many of the suggestions in this category stress the importance of getting the student to believe in his or her own academic ability. The primary responsibility for this process begins with the instructor and shifts to the student as he/she gains more and more confidence. Ultimately, the student will be able to find the encouragement or motivation on his/her own and will not need to rely on external approval.

As with the items in the previous section, some of the suggestions are general and lack specifics. It will be up to the instructor to tailor these suggestions to fit his or her own teaching style. The list of suggestions in this category include:

- Make sure each student knows that the instructor believes in his/her academic achievement abilities.
- Congratulate students for deciding to return to school.
- Let students know that you realize how hard it is for them to return to school and that you will help them.
- Constantly reassure the student indicating a belief that he/she is a capable learner.
- Build on existing strengths and goals by tailoring assignments that allow them to do so.
- Remind the students that they are not "dumb." They just haven't had the opportunity to learn yet and that is what they have enrolled in the program for.

- Encourage patience.
- Let students know they are not the only ones who have felt afraid of school/course.
- Post a daily thought that is meant to encourage and motivate and discuss it as a group.

Knowing your Learners

Undoubtedly, the largest number of suggestions generated by the survey overall were those that centered on different ways to get to know your learners. For the most part, these suggestions were aimed at making the student feel welcome, important, and capable. In terms of self-esteem as defined by Branden (2000), these suggestions can be used both to improve self-respect and to create a sense of self-efficacy.

Suggestions from this category include treating students with professionalism and respect, taking the time to know their names even from the first day of class, and making them feel accepted. Such strategies will help bolster a student's self-respect and will also support student self-efficacy. This will supplement any discussions regarding personal strengths which was also suggested as a common way to get to know the students.

The list of suggestions for knowing your learners includes:

- Show your students respect. Never be patronizing.
- Treat your students with professionalism but, at the same time, be kind.
- Be a good listener.
- Learn your students' names and use them from the first day on.
- Spend a few minutes one-on-one with the new student to learn something about his/her background and goals. Let the students know you care about him/her by showing some interest in his/her personal life.
- Talk to students about the roles and jobs they may have had in the past and help them to see how the life experience and talents they already have can be applied to succeed in basic skills education.
- Find something the student does well such as fixing cars, cooking, etc.

- Identify with your students, where appropriate, to foster a sense of belonging.
- Give the students opportunities, through their schoolwork and verbally, to express their opinions/concerns and to be heard from the outset.
- Talk to the students about how they are feeling toward the class.
- Let your students know that it is okay to feel afraid and that they are not the only ones who feel this way.
- Set up a “reassurance” schedule with each student to make sure you check in with them on a regular basis.
- Have easy access to information about support services and counseling resources.

The strategy of learning student names was cited by 25% of all survey respondents while the idea of asking students about their background was suggested by nearly half. They were the two most common suggestions among all of the responses received, a fact which underscores their importance to any ABE classroom.

Encourage Interaction with Other Students

Many of the survey respondents suggested that instructors need to create opportunities for learners to interact with current and past students. Contact with current students allows learners to form a collective support system, which can be a powerful tool in overcoming some of the issues that are likely to impact retention decisions. Contact with past students, specifically ones that have achieved some measure of academic success through ABE classes, will allow current students to see what their efforts can lead to. Either way, social contact will minimize the anxiety that most new adult students bring to class while, at the same time, presenting the student with evidence that they, too, can be successful.

The list of suggestions to encourage interaction with other students includes:

- Do ice breaker activities in class so that new students get to know current students.

- Have a new student orientation so that new students can meet other new students.
- Have students conduct peer interviews - Give students the opportunity to see that others are or have been in the same place they are at.
- Promote community building through classroom activities. Have students do a good portion of their work in pairs or groups.
- Have students work in small groups on a cooperative task that will get them talking about their educational experiences and goals. This helps them to feel less isolation and to see that their ABE/GED experience is normal and good.
- Have past students return to class to tell their stories.

One survey respondent reported that when "a student bonds with others in the class, anxiety and apprehension fade." Ideally, encouraging interaction among students will help reduce some of the significant factors that lead to drop out.

Learning that is Supportive and Flexible

Knowing and encouraging students are important practices that are likely to impact their decision to remain in an ABE program but academic achievement is what they came to the program for. The problem, however, with the academic structure of many basic skills programs is that they look and feel like the school environments that many ABE students associate with a sense of past personal failure. Another problem with a standard class structure is that it is traditionally associated with children. This fact is further complicated by the fact that most ABE learners are expected to work on material that is usually covered in childhood. Equating ABE courses with childhood has a direct and negative impact on an adult's sense of efficacy.

Additional problems are found when considering the relevance of the content of many basic skills courses. In many programs, the instructor's fail to establish a link between the material being covered and the daily lives of the students. Without creating a sense of relevance, the student loses sight of the purpose of the ABE program and also

will perceive a diminished sense of personal efficacy if his or her academic goals are reached.

To address these concerns, many of the suggestions regarding academic strategies focused on concerns regarding how adults view basic skills courses. Also included in this category are strategies to encourage the students to think about their approach to their academic work as well as advice for instructors on setting expectations. The suggestions are varied and touch on many different aspects of academics yet all are intended to contribute, in some sense, to an improvement in the overall approach to basic skills studies for the purposes of increased retention.

The list of academic strategies includes:

- If possible, work one-on-one with students who appear to be struggling.
- If a student is struggling with one set of materials, try another.
- If a student is not learning from one teacher, try another.
- Explain to students, from the start, how the class will work so they know what to expect.
- Help students establish a link between what they are going to be learning and their own lives.
- Review Equipped for the Future (EFF) standards with students and discuss how they relate to their own lives.
- Talk with students about their history of managing challenges. How have they handled past situations where learning was difficult or they did not understand the material being presented? Try to find a pattern of past responses and work together to help them establish a new pattern.
- Give students help in developing strategies for handling stress.
- Help students set reasonable and attainable goals. Revisit these goals as you work on them step by step.
- Set expectations for attendance and effort. Too much leniency does not help students value their school time or raise the expectations they have of themselves.
- Keep a portfolio of each student's work so the student has something he/she can show and be proud of.

Setting realistic and achievable goals as well as strategies for attaining them should be much of the focus when making decisions about teaching styles and class structure. When instructors create an environment where their students feel they can be successful and when students begin to see success they will begin to establish a sense of accomplishment, which, from a self-esteem perspective, may be the most important factor in retaining ABE students.

Help your Learners Acknowledge Success

Many of the definitions of self-esteem reviewed in Chapter Two discuss the idea of self-efficacy, which, in short, is getting people to believe they are capable of skills that they value. Branden believes that establishing a sense of personal efficacy is key to improving self-esteem as it is closely tied with self-respect.

Establishing a sense of efficacy depends on the achievement of valued goals. Many students, however, come to basic skills programs because they lack sufficient achievement in the basic skills that they value and this lack of skills can frequently be tied to a perception that they are incapable of academic achievement. Changing this perception is a powerful step in encouraging students to remain in programs. A student must see some level of meaningful and valuable progress. This will be the best way to transform a student's self image from that of an incapable learner to someone who has the personal efficacy to be successful academically.

There were several suggestions offered by the survey respondents regarding ways to establish a sense of efficacy. From these responses, it would seem that many instructors believe in an incremental approach to efficacy. Students must achieve small

successes and build upon those before moving onto more challenging ones. The list of suggestions for acknowledging success includes:

- Acknowledge each accomplishment, now matter how small, to reinforce the student's self-efficacy. Make sure all acts of praise are genuine.
- Start work at a level where the student is certain to have initial success before moving on to more challenging material. Sometimes a good grade on a paper is enough to keep them coming back.
- In casual conversation, remind students of their success.
- Set short term goals that are realistic and achievable
- Test the student in small increments to promote early success.
- Don't let students see themselves as just a student in a standard classroom. Challenge them to be “adult thinkers.”
- Try to tie assignments to something the learner already does well.
- Have the learners teach other students the basic skills that they have learned. This builds confidence along with reinforcing basic skills.

One respondent stated that students who experience immediate success of any kind are more likely to stay with the program. So a common strategy of current instructors is to identify tasks that are both achievable and significant to the learner and tie them to existing skills. Because of the diversity of backgrounds among ABE learners, defining such tasks is likely to be highly individual and will have to be carefully managed to avoid assigning projects that the student perceives as irrelevant or patronizing.

Suggestions of Strategies to Avoid

Along with a list of strategies used to retain ABE students with poor self-esteem, each survey respondent was asked to provide information about any strategies that he/she has not found particularly useful. This section discusses the collective responses to this question.

The answers provided were nowhere near as complete as the answers provided to question four. In fact, many respondents provided no answer at all. Of those that did

respond, the focus seemed to be more on things to avoid in the classroom than on strategies that have been tried and found to be ineffective. Regardless, this information is offered to new instructors and tutors as advice only. It is wholly based on the experience and opinion of the instructors who responded to the survey and, as such, should be given appropriate credibility.

The list of classroom situations that should be avoided includes:

- Any activity that causes the learners to perceive themselves as anything other than an adult.
- Independent group assignments where the work must be done outside of class time or where the work is not relevant to the student's goals.
- Expecting students to spend large amounts of time working independently. Students must have sufficient classroom interaction and direction.
- Expecting students to spend large amounts of time working independently on computer-based training modules.
- Allowing students to offer any excuse for missed classes or assignments - Make them stick to their goals.
- Exclusive use of traditional education styles - low literate students need a varied approach.
- Testing students at the beginning of programs and then referring to their scores in terms of grade levels. This draws a negative comparison between the student's abilities and their own perceptions of themselves as a capable adult.
- Following up with students who miss class. The contact information is frequently out of date and the effort yields very limited results.
- Tutoring of ABE students by other ABE students - This sometimes leads to unpredictable results.

Most of these classroom situations are ones an instructor would want to avoid with adults in general but they take on special importance when considering the needs of ABE students and especially students with poor self-esteem.

Using the Survey Data

The information gathered in the first three questions was intended to establish a link between the theories cited in the literature review and the experiences of community

college instructors in the state of Washington. Because this document contains information that could be useful to new and current instructors, there will be an effort to share it's finding in a larger forum. At the very least, these finding will be published on a web page and distributed to the survey respondents. Some or all of its finding may also be submitted to for publication in an educational journal or document service. The pamphlet that results from question four will be distributed to local literacy centers.

The information in question four is to be used to draft a pamphlet designed to help instructors who find themselves in situations similar to the scenario described in chapter one. The pamphlet will be offered as a guide and will include information from the descriptions of the six clusters as well as the suggestions associated with each. Originally, the answers to question five were also to be included in the pamphlet but this decision was reversed partly because of the low number of responses but mainly because of the desire to keep the overall focus of the pamphlet aimed toward positive actions that instructors can take.

The next chapter discusses conclusions that can be drawn from this project and the resulting survey responses. This chapter will examine how the role of a new ABE instructor can be simplified by these project results and will also suggest additional areas of relevant research.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

The main goal of this project was to address the following question regarding the relationship between self-esteem and program retention of ABE students:

How can a new instructor identify students who suffer low self-esteem and what can he/she do to prevent these students from leaving ABE programs for reasons primarily associated with a poor self-image?

For the most part, this goal has been reached. A list of identifying factors along with cautions regarding its application are included and described in chapters three and four. Also included in chapter four is a list of possible strategies that an instructor can employ to help retain ABE students as well as a list of classroom situations to avoid.

What conclusions can be drawn from this project that are important to basic skills instruction and the students it attracts or fails to attract? How can instructors benefit from the suggested strategies when designing classes and interacting with their students and how can they avoid the pitfalls? These questions will be addressed throughout this chapter along with a discussion of potential implications for further research.

Summary and Conclusions

The sources reviewed in Chapter Two present theories regarding ABE attrition rates, reasons for attrition, and, in a few cases, ideas for improving retention. Through this project, an effort was made to replicate or refute the claims made by these authors in the limited domain of Washington State community college ABE programs. Despite a

low return rate, the results of the survey do provide some useful information from which tentative conclusions can be drawn. More work is required to substantiate these findings.

The first of these conclusions concerns the attrition rate in community college ABE programs. While the average attrition rate reported by the survey respondents did not appear to be as extreme as the rates Quigley (1997) reports in the first three weeks, it was still high enough to be a significant factor that warrants action on the part of instructors and institutions. Accounting for the difference in attrition rates could also be important. Are the community colleges of Washington State employing more effective instructional methods and teaching styles or is the difference merely a result of demographics?

An important point to remember is that the list of strategies suggested in Chapter Four are recommendations that the survey respondents believed to be effective enough to pass along to new instructors and tutors. Yet, the same instructors who are employing these strategies have also reported attrition rates that averaged 35% in the first month and nearly 25% in the following two months. Despite the use of the recommended strategies, there is still more work to be done as there is a population of students that are either not impacted by these strategies or are experiencing other factors that lead them to drop out. The likelihood is that both types of issues are involved.

This underscores the importance of understanding the causes of dropout. This has been a major focus of ABE research, some of which is cited in Chapter Two. Many factors have been identified which can contribute to a student's decision to leave a program but several questions remain regarding the way that these factors interrelate or their relative importance on retention decisions. Efforts to prevent attrition must be

properly addressed toward those factors that weigh most heavily on a student's decision to leave a program. This project was focused primarily on self-esteem but similar projects could be designed to address many of the other factors that lead to drop out.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from this project concerns the relationship between self-esteem and ABE students. Some low literates will experience self-esteem problems and some will not. Even those students who are impacted will experience these feelings to varying degrees. What accounts for the difference? Why do the self-images of some low literates appear to suffer no ill effects due to a lack of basic skills?

According to Branden (2000), understanding the impacts of low literacy on an adult's self-esteem requires some level of attention to the question of personal values. A student will neither pursue nor be impacted by a lack of skills he/she doesn't value. The level of effort expended to acquire such skills is relative to the value of the skills in question.

The responses to the survey questions reveal highly varied estimates as to the number of ABE dropouts that are impacted by poor self-esteem. They also indicate that self-image problems may or may not manifest themselves through a variety of expected behaviors. These findings reveal two important points that must be remembered. First, of the students who are suspected of leaving ABE programs primarily for reasons associated with poor self-esteem, what percentage of these self-esteem issues result from a lack of basic academic skills as opposed to the various other factors in the students' lives? If an instructor were to employ strategies such as those that are described in the second half of Chapter Four, how much of an impact can he/she expect to have? It may

not be possible to gauge the potential impact without delving into the realm of pop-psychology, which would almost certainly violate teacher/student boundaries. Secondly, despite the list of suggested behaviors associated with poor self-esteem as offered by Quigley (1992) and Knox (1979), accurate identification of self-esteem problems remains problematic. Without empirical evidence to support a link between the behaviors listed in question three and student self-esteem, any response to such behavior, if it is observed in the classroom, would be largely based on assumption and any resulting modifications to instructional practices may not be warranted. Such a point urges caution when structuring instruction specifically intended for students with poor self-esteem.

Common Strategies

One of the important points that is only briefly touched on in Chapter Four concerns the number of times each of the suggestions was offered by survey respondents. Some of the strategies were suggested only once yet others were offered several times. Examining these common suggestions could lead to potentially important conclusions.

By far, the most commonly suggested strategy was to get to know something about your learners. Whether it be something as simple as learning their names or a discussion of some aspect of the learners' backgrounds, more than half of the survey respondents felt that getting to know the students at some level outside of a purely academic relationship was an important use of instructor time. Showing genuine interest in a student's background helped reveal information about skills the student already had and helped the instructor find ways to establish the relevance and underscore the importance of ABE skills.

Another common suggestion was to remember that the learners are adults. It is very important to treat all basic skills students with the respect and professionalism that should be afforded to any adult. Failure to do so may cause the student to feel separate from and inferior to the instructor, which was commonly suggested as a pitfall to avoid. Similarly, it was important to many instructors to recognize that traditional classroom practices did not support an ABE learner's view of himself or herself as an adult and should be avoided. Several strategies regarding alternative teaching methods were offered.

Finally, many of the suggestions centered on practices to help students establish a sense of personal efficacy. Since one of the goals of this project was to examine the impact of self-esteem on ABE and also since Branden (2000) and others define self-esteem, at least partly, in terms of self-efficacy, this is an important result. If, as Branden writes, enhancing self-efficacy, which is half of what makes up self-esteem, supports self-confidence, which is the other half, then it would seem important to find ways to make ABE students realize that they are capable of mastering basic skills. By doing so, the instructor is, in fact, addressing all parts of a student's self-image potentially leading to improved retention and academic achievement.

Implications for Further Research

The conclusions drawn from this project are important and can contribute to an overall understanding of the best way to work with the variety of personalities that any ABE instructor is likely to encounter. It does, however, leave many areas open to further exploration. Some of those areas have already been suggested in the preceding sections. Expanding the scope of the survey could lead to general results regarding attrition that are

applicable to a larger population in the state of Washington. Examining the true nature of self-esteem problems in ABE students can help instructors better understand the scope of what they can impact and which strategies they should employ. Additionally, empirical validation of behaviors associated with self-esteem will heighten confidence in methods to identify students that need additional attention. Each of these areas, while difficult to accurately research, could contribute significantly to our ability to understand and address some of the most significant problems with ABE retention.

Another area of importance to future research would be to examine the relationship between self-esteem and adults who have never chosen to participate in an ABE program. As discussed in Chapter Two, non-participants stay away from ABE programs for a variety of reasons yet many claim that they value education. Can a list of suggestions for addressing self-esteem problems among this population be established? Are there useful methods that are similar to the strategies assembled by this project? Can any of the strategies be applied directly or modified to address the concerns of non-participants? This could be an important piece of research but, once completed, would have to be coupled with an outreach effort aimed at non-participants to let them know about alternative programs.

Another area of importance for future research could be the use of Lewin's force field analysis discussed in Chapter Two (Lewin in Comings et al, 1999). Such an analysis could be performed with special attention given to the impacts of poor self-esteem. Initially, for students who lack self-confidence, esteem would be seen as detracting from academic success. The focus of a force field analysis could be to transform self-esteem from a negative force to a positive one. The research effort would

focus, in detail, on those aspects of student behavior that cause this transformation.

What, specifically, might the student do to shift self-perception? What have students done in the past to make this shift? What patterns can be found? What practices can be established to facilitate this shift?

A final area of future research involves the suggested strategies themselves. As was stated earlier, this list is based on the opinions and best practices of current ABE instructors. There was no effort undertaken to empirically validate their use. They may work in a general sense and they may only work when implemented under specific conditions. Perhaps research could be designed to validate some of the more common suggestions. It may be possible to link some of these strategies to improved retention rates among ABE students who show signs of poor self-esteem. It would, however, be necessary to first, identify students with poor self-esteem and secondly, to control for the many factors that could impact this type of study.

Conclusion

Regardless of any future research efforts in this area, this project has created new knowledge regarding methods to address the relationship between self-esteem and ABE. This new knowledge is available in this report as well as in the new instructor handbook. New instructors and tutors who believe they are encountering students who lack self-efficacy and self-confidence now have a list of strategies to select from that have proven useful to current instructors in the Washington state community college system. As long as instructors realize the limits of these suggestions and are able to tailor them to their own teaching styles as well as to the needs of their students, this list will remain a useful resource in the on-going effort to improve ABE student retention.

It will also be important to remember that regardless of the actions of the instructor, it is the student who is ultimately responsible for his or her own self-perceptions. The instructor's job is to conduct the class, to provide opportunities to learn, and to help facilitate the realization of academic success on the part of his/her students which, in turn, can lead to improved self-esteem. It is not the job of the instructor to create a student's sense of self-esteem. Only the student can do that and that is where the responsibility belongs.

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Appendix A
Survey Tool

Adult Basic Education Survey

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey.

You will be asked a total of 5 questions regarding the impacts of poor self-esteem on the participation and retention of adult basic education (ABE) students. Your answers will be used to produce a pamphlet designed for the new ABE instructor which will provide strategies for dealing with self-esteem problems among their students.

The participation of experienced instructors is key to this effort as the existing literature contains many general suggestions regarding methods to retain such students but, unfortunately, very few specific ideas that have been proven to work in practice.

At the end of the survey, you will be given an opportunity to request a copy of the survey results which will be part of a graduate project that will include an analysis of the survey results along with the pamphlet which will be made available to new ABE instructors and tutors.

Please respond to this survey by April 30, 2001 in order to have your responses included in the results.

If, at any time during or after the survey, you have questions about this process, feel free to e-mail me at kkirstein@rii.com.

Again, thank you for your participation.

Kurt Kirstein

Question 1

Based upon your current or past experience as an ABE instructor, please estimate the average percentage of students who will leave an ABE program within the first month of participation:

- 0 – 10 11 – 20 21 – 30 31 – 40 41 – 50
 51 – 60 61 – 70 71 – 80 81 – 90 91 – 100
-

What percentage will leave in their second month?

- 0 – 10 11 – 20 21 – 30 31 – 40 41 – 50
 51 – 60 61 – 70 71 – 80 81 – 90 91 – 100
-

What percentage will leave in their third month?

- 0 – 10 11 – 20 21 – 30 31 – 40 41 – 50

51 – 60 61 – 70 71 – 80 81 – 90 91 – 100

Question 2

In your opinion, what percentage of students who leave ABE programs do so for reasons that can be associated with poor self-esteem?

0 – 10 11 – 20 21 – 30 31 – 40 41 – 50
 51 – 60 61 – 70 71 – 80 81 – 90 91 – 100

Question 3

Which of the following behaviors do you most often see in students who leave programs due to reasons associated with poor self-esteem?

Please indicate how frequently you see the following behaviors by selecting from the list below:

F= Frequently

S= Sometimes

R= Rarely

N= Never

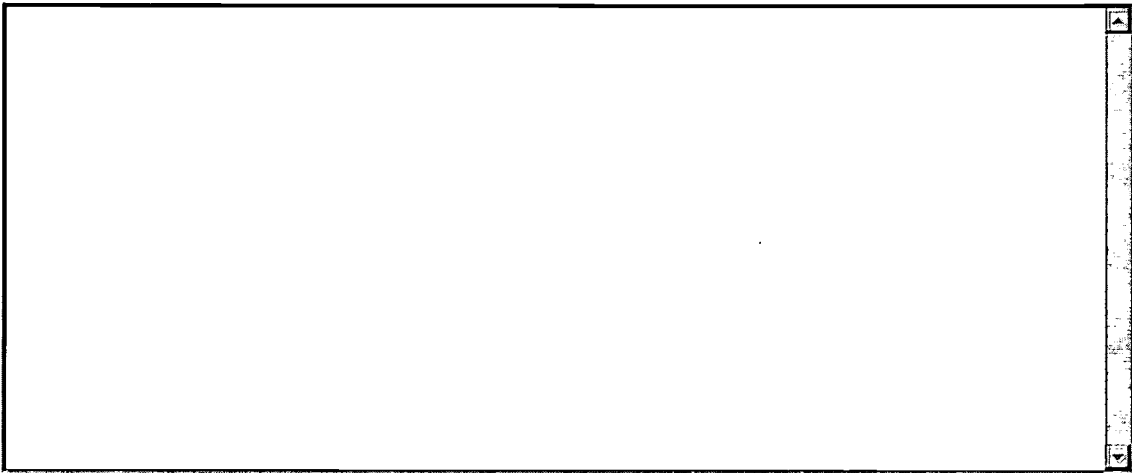
F S R N

- The student demonstrates anxiety about joining the program
 - The student expresses a belief that he/she cannot do the required academic work
 - The student repeatedly apologizes for lack of basic skills
 - The student has a high need of approval from instructor and/or other students
 - The student isolates him/herself socially
 - The student expresses hostility or negativity toward the instructor or program
 - The student seems overwhelmed in the first few weeks of the program
 - The student appears bored in the first few weeks of the program
 - The student has unrealistic expectations of the program or of themselves
-

Question 4

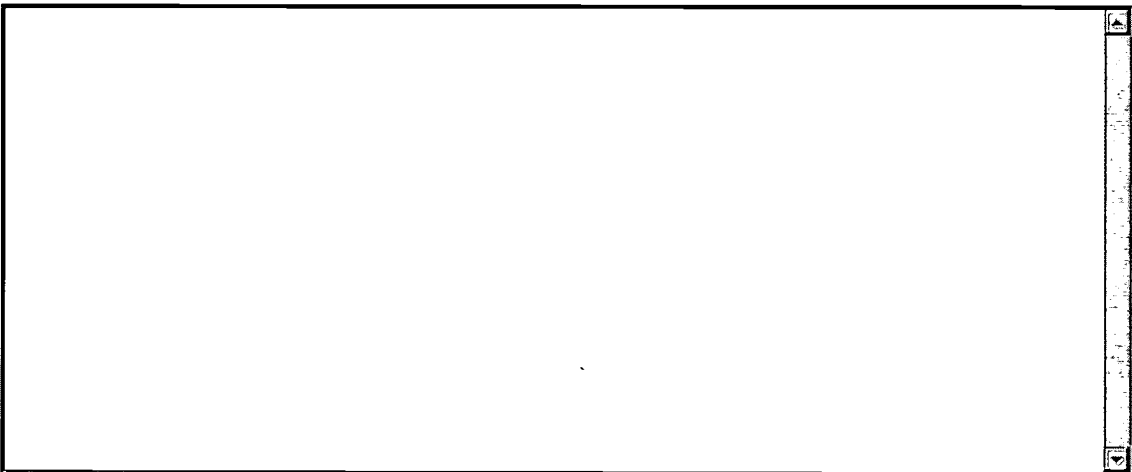
Do you have any strategies or ideas for new ABE instructors or tutors to help them retain students who appear to exhibit signs of poor self-esteem?

Please list these steps in the section below along with any explanatory information that is relevant



Question 5

Can you also describe any strategies that you have employed in the past that have not been particularly effective?



Submit your responses

Clear this form and start over

Appendix B


New Instructor's Handbook



RETAINING ABE LEARNERS:

Strategies for addressing self-esteem
problems in adult basic education students

Kurt D. Kirstein



The Challenges of Basic Skills Education

Adults who are illiterate face many obstacles when trying to overcome their illiteracy. Every adult who chooses to participate in basic skills education must first weigh the academic, personal and emotional costs of participation against the perceived benefits of improved literacy skills. In too many cases the costs become overwhelming causing most adult basic education students to drop out within the first few weeks or months.

For many low literates, one of the strongest factors that influences their decision to either participate in or avoid basic skills education is their own self-perception. Because of the impact of illiteracy on their personal and professional lives and also because of a history of failure in past schooling efforts, many basic skills students come to instruction with doubts regarding their academic abilities or their chances for success. These doubts are likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy unless some action is taken on the part of the instructor or institution to intervene.

As basic skills instructors, what can or should we do to help low literate students with issues of self-esteem? How can we help our students to see that they are capable learners and help them realize the benefits of participation in adult basic education even if these benefits are likely to be long term?

Most ABE instructors are not qualified as counselors or therapists. There must, however, be a way to approach learning in a manner that is best suited for low literate students who are challenged by poor self-esteem while still respecting the personal boundaries of the students as well as those of the instructor. What are the specific strategies concerning teaching styles and interactions with students that instructors should employ to improve retention among their learners?

The best source of information regarding effective classroom strategies is likely to come from the people who interact with basic skills students every day. To this end, a recently completed survey of adult basic education instructors in Washington State community colleges asked:

Do you have any strategies or ideas for new ABE instructors or tutors to help them retain students who appear to exhibit signs of poor self-esteem?

This question generated a rich list of ideas for new instructors. These ideas have been divided into six categories including strategies that cover the classroom environment, student encouragement, personal interaction, academics, social interaction, and personal efficacy. Descriptions of each category as well as recommended actions for the new instructor are included in the pages to follow.

Creating A Positive Classroom Environment

A positive classroom environment is one that fosters learning among students. It must not only be conducive to learning but must also account for the likelihood that many of these students will come to class with special needs that must be addressed to keep them in the program. Several of these needs can be met in the way the classroom is run.

The suggestions included in this category are primarily meant to address the anxiety caused by a return to "school." In order to get past this anxiety, the student must feel that the learning environment is safe. They will also benefit if they believe that the environment they are entering is substantially different from those where they may have failed before.

The list of suggestions for creating a positive classroom environment include:

- Try to promote a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.

- Use humor where possible and appropriate.
- Always respond directly to each student's questions.
- Let all students know, from the beginning of their participation in the program, that their presence is valued.
- Don't make basic skills courses look and feel like "school". Make sure the students have a chance to experience alternative teaching methods. Traditional school formats have not worked for many basic skills students so it is important that they have the opportunity to experience something different.

Encourage Your Learners

In order for students to be successful in basic skills programs it will be important to get them to believe in their own academic abilities. Students with poor self-esteem are likely to lack the self-confidence that this requires.

The initial responsibility for encouraging students lies with the instructor and shifts to the students as they gain confidence in their academic abilities. The ultimate goal will be for students to provide their own encouragement and motivation so that they no longer need to rely on external approval.

But first, the low literates with poor self-esteem must begin to shift away from a belief that they can't succeed in school. They must develop a personal perception of themselves as capable learners. Instructors can help them begin this shift using many of the suggestions described here.

The list of suggestions for encouraging learners includes:

- Make sure each student knows that the instructor believes in his/her academic achievement abilities.
- Congratulate students for deciding to return to school.
- Let students know you realize how hard it is for them to return to school and that you will help them.
- Let students know they are not the only ones who have felt afraid of school/course.
- Constantly reassure the student indicating a belief that they are capable learners.
- Build on existing strengths and goals by tailoring assignments that allow them to do so.
- Remind the students that they are not incapable. They just haven't had the opportunity to learn yet and that is what they have enrolled in the program for.
- Encourage patience.
- Post a daily thought meant to encourage and motivate your students and discuss it as a group.

Know Your Learners

If a student comes to a basic skills program with a poor self-image and doubts about his or her academic abilities, it will be important to make him or her feel welcome and valued. Treating low literate students with proper professionalism and respect to make them feel accepted will help bolster their self-respect and contribute to the likelihood of significant academic achievement.

One of the best ways to show a learner that he or she is welcome and valued is to show an interest in the student's background. This serves two useful purposes. First, it help to lower the teacher/student

barriers which so many illiterates associate with past school failure and second, it allows the instructor to discover skills that the student already has and tie instruction to those areas.

Treating your students as respected adults and taking an interest in their skills can be key to the way students will view themselves throughout their basic skills instruction. The suggestions presented here center on these two ideas.

The list of suggested strategies for getting to know your students includes:

- Show your students respect and never be patronizing.
- Treat your students with professionalism but, at the same time, be kind.
- Be a good listener.
- Learn your students names and use them from the first day forward.
- Spend a few minutes one-on-one with new students to learn something about their backgrounds and goals. Let the students know you care about them by showing some interest in their lives.
- Talk to students about the roles and jobs they may have had in the past and help them to see how the life experience and talents they already have can be applied to succeed in basic skills education.
- Find something the student does well such as fixing cars, cooking, etc. and find a way for the student to share these skills with others.
- Identify with your students, where appropriate, to foster a sense of belonging.
- Give the students opportunities, through their schoolwork and verbally, to express their opinions/concerns and to be heard from the outset.
- Talk to the students about how they are feeling about the class.
- Let your students know that it is okay to feel afraid and that they are not the only ones who feel this way.
- Set up a "reassurance" schedule with each student to make sure you check in with him or her on a regular basis.

Encourage Interaction With Other Learners

Instructors need to create opportunities for learners to interact with current and past students. Contact with other members of the program allows students to form a collective support system, which can be a powerful tool in overcoming some of the issues that are likely to impact retention decisions. Contact with past students, specifically ones that have achieved some measure of academic success through basic skills classes, will allow current students to see what their efforts can lead to.

Either way, social contact can be an effective way to minimize the anxiety that all new adult students bring to class, which is particularly important for the heightened fears that are likely to accompany poor self-esteem. Eliminating isolation from the start will be key for students who need to feel valued and important in order to want to remain in basic studies programs.

The list of suggestions for supporting interaction with other learners includes:

- Do ice breaker activities in class so that new students get to know current students.
- Have a new student orientation so that new students can meet other new students.

- Have students conduct peer interviews - Give students the opportunity to see that others either are or have been in the same place they are currently at.
- Promote community building through classroom activities. Have students do a good portion of their work in pairs or groups.
- Have students work in small groups on a cooperative task that will get them talking about their educational experiences and goals. This helps them to feel less isolation and to see that their ABE/GED experience is normal and good.
- Have past students return to class to tell their stories.

Structure Learning to be Supportive and Flexible

Knowing and encouraging students are important factors that are likely to impact their decisions to remain in an ABE program but academic achievement is what they came back to school for.

The problem, however, with the academic structure of many basic skills programs is that they look and feel like the school environments that many ABE students associate with a sense of past personal failure. Another problem with a standard class structure is that it is traditionally associated with children. Equating ABE courses with childhood has a direct and negative impact on an adult's self-esteem.

It is also important that the instructor establish a link between the material being covered and the daily lives of the students. Without creating a sense of relevance, the student may lose sight of the purpose of the ABE program and will also experience a diminished sense of efficacy if his or her academic goals are reached.

Many of the suggestions regarding academic strategies were intended to address these concerns. The list of academic strategies includes:

- If possible, work one-on-one with students who appear to be struggling.
- If a student is struggling with one set of materials, try another.
- If a student is not learning from one teacher, try another.
- Explain to students, from the start, how the class will work so they know what to expect.
- Help students establish a link between what they are going to be learning and their own lives.
- Review Equipped for the Future (EFF) standards, if they are part of the class, and discuss how they relate to the students' lives.
- Talk with students about their history of managing challenges. How have they handled past situations where learning was difficult or they did not understand the material being presented? Try to find a pattern of past responses and work together to help them establish a new pattern.
- Give students help in developing strategies for handling stress.
- Help students set reasonable and attainable goals. Revisit these goals as you work on them step by step.
- Set expectations for attendance and effort. Too much leniency does not help students value their school time or raise the expectations they have of themselves.
- Keep a portfolio of student's work so the student has something to show and be proud of.



Help your Learners Acknowledge Success

One of the problems that many basic skills students must find a way to solve is a view of themselves as limited in their ability to learn basic skills. They view themselves as lacking the personal efficacy needed for academic achievement.

To establishing a sense of efficacy, a learner must achieve valued goals. Many students, however, come to basic skills programs believing themselves to be incapable of the academic achievement that they seek. Changing this perception is a powerful step in encouraging students to remain in programs. A student must see some level of meaningful and valuable progress. This will be the best way to transform a student's self image from that of an incapable learner to someone who has the personal efficacy to be successful academically.

Striving to achieve academic success will be difficult if the end result is of little or no value to the learner. The instructor must learn what is important to the student and help them set meaningful and achievable goals that they will be able to build upon before moving onto more challenging ones.

The list of suggestions for acknowledging success includes:

- Acknowledge each accomplishment, now matter how small, to reinforce the student's self-efficacy. Make sure all acts of praise are genuine.
- Start work at a level where the student is certain to have initial success before moving on to more challenging material.
- In casual conversation, remind students of their success.
- Set short-term goals that are realistic and achievable.
- Test the student in small increments to promote early success.
- Don't let students see themselves as just a student in a standard classroom. Challenge them to be "adult thinkers."
- Try to tie assignments to something the learner already does well.
- Have the learners teach other students the basic skills that they have learned. This builds confidence along with basic skills.

Additional Resources

The following list of resources is provided for those readers who would like more information on the topics of self-esteem and adult basic education:

Beale, A. V. (1994). A reality therapy-based approach to working with adult learners. *Adult Basic Education*, 4 (1), 50-55.

Beder, H. (1991). The stigma of illiteracy. *Adult Basic Education*, 1 (2), 67-78.

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