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"Then I Stop Coming to School": Understanding Absenteeism in an Adult English as a Second Language Program

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ABSTRACT

This case study covers an ethnographic assessment of an adult ESL program at a community center in southern Minnesota. We studied factors preventing learners from attending classes and formulated improvement strategies by using a cultural broker framework and Knowles's (1990) principles of adult learning. Additional curricular structure and more effective communication between teachers and students regarding content and outcomes were identified as keys to reducing absenteeism. More attentive, respectful estimations of students' abilities would ensure effective communication and help students develop a sense of ownership in their learning. This holistic perspective produced a constructive model encouraging program staff to consider changes beyond the conflicting viewpoints of teachers and students on absenteeism.

INTRODUCTION

"Cold, cold, cold. What's the first letter in *cold*?" asked the teacher. Six adult students watched her in silence. She then voiced the first consonant of *cold* as a clue. One student answered, "*K*."

"Yes, *K* makes this sound, but *C* also makes the same sound. In this case, *cold* starts with *C* instead of *K*," she replied. Pointing to the letter, she asked another student to pronounce it. Finally, she wrote *cold* on the board, and the learners dutifully copied it in their notebooks. After 20 minutes, the board had a list of words: *name, zip, dime, time, cold, February, hot, pot, cot, cat, hand, land, on,* and *off.* This activity was intended to show the relationship

between sound and spelling. These learners were enrolled in a beginning ESL class at the Roosevelt Community Center[1] in southern Minnesota, which is experiencing a significant influx of refugees from East Africa and migrant workers from Latin America. The students came from such countries as Somalia, Mexico, Sudan, and El Salvador. The center offers four levels of ESL classes as a division of its larger, publicly funded adult education program. The program offers additional classes in GED, reading, writing, math, history, computer literacy, and citizenship.

In November 2003, ESL teachers identified the need to reduce student absences. Accordingly, we studied factors preventing learners from attending classes and considered solutions to minimize absenteeism. This article describes our ethnographic research on attrition and assesses the contribution of anthropology to a practical understanding of this case. We begin by describing the context of absenteeism and explaining our research procedures. We go on to present our findings, which indicate teachers and students held contrasting beliefs about absenteeism. Our ethnographic analysis revealed factors contributing to a cycle of absenteeism, including the divergent perspectives of teachers, students, and program administrators. Finally, we present strategies to minimize student absences. This case study demonstrates the value of ethnography in assessing and improving education programs.

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CONTEXT

Adult educators consider attrition to be the primary problem confronting programs (Kerka, 1995; Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994). Absenteeism impedes learners' progress and can jeopardize programs' funding. At Roosevelt, 2001–2004 attendance patterns showed that almost 20% of learners attended less than 12 hours per year.[2] Among students who attended more than 12 hours, yearly percentages of completion of at least one instructional level in 2001–02, 2002–03, and 2003–04 are 18%, 27%, and 38%, respectively.[3] While these figures were better than the Minnesota statewide average, 70–85% of enrollees failed to complete classes in their skill levels within a year.[4]

Within this context, we had the following research questions: "What factors prevent learners from attending classes?" and "How can staff minimize student absences?" We focused on 2003–04 school year attendance, conducted primary fieldwork at Roosevelt from January to May 2004, and submitted our final report in July 2004.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our theoretical framework is based on a cultural broker model of ethnography and Knowles's (1970; 1990) adult education principles. The cultural broker framework, common in ethnographic program evaluation, defines researchers as the facilitators of intercultural communication among various stakeholders involved in social services programs. In education, this framework aims to support program staff in understanding learners' perspectives by constructing a holistic, multifaceted explanation of program efficacy. We employed Knowles's adult education principles to explain the cycle of absenteeism and formulate strategies for minimizing absences.

Cultural Broker Framework

The cultural broker model asks educators to understand learners' viewpoints, but not the reverse, because educators have power over students and a responsibility to formulate effective programs (Ervin, 2000). Findings serve as a bridge between these parties by allowing educators to step into learners' shoes (Ogbu, 2003). We encouraged teachers to value students' viewpoints by revealing programmatic and cultural contexts influencing their learning. We use the term *culture* to refer to the structure and organization of distinct groups connected by particular social statuses, roles, and worldviews. Teachers and students belong to

different groups: one in charge of teaching, and the other composed of those who come to school to learn. The two groups have contrasting perspectives of the program due to differing social statuses and roles (Olivo, 2003).

Contrasting worldviews between teachers and learners are a recurrent theme in adult literacy education. Beder and Medina's (2001) study of classroom behavior in adult literacy programs found that, even though "teachers' most commonly expressed goal was to meet learners' needs" (p. 32), their teaching does not reflect this goal. The researchers "saw little evidence of teachers systematically assessing learners' needs or evaluating whether instruction was meeting individual or group needs" (p. iii).

Coming from nondominant sociocultural backgrounds, adult ESL learners find tremendous incongruity in how literacy skills are taught, not only in content and vocabulary, but also in culturally distinctive interactions. This mismatch turns back to teachers, who have been trained in mainstream paradigms, and urges them to consider how students use literacy skills in their daily lives (Sparks, 2002). Anthropologist Weinstein-Shr (1993) suggests that adult learners have their own purposes for literacy, regardless of how their performance is judged by teachers. Her research describes two Hmong men in Philadelphia; one served as an interpreter at an American church, and the other recorded oral Hmong traditions for preservation. While teachers considered the former student more successful, based on his command of English, Weinstein-Shr points out that both learners played equally active social roles when they used their skills.

The cultural broker model helps educators make programs more relevant to learners' needs. The application of Weinstein-Shr's ethnographic findings—the importance of considering learners' daily lives—to another family literacy program for Somalis in Flemington, Australia, provides a further example (Howell & Hebert, 1995). Because the importance of family ties among Somalis was recognized, learners' children and community-based activities were incorporated into the program. For example, learners wrote traditional stories both in Somali and in English to read with children. This culturally sensitive program improved learners' English literacy and encouraged them to integrate into the local community. Howell and Hebert state, "This successful outcome is largely due to the characteristics that Weinstein-Shr (1993) identified: the process was collaborative, it attempted to build on family strengths and

acknowledge the home culture, and it was based on initial ethnographic research." (p. 8)

The merit of the cultural broker model lies in its holistic approach to collecting and analyzing data (Fetterman, 1986). Holism requires the consideration of multiple issues and voices involved in any program under study. When applied to attrition, it explains how absenteeism occurs and reconciles conflicting expectations among different stakeholders, enabling policy makers to formulate constructive solutions for program improvement. As Simon (1986) states:

> Without exception, ethnographic research is to aim for holism; again, unlike the hypothesis testing approach, the ethnographer seeks to understand what he or she is observing from as many points of view as possible, and takes into consideration all conceivable influences on a situation. (p. 58)

In our research, the cultural broker model was a powerful tool for discovering students' thoughts and patterns of behavior. We consider adult ESL students as active agents who make judgments according to their own value systems. We chose this approach because we wanted students' voices to drive the analysis.

Knowles's Adult Education Principles

Knowles's (1970; 1990) principles for effective adult learning guided us in explaining and formulating strategies for minimizing absenteeism. Knowles views adult learners as independent, self-directed individuals who are capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. This learner-centered approach defines teachers and students as "joint inquirers" (Knowles, 1970, p. 41). Within the context of adult literacy education, self-improvement is a primary motivational factor for participation. In particular, a classic study of adult ESL programs in Iowa found that this intrinsic motivation was tied to learners' strong desire to integrate into American society (Beder & Valentine, 1987). Both adult basic education (ABE) students and adult ESL learners were motivated by self-improvement, a desire to help children, employment and economic concerns, and a desire to read and write (Beder & Valentine, 1987, 1990). Knowles's adult education principles were compatible with our cultural broker framework because both theories define adult education as empowerment, acknowledging learners' inherent purposefulness and independence. Our theoretical framework resolved contrasting viewpoints between students and teachers regarding program efficacy and absenteeism.

METHODOLOGY

We utilized a variety of ethnographic methods to understand absenteeism from a holistic perspective. The research employed classroom observations, semistructured interviews with teachers and students, a student focus group, and qualitative analysis of collected texts.

We first participated in all four instructional levels and observed interactions among teachers and students once a week from January to May 2004. Participant-observation, a key anthropological method, involves close and frequent contact with research participants in their daily routines. This detailed observation of social interaction provides a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Participant-observation was not limited to the classroom. Informal conversations with students, inside and outside the community center, revealed their subject matter comprehension and attitudes toward lessons. Kay's tutoring experience at Roosevelt was particularly useful for obtaining and interpreting data. She had been a tutor for 10 months prior to this research and was familiar with the setting. Kay also tutored during the research period, providing substantial additional data.

We conducted semistructured interviews with 10 students, 4 teachers, and 2 administrators regarding their experiences with and expectations of the ESL program. Interpreters assisted us in communicating with students as necessary. We asked open-ended questions from a prepared list and encouraged interviewees to freely express their ideas. Although we did not explicitly direct interviewees, the main focus of these questions was to learn about factors affecting attendance.

The nonstudent interviewees were selected from the teachers and administrators who spent substantial time with students on a regular basis. They also had at least a few years of experience at Roosevelt. Among the teachers interviewed, one received graduate-level training in ESL teaching. The others completed undergraduate programs designed for K–12 teaching, not ESL or adult education.

We used a more structured method for sampling student interviewees to collect a wide range of viewpoints.

A total of 139 students were enrolled at some point during the 2003–04 school year. We divided this population into three categories and selected interviewees from each category, as shown in Table 1.

We chose higher numbers of sporadic attendants in order to learn about their reasons for absenteeism. This selection process reflected the demography of the student population by keeping to three rules:

1. Select at least two students from every instructional level.
2. Select at least two men and six women to reflect the male-to-female ratio.
3. Select at least three Somalis, two Mexicans, and two Sudanese, following the ethnic group ratio.

We facilitated a focus group of seven learners to obtain input on attendance obstacles and program recommendations. These participants came from all levels except the most elementary level. Their ethnic backgrounds were diverse, including African, Asian, and Latin American. The focus group discussion lasted for 90 minutes at Roosevelt.

We analyzed program records, field notes, interview records, and the focus group transcript by coding the texts with emerging key topics relevant to reasons for absences (Bernard, 2002). This process generated 11 categories: lack of motivation, instruction, teachers, child care, health problems, religious practices, employment, appointments, transportation, relocation, and visa problems. We then considered interrelationships among these categories to construct a theoretical model explaining how absenteeism occurred. This process revealed that teachers emphasized external factors for student absences, while students pointed to internal factors. To explain ultimate causes of absenteeism, we further distilled the internal factors into two essential problems covering a wide range of observations and responses given by research participants. The primary causes were the fluid curriculum structure and miscommunication between teachers and students.

One additional factor influencing our data collection and analysis should be noted. Kay is herself a former ESL student. She was more empathetic to ESL learners than teachers when the teachers and learners had contrasting viewpoints. We believe that empathy was both beneficial and necessary in developing an explanatory model relevant to students' reality. Empathy is "an essential quality in the search for solutions to human problems. Overall, the anthropological perspective provides a tool for exploring a human topic in considerable depth . . . and, most especially, from the point of view of participants" (Ervin, 2000, p. 1).

FINDINGS I: CONTRASTING EMPHASIS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Our ethnographic data suggested that learners' dissatisfaction came primarily from anxiety about unpredictable learning topics and goals. A fluid curriculum kept students from developing a sense of ownership of their learning. Teachers initially overlooked students' evaluations of classes and did not recognize learners' self-directedness. Knowles's theoretical basis helped us explain absenteeism in terms of curriculum and structural matters. This holistic perspective aimed to produce a constructive model enabling teachers to consider changes without feeling personally criticized, and giving voice to the concerns and desires of the adult learners.

Students often explained absenteeism in terms of frustration with the program, such as unmet needs or boredom. For example, Houd, a student who wanted to attend college, did not feel adequate help was available in a difficult class. He entered the program three months before the time of the interview. Sitting with us at a large table in an empty classroom, Houd explained:

Table 1
Number of Student Interviewees Selected by Category

Categories	Interviewees selected
1. Students with regular attendance from September 2003 (or enrollment dates) until February 2004.	2
2. Students with sporadic attendance from September 2003 (or enrollment dates) until February 2004.	4
3. Students with both regular and sporadic attendance from September 2003 (or enrollment dates) until February 2004.	4

When I'm studying, I would need to ask questions. And when I see teachers are busy, I just stay over there, but time goes by while you are sitting. If I can't ask her questions, sometimes, I just go home because I don't understand things that I want to understand. When I do that, then I stop coming to school. I was tired to come to school and I stay at home aside of coming, because I feel like I am not learning anything when I come to school. When a student needs, I mean, he has a question to be answered, and there is no tutor or somebody to help teachers, he would feel helpless. That's the way I feel sometimes.

Another student, Eldora, a young woman, also expressed dissatisfaction with class content and topic presentations. At her apartment, Eldora, her boyfriend, his friend, and Kay spoke about her experiences. Eldora's boyfriend acted as translator in our conversation. Eldora was first placed in an intermediate class and later moved up to an advanced class. She stopped attending because she

didn't feel like they [teachers] were teaching the right stuff that she wanted to learn. She wanted to work more on grammar skills and how to say different types of words, pronunciation. They were showing the things that she already knew, that she already understood. That's why she started losing interest in classes. That's another reason she decided to stop going.

"So, the classes were too easy for you?" Kay asked.

"They show you something, but they don't show you the things that are basically necessary."

Eldora's boyfriend further explained, "She doesn't like they [teachers] took too long on one page or one subject. One of the teachers . . ." He asked Eldora for the teacher's name.

"Cathleen," Eldora replied.

He continued, "She takes about two, three hours just on one page. . . . [Eldora] just didn't like how they kept on the same subject way too long. She felt that they need to speed up a little bit."

Other students shared Eldora's dissatisfaction concerning the notion of slow teaching. Mary, a reserved

middle-aged woman who had resided in the United States for a couple of years, mentioned slow teaching as a reason for absenteeism. Although Mary seemed to have refrained from commenting on classroom lessons when we first interviewed her at her apartment, she was quite frank during a second interview at Roosevelt. Kay asked, "Why do you think some students miss classes; like, some students don't come to school every day. Why do you think that happens?"

"Ha! Ha!" Mary laughed. "It's a good question. They lost interest in learn English. Boring, slowly teaching, or . . ." Mary paused.

"Have you talked about this kind of topic with other students?" Kay questioned.

"No," Mary replied. "It is personal observation. But you know [what I'm talking about] by interviewing."

While learners emphasized instruction, teachers usually attributed absences to factors outside of the program. We attended teachers' weekly meetings three times and also individually interviewed four teachers most familiar with the student population. All teachers pointed to child care, transportation, employment, and relocation as important reasons for student absenteeism. For example, we met with Jennifer, who had two decades of teaching experience with children before coming to the center. Sitting in a classroom with colorful drawings and snapshots on the wall, Jennifer commented:

I don't know what makes some [students] more motivated than others. I know the ones that don't attend on [a] regular basis, sometimes they maybe have a job, or the family. Or sometimes, we had a student who was gone for a couple of weeks, for she was sick, then her kids got sick, so she had to stay home with them. So, sometimes things happen in their family; they keep them from coming.

Kristin, a friendly teacher who often talked with her students outside of classes, answered our question "Who doesn't attend classes?" this way:

People who can't get child care, or have some conflict with their child care, maybe they lost it, maybe they can't pay for it, maybe they have

a new baby. They can't come because they are breast-feeding, or something. That can be an issue. People who don't have transportation, they live too far, or they can't get a ride in city limits, or something. People who are really desperate for a job, people who have to find a job, or they have to have two jobs, or you know. They sometimes don't come because of responsibilities from work.

The differing outlooks between students and teachers are an obstacle to minimizing absenteeism. While outside reasons for nonattendance may be beyond institutional control, students' satisfaction with the program is one important factor staff can work on directly (Kerka, 1995). Silver (1986) points out the significance of students' evaluation of lessons in terms of attendance. Attendance records reflect, to some extent, learners' "evaluation of the program's effectiveness" (p. 16).

One important factor keeping teachers from recognizing students' evaluation concerns teachers' reluctance to critically assess their curricula and teaching styles. As Gallimore (1989) states:

> Teachers find it difficult to confront negative results when they have put their best into an effort. This experience may be more familiar to researchers, but it is never pleasant. In response to a failing innovation, there is a strong tendency to discount the data, the methods and even the idea of evaluating. (p. 73)

We observed that the staff at Roosevelt was not exceptional in this sense when we received their feedback on our preliminary report. The text covered reasons for absenteeism given by students, their opinions about the program, and recommendations for teachers. While some teachers recognized the validity of our findings, others looked for information to dispute the findings. For example, some teachers asked Kay how we evaluated a particular student's comments. Teachers were curious about the learner because she volunteered to be interviewed in front of her teachers, and they believed her perceptions were distorted due to medical issues. Teachers' reluctance to critically assess their curricula and teaching styles became a barrier to recognizing students' concerns.

FINDINGS II: THE CYCLE OF ABSENTEEISM

We analyzed the differing outlooks among teachers and students by exploring the interrelationship among three groups: teachers, students, and ESL program administrators. Fluidity of the student population presented teachers with challenges in curriculum development, which students perceived as unpredictable learning topics and goals. The consequence of excessive flexibility was twofold. First, some learners found it difficult to comprehend subject matter. Second, the fluid curriculum generated miscommunication between teachers and students regarding teachers' classroom management styles, and this miscommunication further reinforced students' frustration.

Excessive Flexibility in Curricula

The cycle of absenteeism started with the government's funding policies, which allocated a budget to each program based on its previous year's total attendance hours. This number was a composite and did not indicate individual attendance patterns. Under this policy, Roosevelt implemented an open-door enrollment system in which students continuously entered and left the program. Although open-door enrollment appeared to maximize attendance hours, the fluid student population made it difficult for teachers to structure curricula. Cathleen, who had been teaching at the center for many years, explained this challenging situation. "You don't know which students; you don't know how many students . . . so it's best to kinda gear your lessons to separate day-to-day things. And it's very difficult to adapt sometimes in the subject area."

Even with this barrier to curriculum development, Roosevelt maintained an open-door enrollment policy to fit with funding policies. Margaret, another teacher who had been at the center for many years, clearly expressed this dilemma. She responded to our question of "How does an open-door policy influence what is going on in the classroom?" as follows:

> I think, in an ideal world, or in an ideal setting, it probably would be better to have a closed-door policy for a certain given period of time: to go from A to B. Do they [students] master it; have some kind of a pre-test, a post-test? But in the real world, we're just like a big merry-go-round—people hopping on and off all the time. So we just kinda keep getting on it and maybe we are just hoping for the best.

"It's kind of a which came first, chicken and egg question," Susan joked.

"Oh, yeah." Margaret laughed, and continued:

And then we have to always worry about attendance. Hours mean money. So we had this debate before. Well, let's put them on a waiting list; let's have this perfect class; let's teach these things; everybody else is on the waiting list. But my gosh, as soon as, OK, say if a few people stop coming, maybe you only have six coming to your class, and there is seven on the waiting list, any program manager is gonna say, "Get those people in the program," because that's our bucks, you know. So, I guess maybe we never figured out how we do it. Has anybody?

Even though the Roosevelt staff was passionate about teaching, their objectives or expectations were not always communicated to students because of the systemic fluidity in curricula. Consequently, students we talked with often had such ambiguous or unrealistic learning goals as "to learn everything," "to get a job," or "writing it [English] perfectly." They did not (or could not) define their goals or achievements in terms of curriculum content or schedules. For example, Lisa had been enrolled in the program for a couple of years. Kay asked her, "How do you know what you will learn each day?" She told us, through an interpreter, how subject matter was presented in class.

They [students] just come, and the teacher just decided what they are going to learn today. And sometimes they didn't learn in class. If they didn't finish it up, you will take it home until you come back tomorrow, you are going to learn it again. It's hard sometimes because if they [teachers] have given assignment, they don't work on it. They tell you to turn it in but they don't help you with it anyway. So, it's very hard sometimes. It's hard to know what areas you need improvement on.

We observed fluidity in daily lessons and over the long term, particularly in the way assessment was managed. While every student was supposed to take a standardized test (CASAS) approximately once in three months for accountability purposes, most classes did not have informal assessments to measure subject matter comprehension.[5] Furthermore, teachers seemed to have different processes of reporting CASAS scores. Some learners were not notified of their results until they were called for individual conferences, which were held a couple of times a year. Some teachers indicated that students often missed conferences because they could not show up for appointments. This testing procedure did not serve as a regular measurement of subject matter comprehension or achievement.

Students' Confusion

Excessive flexibility in curriculum made it difficult for learners to keep up or fully comprehend subject matter, since students did not usually know what subject matter would be covered each day. When we asked students what topics they learned, the typical first response was silence; others said "Many things," instead of giving specific examples, such as housing vocabulary, counting, or the past tense, even when prompted with that day's topic. Their responses implied that they were not aware of, or could not recall, the topics.

The focus group revealed agreement among learners regarding the confusion about subject matter. Participants commented that they had difficulty understanding topics. Kay first asked the group what topics were covered in classes.

"In airport, in neighborhood, in class, whatever," Mary answered.

Another participant, Linda, tried to explain a problem she saw in one of her classes. "Maybe the problem is the real situations, the problem here are the Civic class, to know the geography of the states. It's the situation; the situation is a real situation."

Phineas, an eloquent student from the same class, added to Linda's comments:

About the Civic class, we don't know which geography they teach us. Because we're still on page 86, 87, we jumped to page 196. It is still not clear right now which place America had Independence or the Civil War, which year was bigger. There is confusion now.

Phineas elaborated on why it was difficult to understand subject matter sequence using an example from other classes:

They [teachers] don't give us [topics] in the same time in the week. For example, I go in to study the past tense. One [teacher] gives you the past tense a couple of weeks ago; one gives you another week. I think that repetition is bad. I think they have to collaborate and keep some things together.

Miscommunication Between Teachers and Students

Curriculum fluidity not only prevented students from comprehending subject matter but also made it difficult for students to understand what they should learn and why. Consequently, learners became unhappy with classes when they did not understand teachers' intentions or expectations. Ruth, a young mother of several small children, criticized her teacher although the instruction seemed relevant to her needs. Ruth explained that it is important for her to obtain employment in order to support her family and added that this program should help her get a job. She then continued through an interpreter, "The teacher who has been teaching them [students] now, she doesn't do a good job, so they don't learn anything. So they feel they need a different teacher now."

"What do you mean by 'doesn't do a good job'?" Kay asked. "Could you explain more about it?" We were sitting in a classroom during a lunch break, and small groups of people were chatting on the other side of the classroom. Ruth and her interpreter talked together for a while, and the interpreter explained Ruth's opinion:

Yeah, the program now, they are supposed to be teaching writing and reading. Instead, the teacher that is teaching them now, she just uses materials like cooking materials in which they don't learn in the book. They try to teach something like cooking and how to organize your home. This is not what they need. They need someone who can teach them in a book and show them that this one it means this one. That's what she means about the teacher didn't do a good job.

Ruth's view showed miscommunication between the teacher and students regarding curriculum content. The staff at Roosevelt covered such life skill topics as employment, health, and housing because government guidelines emphasized functional literacy and assessed learning outcomes on these topics. For example, Ruth's teacher once presented a grocery list of such items as *orange*, *bread*, and *towel*, and asked students to alphabetize the list. This activity apparently verifies Ruth's comment, "just uses materials like cooking." However, the teacher later told us about her intention in teaching essential life skill terms. She explained that understanding how to alphabetize words is a necessary skill for employment. Nevertheless, Ruth did not see it as a legitimate topic and expected formal reading and writing practice popular in traditional school settings.

We often noticed such miscommunication between teachers and students. Another learner, Mary, explained that her teacher discussed historical events related to Abraham Lincoln. "This is teacher's opinion, teacher's direction. I follow it, but I feel uncomfortable." When asked why, she answered, "I want to learn grammar. In this class, I learned a lot of vocabulary, but I need grammar and speaking practice. This [class] is good, but sometimes boring." While we were unable to verify the purpose of this lesson with Mary's teacher, learning about American history would prepare immigrant students for the citizenship test and possibly promote civic engagement.

When students were critical of teachers or classes, we observed that their views stemmed from expectations based on their cultural and educational backgrounds. There is often disparity between contemporary American pedagogy and the expectations of adult ESL students from non-Western countries (Collignon, 1994; Fingeret, 1991; Rossi-Le, 1995; Sparks, 2002). The new pedagogy, or "communicative approach," has been popular in Western countries over the past two decades. This approach is based on active learning principles and uses such activities as small-group discussions, role playing, and games (Silberman & Auerbach, 1998). It differs substantially from the teacher-centered approach, in which teachers, as authoritative experts, instruct students with "long vocabulary lists, out-of-context grammar rules, and language laboratory exercises" (Lewis 1996, p. 7).

In spite of its effectiveness, however, research shows that ESL students often dislike the communicative approach (Lewis, 1996; Rowsell, 1990). At Roosevelt, many learners seemed to expect a conservative classroom environment, where students sit still and teachers instruct them with designated textbooks. These students did not

see active learning as meaningful. Their dissatisfaction might have been resolved if they had confidence in their lessons and understood that learning life skills is important in order to function in a community. With anxiety about unpredictable learning topics, however, they judged classes according to their preferred learning styles instead of teachers' curriculum objectives.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the cycle discussed above, we identified two areas staff could address to minimize absenteeism: curriculum structure and learning environment. These strategies show how the ethnographic approach worked in one adult ESL program, and its broader implications.

Additional Curriculum Structure and Communication

The most obvious strategies to break the cycle of absenteeism concern curriculum and instruction. Additional curriculum structure and more effective communication among staff and students regarding objectives and expectations would clearly increase student satisfaction. With more structured, topical curricula tied to a fixed schedule, students could set clear goals and develop learning ownership.

In diverse ESL classrooms, instructors cannot accommodate every student's preferences because, as one teacher at Roosevelt noted, skills vary widely even within the same instructional level:

> I think the most challenging is that even though I teach the beginning class, I have so many different levels of students within my class. Some are really good readers; some of mine are just beginning to read; some are really good at speaking; others are not. Some are good at spelling; some are not. And I think that the hardest thing is trying to find something to teach in class to keep everybody interested or to keep everybody where they should be.

This common challenge requires staff to make conscious efforts to clarify curriculum objectives and expected outcomes (Lewis, 1996). Practical learning goals ensure that students have a sense of purpose and success, encouraging them to complete the program (Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994). The importance of structured curricula and effective communication correspond with the cornerstone of Knowles's (1970; 1990) adult education principles: respect for learners' self-directedness.

The open-door enrollment system posed a challenge to curriculum development at Roosevelt. Nevertheless, some adult ESL programs funded by the same governmental sources handle open-door enrollment with "careful and thorough management" (Silver, 1986, p. 1). One program in St. Louis consists of eight levels of courses with particular topics, grammar, and vocabulary. All students take short quizzes every month. Teachers use scores for evaluating teaching and clarifying future goals. Each course takes approximately three months to complete, and students advance according to their scores. This structured program gives students clear learning goals and positive reinforcement (Silver, 1986). Systematic assessment enables students to measure progress, and "commitment comes from knowing that goals are being met" (Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994, p. 11).

Respectful Learning Environment

Another obstacle to curriculum delivery seemed to be teachers' negative assumptions about students' abilities to comprehend lessons. More attentive and respectful estimations of students' abilities would facilitate communication and help students develop ownership of their learning (Brookfield, 1986). Instructors should develop a respectful and supportive learning environment, include learners in curriculum development, and encourage them to monitor their own learning outcomes (Knowles, 1970).

When teachers underestimate students' intelligence, students may not be fully informed of curriculum objectives and assessment results. When we asked Kouther, a polite elderly student, whether she needed a syllabus, she said she was not sure if she wanted a course schedule. She would "just go to class and see what would happen." She explained, through an interpreter, that teachers did not think students could read a course schedule. Although Kouther seemed to be satisfied with classes, teachers' low expectations kept her from receiving information.

We quickly noticed that students were more intelligent than staff believed. For example, the teacher Cathleen told Kay about the importance of repeating the same topics because students "forget." At the same time, her slow teaching was criticized by Eldora, as discussed previously. Another teacher, Margaret, assumed students would misuse test scores:

The first thing that would happen is everybody would look and then they look at each other's. And I just can't see it is being good, see maybe at the advanced level…. [After a brief interruption, Margaret continued.] On the other hand, I guess I might wanna know how I did right away. But that's because I'm an educator, and I can kind of put it in context of "Oh, I know what the test means," and I have to get this first. Maybe at the advanced, students could handle it, not down here.

Margaret's use of the phrase "down here" to refer to introductory classes implies a hierarchy. It was not a reference to location, as all classes were held on one floor. Rather, it suggests she was unsure about students' abilities. While Margaret's view might apply to some learners, the focus group participants were aware of how to use test scores. They agreed that they needed to know their scores and wanted to learn "what level you are and what progress you are making: when you do some mistakes, you have to study more."

CONCLUSIONS

This paper covered an ethnographic assessment of an adult ESL program at a community center in a small Minnesota city. We studied factors preventing learners from attending classes and identified possible solutions to minimize absences. We formulated improvement strategies by using the cultural broker framework and Knowles's adult education principles based on learners' self-directedness. Additional curricular structure and more effective communication between teachers and students regarding curriculum content and expected outcomes were identified as keys to reducing absenteeism. More respectful estimations of students' abilities would ensure effective communication between these parties and help students develop a sense of ownership in their learning.

This case study shows how an ethnographic approach worked in one program and indicates a potential for broader application to the growing needs of adult ESL education. Ethnography is compatible with adult ESL pedagogy because both encourage educators to consider adult learners' self-directedness and their needs. The main contribution of ethnography is its holistic approach, which values different perspectives of various stakeholders. Our final report described students' viewpoints and explained the links among absenteeism, curriculum, and teaching style. When students commented that classes were boring, their views came from anxiety about unpredictable learning topics or veiled curriculum objectives. At the same time, the open-door enrollment policy made it difficult for teachers to structure curricula. The anthropological approach we utilized encouraged staff to understand students' viewpoints, without pinpointing individual teachers. Our ethnographic research went beyond the conflicting viewpoints of teachers and students on absenteeism to identify practical solutions.

ENDNOTES
1. In order to protect informants' identities, we use pseudonyms. Confidentiality also required us to keep interviewees' ethnicity and language backgrounds concealed. Some lesson topics in students' quotes have been switched to similar topics used in adult ESL textbooks to protect both students' and instructors' identities.
2. Twelve hours a year is a criterion for evaluation employed by the state of Minnesota.
3. The federal government and the state of Minnesota consider these percentages for measuring the success of programs. While the yearly figures rise drastically, we will not analyze their meaning here. ESL student records at the community center were not precise enough for statistical analysis because of the fluid student population. Equivalent state averages are 21%, 25%, and 28%, respectively.
4. We calculated these percentages by comparing yearly reports from the community center and from Todd Wagner at the Minnesota Department of Education (e-mail to authors, August 25, 2004).
5. CASAS, or Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, aims to measure learners' overall English skills, not subject matter comprehension in particular classes.

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