

## Getting into Groups

### **In Gilmer County, Georgia, a shift from individualized instruction to classes and group discussion increased student retention and participation**

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*I am an instructor at the Gilmer County Adult Learning Center in Ellijay, Georgia. Gilmer, once relatively isolated, is rapidly becoming a satellite community of urban Atlanta. Our students are a diverse group in terms of age and academic development; the youngest is 16, the oldest is 92. They range from non-readers to those who have completed the GED tests and are studying for entrance to technical school or community college. With the exception of a dozen or so Hispanic students, all are Caucasians in the middle to low income brackets.*

Art LaChance and I were concerned with student retention. Our drop out rate was consistently about 34 percent. A large number began well but their attendance gradually tapered off until they disappeared without notice or explanation. Perhaps another ten to fifteen percent were within easy reach of their goals when they suddenly and inexplicably left the program. Follow-up calls to these students did not yield results. We wondered if we could do anything to change this pattern, or whether it was an unalterable fact of adult education. We had never looked at the problem critically, however, until we participated in a practitioner inquiry project sponsored by the University of Georgia's Department of Adult and Continuing Education in Athens. It was with this project that we really began to consider the possible causes for such high numbers of dropouts.

We began brainstorming ideas about what we could do to increase retention. Would different methods of intake or a weekly student orientation affect retention rates? Would awards and certificates of level completion have an impact? What about asking our students about the kinds of study and activity they preferred? What about creating regularly scheduled classes in reading, writing, or math, or starting discussion groups based on current events? We had success with some team building and discussion-prompting activities in the past, so this idea seemed to have merit.

We then considered our students. All were influenced by variables over which we had no control. Many of them told us that they had never seen education as a necessity.

We had been offering individualized, self-paced study with instructor assistance and self-directed computer-based programs. We wondered about group activities with greater participation from students. Our research question became: Will group participation in structured classes and discussion groups increase student motivation and retention?

We asked our students to respond to a simple questionnaire about the possible instructional approaches we could use at the Center. Choices included individual study with either text materials or interactive computer programs such as PLATO, study in pairs, or group study in a classroom environment. The groups would focus on language, math, and writing skills. More than 85 percent of about 50 students said they preferred studying together as a group.

## **Student Input**

We then interviewed students in more depth to determine at what point and in which subjects they felt they most needed help. We began to hold loosely organized classes two or three times a week based on the needs of the greatest number of students. One of us was always available to those students who preferred to work individually. Classes were at first informal and unscheduled. As we progressed, the classes became more structured and scheduled, though during the span of the project we were careful not to make these sessions seem unnecessarily academic or authoritarian. We considered student feedback and participation to be two of the most important elements. We also began discussion groups based on topics selected by the students and on exercises from "Beyond Basic Skills," a newsletter of classroom ideas published by the University of Georgia. These groups provided a place in which the students could talk about issues they felt were relevant to their lives. In these forums, they questioned the relevance of education, e.g. "How can my life improve by learning percents and geometry?"

## **Results**

We looked at attendance records for data, extracting the cumulative monthly hours of all students who were not mandated to attend and comparing them to hours of attendance in the months before the project began. The average number of attendance hours for non-mandated students had increased about 50 percent during the project.

Art and I interpret this data to be an indication of the success of our project, and we now have incorporated group classes and discussion into our present methods of instruction and curriculum presentation with some real success. Both the classes and the discussion groups generate energy and enthusiasm in the students, which leads to greater participation and time spent in the program. The fact that the classes become multi-level exposes many of the learners to ideas and subject matter that they would not otherwise encounter and fosters student interaction. We have noticed that class participation seems to foster study groups, with more advanced students often helping those who are less far along.

We recognize that many factors which influence motivation and retention are beyond our influence, and we concentrate on those that we can help to change. We remain open to change and to restructuring our methods of approach. What works one time with one group may not necessarily work the next time. We see the need for relevant content as constant, but the solutions to the problems we encounter may vary from time to time and group to group. This has led us to believe that there is no single solution to the problems of retention and motivation, but many solutions must be applied according to the demands of the time and the needs of the students.

## **References**

Valentine, T. & Sandlin, J. (Eds.) (1997). *Beyond Basic Skills*, Vol. 1, No. 3.

Summarized by Bella Hanson. From *Focus on Basics*, Volume 2, Issue A, March 1998

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