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Improving Student Persistence at the Genesis Center

by Nancy Fritz and
Barbara Piccirilli Alsabek



Photo credit: Jon Lavieri

Students Savoeun Chim and Vicky Rodriguez work on their persistence surveys at the Genesis Center.

The Genesis Center is a community-based adult education center located in Providence, Rhode Island. Founded in 1982 to assist immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia in their transition to life in the United States, the Genesis Center now provides adult education, job training, and child care services to people who have immigrated from all over the world. The Center has approximately 600 adult students in its day and evening classes each year. These adult students are from the greater Providence area; most are low-income residents, and about half have less than a high school education.

In 2005, the Rhode Island Department of Adult Education was reorganized and accountability was given increased emphasis. Programs were urged to increase student hours of attendance so that a greater percentage of students could show

learning gains in adult education classes, as measured by standardized tests. Some of the staff at Genesis became interested in the topic of persistence. Then in the fall of 2007, three of us (Barbara Alsabek, ESOL instructor; Nancy Fritz, adult education director; and Bernice Morris, social worker) decided to participate in a study circle where we read research articles about persistence and then formulated an action research proposal. This study was part of the Adult Learner Persistence Project that was funded by the New England Literacy Resource Center and World Education in the spring of 2008 (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009).

The Project

We wanted to increase the persistence rates of adult learners in Barbara Alsabek's 12-hour-per-week beginning ESOL class. We chose three

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main strategies: (a) democratization of the classroom, (b) adjustment of curriculum to meet immediate student interest and demand, and (c) development of learners' metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness. In this article, we'll describe our strategies, how they were implemented, and how we think they affected learning gains. Other staff at the Genesis Center also became interested in persistence during this period. They implemented additional strategies, some in other classrooms and some centerwide. We will include information on these other strategies as well.

The survey

Barbara's beginning-level ESOL class met Monday through Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. Barbara's key strategy was to ask students at the end of each week what classroom activities benefited them most. She also requested suggestions for the following week's activities. Each Thursday, she administered a simple survey to collect this information (see example, page 107). On the following Monday morning, she presented the tallied results to the students, either orally or in simple pie chart form on the board. Barbara honored the students' requests and included desired curriculum topics in the next week's activities.

At the beginning of the four-month term, she found that students tended to "vote" for pronunciation and speaking activities. As the term progressed, they more often requested literacy activities (primarily writing). This is not surprising, given that their language acquisition and literacy skills evolved over time. Both the wording of the suggestions and content area

requests became more sophisticated during the semester. For instance, suggestions might go from more general ("I need more speaking") to more specific ("I want to talk to the doctor"). Students looked forward to the survey and, in one holiday-shortened week, reminded Barbara that a survey was due.

Barbara never found herself unable to fit a request into the 12-hour schedule and make it relevant to all learners. For example, students planning to take the citizenship test were naturally intent upon learning specific content, but all of the learners felt that both the information and the skills (dictations, answering questions in complete sentences, knowledge about U.S. history and government) were valuable. Since pronunciation consistently garnered a high vote, Barbara began class each day with a pronunciation lesson to encourage punctuality. Finally, although we were initially concerned that the class test scores might suffer if learners drove the curriculum, we found that test scores actually rose significantly in Barbara's class.

Daily agenda

Barbara also put a daily agenda on the board for the learners, so they could effectively anticipate the day's activities and prepare for them psychologically. She felt that letting students know what was coming next lessened their language-learning anxiety. Also, the written sequencing of activities made students realize how important review and expansion of prior knowledge are. The agenda reaffirmed the curriculum democratization process by illustrating concretely that Barbara was holding herself accountable to the

students' survey input. Furthermore, the daily outline demonstrated that instructional plans must be flexible. The students were able to see that activity length is impacted by learner needs, and that the plan is a dynamic guide, not a sacred document carved in stone.

Classroom routines

Our final persistence strategy involved building daily classroom routines to help students understand that learning is incremental and that language learning occurs daily. Beginning language learners often have difficulty seeing progress, and they may find the slow, developmental nature of the process frustrating. Over time, Barbara helped her adult learners to articulate what they were learning. By helping them become more aware of their progress in language and literacy learning, Barbara hoped to increase their persistence in the program.

In an attempt to make our efforts toward persistence very obvious to the students, Barbara began to use concrete evidence of attendance in the classroom. She posted an attendance chart on the wall, and students placed stickers beside their names each day. Each month, Barbara provided "good attendance" certificates to students who came to all of the classes. A certain amount of friendly competition existed over these trappings of increased persistence. Because attendance charts are often used in elementary schools, we feared that adult students would have little interest in them. However, the visible representation of their improved attendance had a surprisingly strong effect. Students showed pride in the



Photo credit: Nancy Fritz

Francisco Hiciano and Ana S. Maria point to their attendance records.

public acknowledgement of their persistence and often went to the chart immediately upon arrival to put a sticker in the proper place!

Results

We compared the attendance and achievement rates in Barbara's spring 2008 class to those of her very similar class in 2007. From 2007 to 2008, the attendance rate (number of hours attended divided by the number of hours available) went from 52% to 59%. In an even greater increase, the learning gains rate (the percentage of students who moved up an NRS

educational functioning level) went from 37% in 2007 to 68% in 2008 (see Table 1).

We believe that the strategies we implemented definitely made a difference. Because they all supported each other, it is impossible to isolate particular strategies as being more successful than others. Nevertheless, the heart of the process was the weekly survey. It centered curriculum on learner interests and immediate language learning goals. Curriculum and instruction, we feel, must be as learner driven as possible if we are to meet the needs of our adult students.

Their valuable time cannot be given over to anything but the most meaningful activities. To that end, Barbara worked with her students to create a classroom environment that (a) better met their short-term and long-term learning objectives, (b) gave them a greater voice in choosing activities, and (c) provided a framework in which they could articulate their developing linguistic and literacy interests and achievements.

Follow-Up Study

After Barbara made her findings known to others at the Genesis Center, Cindy Shawn, then an evening ESOL instructor, decided to implement her own research project in fall 2008. Cindy taught two beginner-level evening classes at that time. One class met on Mondays and Wednesdays from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. The other met on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at the same time period. Cindy implemented no new strategies in her Tuesday/Thursday class. However, in her Monday/Wednesday class, she tried several persistence strategies. This allowed her to compare results in the two classes.

Strategies

First, Cindy developed a picture-based

Table 1

Results of Persistence Strategies in Barbara Alsabek's Classes

Rate definition		Spring 2007 (N = 38)	Spring 2008 (N = 24)
Attendance rate	Total number of hours students attended divided by the total number of planned student hours	52%	59%
Completion rate	The number of students completing the cycle divided by the total number of enrolled students	71%	68%
Learning gains rate (encouraged but optional)	The number of students who demonstrate learning gain, as measured by scores on the CASAS Life and Work reading test, divided by the total number of enrolled students	37%	68%

survey that she gave to her students at the end of each week. The students could then indicate which activities they had liked most in that week's classes. On the following Monday, Cindy reported the results of the survey to the students and made sure to carry out the most requested activities.

In addition, she posted the attendance chart on the wall and students put stickers next to their names on the evenings they attended. This turned out to be a very popular activity. She also awarded certificates for perfect attendance at the end of each month.

Midway through the semester, she developed a homework raffle. She assigned homework on Wednesday evenings that could only be turned in on the following Monday. Monday is usually a low attendance day at our center and she was trying to provide an additional incentive for students to come to class. Each student who turned in homework on Monday evening was given a raffle ticket. At the end of the month, Cindy put all of the stubs into a box and drew three winners. A student who handed in homework each Monday could have several chances of winning. The prizes were gift cards that Cindy had solicited from a local supermarket.

Results

The difference in results for the two classes is quite striking. Although the percentages of students who stuck with the class and completed the term are virtually the same, the attendance rates and particularly the learning gains rates are different. In the Tuesday/Thursday class where Cindy implemented minimal persistence strategies, the attendance rate was 51%

TYPICAL CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES SURVEY

Please put numbers 1 and 2 next to the two classroom activities you liked best this week.

PRONUNCIATION
 'th' / __ / (thing)

VOCABULARY
 (Emergencies and natural disasters)

SPEAKING/Grammar
 Card game with irregular verbs in the past tense

SPEAKING/Writing
 Words and sentences we need when we travel

HEALTH
 Swine flu reading

READING/Comprehension
 "Together again"

GRAMMAR/Writing
 Past tense irregular verbs

What topics or activities would you like to do next week?

as opposed to 65% in the Monday/ Wednesday class. This is in contrast to our usual pattern where our overall attendance is better in our Tuesday/ Thursday classes. The most striking difference is in the learning gains

rate. The Tuesday/Thursday class only achieved a 17% learning gains rate, while the Monday/Wednesday class posted a 52% learning gains rate. This 52% rate is very high for any of our evening classes. We do not know



Photo credit: Jon Lavieri

Barbara Alsabek leads her ESOL class in a group activity at the Genesis Center.

if we can attribute this difference to the higher attendance rate, the use of the weekly survey to make decisions about curriculum, implementation of the homework lottery, or some other factor. Cindy reported that the use of the weekly survey seemed to help build a feeling of community in the class as they advocated for some of their favorite activities (such as vocabulary bingo and homework correction).

Centerwide Changes

Since we began the persistence project in January 2008, we have implemented a number of changes centerwide that we believe have led to greater student persistence.

- ✦ We have revised our orientation process to include more information on the importance of persistence and how we can

help the students in that area. We let students know that they can change from morning to evening classes (or vice versa) if their work schedules change.

- ✦ We have implemented a system for recording daily attendance in the classrooms rather than in a teacher's roll book that might be taken home. At the end of each week, staff members check to see if any students have been absent all or most of the week. Our student data manager then calls these students to see if they are having any problems that we can help them with and to find out when they plan to return to class. Most students seem happy to receive these calls.
- ✦ Several teachers now post attendance charts on the walls and award certificates for good

attendance at the end of each month. Some teachers take a photograph of all the students who achieved perfect attendance and post it in a prominent spot as a reminder.

- ✦ We have started posting the names of students who achieve perfect attendance for each month on a prominent bulletin board. Students regularly look for their names.

In the past few years, the average number of hours of attendance at the Genesis Center has increased markedly. In FY 2006, the average for all students was 108. Two years later, the average had jumped to 163 hours of attendance. We believe that an emphasis on improved attendance and increasing persistence can yield important benefits for any adult education program.

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