

Is Goal Setting Primary to Every Student?

NCSALL Practitioner Dissemination Research Network Report
Susan Bulp, 2004

Thirteen students attend class on day one - - three weeks later, eight students. Six weeks later, twelve students are present; however, only three of the original students remain. The adult education teacher's nightmare - a class whose composition changes constantly where, paradoxically, continuity is seen as the key to progress and success. In the break room, at conferences, staff meetings, where ever teachers meet, they speak of their frustration with student retention. There are, however, those students who *do* persist and reach their goals. What makes them stay? What are the characteristics of "successful students"? What was different about them or their experience that enabled them to come to school until they met their goals? What was the most important factor that supported their staying in school? These basic questions fueled this research.

During the fall of 1999, I led a NCSALL study circle on learner persistence, retention and motivation. This group of nine adult educators from N.H. poured over the readings and discussed their experience with this topic. Much of the research rang true, but there were some important points that seemed to be missing. *Persistence Among Adult Education Students in Pre-GED Classes* (Comings, 1999) noted that "The first support to persistence is the establishment of *a* goal by the student." Some members of the study circle, including myself, questioned this finding. It seemed to us that some people are goal-setters while others are not. Some students who are successful never seem to be goal-oriented. Rather they seem to thrive on the support they receive while they are at school. As I was reading and thinking about this idea, I came across the following quote:

The majority of men set goals and measure success by achievement.
The majority of women tell me that the major accomplishments of their lives came through a confluence of unexpected events. They see themselves having intuited the right path as it opened in front of them, rather than consulting a map that led to a specific destination. Some men complain about women's "circular, fuzzy thinking." The fact is that we tend to see relationships between things that may not be obvious to men... (Borysenko, 1999).

Is goal setting primary to every student?

Bearing this in mind, I began wondering if goal setting is a primary support for successful students. I have been teaching in adult education for the past 25 years, and through those years I've seen the importance of forming a community within the classroom. A sense of community, and the relationships that a community engenders, seems to make the difference for students being able to weather the storms of life that would otherwise cause them to drop-out of adult education. Knowing that their classmates and teacher provide support seems to make such an important difference.

In my more successful classes, those with high attendance rates and strong retention, I've noticed that the students really "jelled" with each other. They lent each other their support, and worked closely with me. I felt that we all had "bonded" and shared a common goal. I saw students become more independent and confident as they spent more time in class. When I felt things were at their best, my role often changed from that of teacher to one of facilitator. They directed more; I listened and guided. They felt ownership for the climate of learning within the

classroom. Indeed, if I was absent, they could carry on without a teacher. When given a choice if they wanted a substitute or not, many times the class would decline, and “go it on their own” and they would add, with great success! I had my own ideas of what made them keep coming to school, but I wanted to know just how students thought about it, so I thought I'd ask them.

Some background

During this past year I ran two focus groups, one with my current students, and one with a mixed group of former and current students from different classes and teachers within our program. I also held a final, informal meeting with members of my current class after the school year was over. The focus groups took the form of a discussion where I asked a series of questions, and members of the group responded to my questions and to each others' responses. Each session lasted about an hour and a half. Following the dialogue, each participant completed the questionnaire (see Appendix). The participants in these groups genuinely enjoyed talking about their experiences, and they asked if we could do it again. Although some of them had been away from Second Start for several years, they wanted to stay connected. It had been a pivotal experience in their lives.

Who were the participants?

The program coordinator, staff development director, and three teachers drew up a list of categories of people who attended the ABE program. That list included TANF recipients, teenage drop-outs, injured workers, career changers, displaced workers, SSI recipients, recovering addicts, court appointees, among others. In Concord, N.H., there are very few minority ABE students. We then brainstormed a list of former students who both those categories and who had persisted to reach their goals despite formidable circumstances or personal trauma that arose while they were attending school. My task was to track them down and invite them to the focus group which I called "The Successful Learners Focus Group." In the end, seven people attended. I also held a focus group with five members of my daytime ABE class.

Findings

When asked the question, “What was the most important factor that supported your coming to school?” by and large all participants said it was their teachers. Around the group, one person after another used superlative terms to describe the impact of their teachers. “It was all the teachers.”

Holly, at age thirty, was beset with serious health problems. She explained to the group that she had one surgery after another while she was attending Second Start. She credits her teacher with allowing her to reach her goal of entering a secretarial program so she can make more money for her family.

Pat [her teacher] really helped me a lot. When I had problems I'd go in and say 'Pat, I don't know how to get through this.' You know she'd say, 'Just let's talk about it.'... She was just wonderful. I mean again all the teachers really helped out a lot. I needed that support though to keep coming.

Fifty-year old Paul had been out of work for the past five years recovering from a job-related injury. When he filled out his questionnaire he noted the impact that the teachers had on his ability to keep attending classes.

I really felt welcome, and the teachers are very into helping the students mentally and personally. I have health problems, so to take my mind off my pain I try to keep busy. The teachers are very helpful. Now I feel better about school and what it means to have a good education and to focus on my writing skills.

The instruction was very stimulating for me and made me want to come to class, so I felt the support from the very start. Not only are they [the teachers] on your side, they're on your front and back-- to make sure you were confident, and you could stay afterschool or before for help.

Betty, a thirty-three year old mother of three boys, two of whom are autistic, talked with tears in her eyes about her experience during her six years in adult education. Because of her own learning problems, she experienced great frustration in the public schools. In adult education, she finally experienced success.

I was getting nothing at school. That's why I quit.. I was pushed through the grades. I had a hard time even reading a paper... When I read that first book I was so impressed with myself that I did that. It was like, Wow, I did this! I can read this.' So my goal is to get my GED and then go into teaching. All the teachers here put their heart and soul into teaching. And you know it's just amazing how they have all this energy to give you. That's why I'm still going to school 'til I get that GED.

Seeing the transformation

To try to extend people's thinking about their experience, I suggested that there must have been factors other than the teachers' support because not every person is successful at Second Start. I suggested that they respond to the idea that their success must have been something inside of each one of them.

At this juncture, participants began talking about the transformation that they saw in themselves. As I reviewed the focus groups' comments, I began to see that they were explaining a step-by-step process that they had experienced.

- A student comes to the program with inner motivation.
- At first, students see their teachers as the most important support to persistence because of the positive reinforcement they receive from them.
- Eventually, adult students gain confidence and an increased feeling of competence through experiencing small successes.
- Ultimately, their feelings of confidence lead them to setting goals.
- Being a member of the classroom makes them feel part of a whole; they are support givers as well as support receivers. They say positive and encouraging things to other students; they emulate their teachers' praise-giving techniques.
- Newly-found success through reaching a goal and the development of new social skills enable them to process thoughts differently and to develop a new style of inner dialogue. Developing new habits leads to additional increments of confidence and competence.

“I don't talk myself out of it, I talk myself into it.”

At the evening focus group, Jasmine started the discussion after the probe of "What is it about you that supported your staying in school." Jasmine, a stylish woman in her late twenties,

is contagious with enthusiasm. When she was in class, her zeal for life was in sharp contrast with the anxiety that sometimes crippled her. Her comments were key to bringing the group to a deeper awareness of each person's strength that he or she brought into the process.

I'm not big on setting goals because I don't want to set myself up for failure. They [the teachers and staff] had more confidence in me than I had in myself...

Question: Have you had a lot of experience of not reaching your goals?
Marriage number one and marriage number two--little things like that.... I didn't ever want to be dependent on anyone again. I had to do things on my own. That's why I came to school. When I started here it was again tough on me... And then after while it wasn't too bad. With everyone's help I was, "OK, I can do this." And then it was like right there, I'm just this far away from where I want to be... Once I hit that GED though, it was like a big deal because I reached that goal. When I saw my grades... that helped again bring my enthusiasm up to bring me the drive to do better. Since I got my GED, things that I've touched along the way have turned out better. When I have my mind set, I don't talk myself out of it, I talk myself into it. I was always afraid to take on any challenge...

Others in the groups nodded in agreement with Jasmine's assessment of her transformation from a person with a poor self-concept and narrow interests to a confident, self-assured, productive, always-becoming-better human being.

Forty-two year old Ronnie dropped out of school in eighth grade. Her sense of embarrassment because of her perceived inadequacies plus an active dislike of any authority figure [teachers included!] made Ronnie a difficult student at times. The change in her throughout the school year was remarkable to witness. After the focus group, I had read Transformational Learning in Adulthood, (Portnow, 1998) and found the students' voices reflected in this quote from the research:

The second principle [of development] is that development is more than the accumulation of new information and skills; it is a qualitative change in the very ways that adults know and make sense of their world. It is, again, a kind of learning that leads to deep and pervasive shifts in one's perspective and understanding oneself, one's relationships and one's goals...

Ronnie was amazed how much this group of heretofore strangers had in common. She remarked, "Our stories are all so alike. It's unreal." Later, after Jasmine's comments she went on to explain how her life has changed.

I have a lot of confidence in myself, too. I use a computer all the time now. When someone writes to me I'm not critical, but I see their mistakes. When I left here I took time off because it was like a full-time job [going to school]. .. And then I went out to look for a job. My face was glowing when I put down I had my GED. People praise me a lot...I know a lot. Before I came here I was street smart, but I wasn't educated. You know, I think education is great.

I read a lot more now. You know how bad my comprehension was. I only liked reading certain things. I could understand it if I was interested in it. Now I can get interested in everything that I read. It's funny, I pick the newspaper up every single day. Now I read the newspaper. I never did before... and I sold the newspaper for twelve years, but I never picked it up.

For some people, being part of the classroom community was crucial to their success. They needed the support that others could give them; while others felt a strong sense of purpose by being the support person for another person in the class. Nineteen-year old Marie's succinct comment on the questionnaire in answer to "How would you describe your connection to other members of the class?": "I feel we all make a whole," shows how deeply affiliated she was with her classmates. Paul answered that same question by saying,

I would hope I was helpful in every comment I made towards my fellow students. I felt like I was, and felt like part of a unit which I think is special.

Elian, a thirty-six year old native of the Madera Islands, was a good example of someone who took his part as a role model to younger people very seriously. Elian's contagious laugh and quick wit warms people to him immediately, but his years as a rock musician intimately acquainted him with some of same problems that some young students bring with them to adult education classes, and he believes teenagers can learn from his example.

I used to think of myself as a failure and didn't want to associate with some people. I'm inspired now by other people... I always like to inspire people, so if I'm doing good and they see me doing it and I'm older, they drive themselves to do better.

The common thread

Every one of the respondents had one thing in common-- a strong inner motivation to succeed at getting his/her education. The most common reasons were to set an example for their children, to become better off financially, or to fulfill a dream. In his speech at graduation, Paul summed up his feelings by saying:

I am here tonight because I had a dream. I had a dream that one day I would graduate from high school and tonight that dream came true, not only for me, but for everyone graduating here tonight.

It was interesting to note that the participants in the focus groups minimized the impact of the barriers that they faced during their enrollment in ABE. I remember the struggles that they endured, but they shrugged them off as being "no big deal." What they do remember is how well they were supported by their teachers, their partners, their children and their classmates; and they give themselves a lot of credit for enduring the ups and downs of their time in school. At the end of the evening focus group, Ronnie's final remarks about her journey were echoed by others in the group.

One of the things that was difficult is that I wanted a full-time job again [while I was in school], and I wanted to drop out. But every time that I got a paper and somebody wrote on it, one of the teachers wrote on it 'Excellent', "See, you can do it," stuff like that, those little notes. The support right there on something that I never knew how to do, what to do with it, or anything like that. That was rewarding enough for me myself to come back the next day and look forward to another paper coming to me and say "Excellent"....

It was the proudest day that I think I ever had in my whole life to get my GED. That I did it for nine months. You know, it's I did it on my own. Sure I had support and stuff like that, but if it wasn't fir me having that strength and get up and go to come here everyday, I couldn't have done it. I have to take a Lot of credit myself, too.

Implications

- Some adults who enter ABE programs come with strong inner motivation and drive, but paradoxically these traits are accompanied by great feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, and low self-esteem. The teacher is paramount to help boost these people's self-image, so they can begin to gain self-confidence and self-assurance.
- Not all students can establish a goal immediately; they have too many examples of failure in their lives to just think that they can make anything come true. These students first need to develop a sense of accomplishment and competence by receiving abundant, yet authentic, praise and positive reinforcement from as many support givers as possible.
- For some people, a group setting filled with classmates and teachers who are friendly and supportive is key to retention. For many ABE students public school had not been a positive, productive experience. The ABE classroom is the first time they have experienced a sense of belonging in a school setting. This feeling of being part of a unit helps people develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and their attendance. They are not only making sure they are coming to school for their personal goals, but they realize they are co-creators of the bigger picture that contributes to their classmates' and teachers' experience.
- Teachers must model a friendly, non-judgmental and praise-giving manner. so students can learn to do this for other people and eventually for themselves. Many adult students have had little experience with or receiving praise up to this point in their lives. Verbalizing positive and encouraging remarks to other people may help to incorporate this way of being into a person's inner dialogue. The development of positive, internal discourse can transform a student's self-image and experience of being alive.
- In this new century, with a love affair with technology in the classroom and distance learning, we must never forget that students say human-to-human contact is what is crucial to their being successful in ABE.
- Students' need for support could be better met through the establishment of peer mentoring programs whereby former students who have met their goals are paired with current students who are still engaged in the process. Although friends and family are important factors in supporting a student's persistence in an ABE program, a former student who had had successfully navigated the program could not only offer empathy but also provide practical advice and coping strategies.

Appendix: Persistence Questionnaire

Name: _____

Your age while you were at Second Start: _____

How many months did you attend there? _____

Please feel free to use the back of the paper if you need more space to answer any question.

1. When you were attending Second Start, what things kept you coming to school?
2. Did you have any problems during your time at Second Start that almost made you drop-out?
3. Did you ever leave for a while and then come back?
4. Who or what helped you stay in school or return after a long absence from school?
5. Who or what supported your staying in school if you were getting discouraged? (see below)

Examples:

Family members or a partner

A program I was participating in

My own determination

Friends I made in school

My job or promise of advancement

My personal goals

My wanting to accomplish this for a long time

Setting an example for my kids

6. Explain how that support was given.
7. Who or what discouraged you the most while you were attending Second Start? (see examples)

Examples:

health problems

not enough time at home for homework

not enough time in class

boredom

unsupportive spouse

lack of confidence

8. Did an attendance policy help you to keep coming? Explain how it helped you to keep coming?
9. If you think back to what you were like when you first started school, and then think about what you were like after you had been there a while, what changes do you see in yourself?

10. Did you develop any "buddies" in school that supported your attendance? How did they help you?
11. Did you talk to or socialize with your buddies outside of school hours? Please explain.
12. How would you describe your connection to other members of the class? Did you feel you had a special role in the classroom? What role did you have?
13. Did the style of instruction support your coming to school? What was it about the instruction that seemed right to you?
14. Were there other activities or events that occurred at the school that made you feel part of the community?
15. Did you feel connected to your teachers? How?
16. How did the counselor (student advisor) contribute to making school a successful experience?
17. Did you feel that teachers were on your side and gave you enough time and attention? Can you give examples?
18. Were your teachers knowledgeable ? Did you feel confident with their instruction?
19. How did you feel about your classroom environment? Was it spacious enough? Comfortable?
20. Did your classroom have enough resources like books, computers, and dictionaries?
21. How many students were in your class on an average day?
22. Did that number of students vary?
23. If it varied a lot, did you find that to be distracting or discouraging? Why or why not?

24. Your class was made up of different ages and types of people. How did the diversity of the classroom affect you?
25. What made you feel comfortable, ask questions and be yourself in class?
26. Were you ever afraid of school or of speaking up in class? How did you overcome that?
27. Did your prior experiences in public school help you or hinder you in your progress in adult education? Explain how the past influenced your feelings and performance in school as an adult student.
28. How did your confidence grow as a student in ABE classes?
29. What was the most significant change in your life since your involvement in adult education?
30. Could you envision yourself being a support person or mentor for someone new, just entering adult education classes? If so, what do you see your role being for that person?