

The

Adult Basic Classroom

For Florida Adult Basic
Education Practitioners

VOLUME 2 - 2003

www.ABEFlorida.org

Where did all the students go?

Does it seem like the faces in your Adult Education classroom are forever changing? Some students we expect to not come back; many we are disappointed to see not come back. Often teachers wonder what they have done to turn a student away. But the most helpful answer comes to this question: What can I do to keep my students coming back?

KEEPING THOSE STUDENTS COMING

Good Teaching Is The Best Retainer

No matter what bells and whistles are played or what prizes are offered, nothing keeps students coming back for more like good teaching. All creatures repeat those things which reward them deeply. A student who learns, who becomes engaged in his work, who trusts and is trusted, wants to repeat the behavior that brought that about. He wants to be in class; he wants to do his work.

There are any number of things that a teacher can do to make the classroom *the place* to be. None of them require a continuing education course, a lot of time or a lot of money. They do require consistency, professionalism, and desire.

Take Care Of Your Classroom

The condition of the place in which you teach says a lot about your respect for the experience of learning. While it is true that ABE/ GED classrooms are often catch-as-catch can, there are basic things the teacher can do to make sure it is a learning environment. Your students are entitled to a clean, comfortable, and orderly environment. You prefer that, too. BUT...you are assigned a dump. What do you do? First of all, you make the administration aware. Secondly, you tackle your desk and those of your students. If they are not clean, scrub them. If yours is disorderly, have a neat desk at least when class begins. If the restrooms are less than aesthetic, bring in a plant, a can of cleanser and air freshener. Requisition paper towels, glass cleaner, etc. I hear you: "I'm not a janitor," you say. But you are a teacher and basic cleanliness is a life skill to teach. I know one teacher who had a really crummy floor in her unisex restroom. She salvaged a piece of linoleum and got the students to cut it to fit. The students learned a lot about measurement and geometry while they

did it. While you cannot require your students to clean your room, you can lure them into it. The resulting pride in their learning space and respect for their surroundings is invaluable. Let them see you washing a window - they will know you care.

Show Off Your Classroom and Your Students

Since you and they have spiffed the place up, you can have company. Invite in guest speakers relevant to current events or a subject being studied. Is there an election? Get in touch with one of the candidates and invite him to speak to your class. Prepare with a discussion of all the issues surrounding voting and suffrage. Involve vocabulary and the analytical reading of newspaper articles. Let the class construct questions to ask. Contact the Supervisor of Elections Office to become eligible to register your students to vote, or invite someone from their office to come to your classroom to register eligible students.

Let Your Students Lead

Encourage your students to socialize among themselves in the classroom in a productive manner - not in the parking lot with sodas and cigarettes. If they make friends with each other, they will keep each other coming. Encourage them to work in pairs. Let them organize a party - but make it a learning experience. They can create a chart listing what is required. They can decide who will do what. They can figure out what it will cost. They can write an essay about the experience or put together a recipe collection.

Keep Things Moving

In each situation above, please note that it is not what the teacher does but what the teacher orchestrates that results in a climate that allows students to be actively involved in making the classroom a place they want to be. Students who are actively involved in learning get hooked on learning.

One way to keep students actively involved is to provide more than bookwork for them to do. Have you considered the power of competition?

Everyone wants to win, even adults. Do you think that rewards are too elementary? Most people work for money and benefits and will do increased work or more difficult work for more money and better benefits. Isn't that a reward system? Are you concerned that if someone wins in your classroom then someone must lose? Not necessarily. Everyone can win if you structure competition that allows for across-the-board success just like a paycheck does. You aren't the only one who gets paid, are you? You may even want to let students call this their earned commission. One success-building game is THE THIRTY-DAY WONDER.

The Thirty- Day Wonder

At the beginning of the month, provide a calendar with one activity for each day. The rules of the game are to perform as many of the activities as possible by the end of the month. They can include such things as:

- Bring in an interesting news article.
- Report on something you heard on the news.
- Look in the mirror and tell yourself you are a good person.
- Compliment someone in the classroom.
- Ask a peer for help, etc.

At mid-month, have a drawing from the names of all students who have completed half of the activities. Award three or four prizes and continue the game.

At the end of the month, award a prize to anyone who completed all the activities. Then put everyone else's name in for a drawing for several more prizes.

So who comes up with these prizes - and what are they? They can be as minimal as an attractive folder, a ball-point pen, or a note pad. Merchants can be tapped for coupons or minimum-cost prizes. Pizza or fast-food coupons or even grocery coupons are usable depending on your class. How about magazines or a book you have finished? Use your imagination (and your friends' castoffs). The point is not the prize; it is the participation and the recognition.

Another way to keep students actively involved is to ask for more from them. Soap Opera Lessons work wonders in demanding student participation.

Soap Opera Lessons

Everyone gets caught up in soap operas—whether it is a daytime tearjerker or a prime time “West Wing.” Choose a piece of good literature that will be relevant to your class. A short story will work best—one that has weird characters and lots of action. Divide the story into about ten segments. Provide student copies of only one segment at a time on successive days of class. Keep a running chart on newsprint identifying characters and events. End each day's reading with a prediction of “What will happen next?” (Incidentally, you are also teaching deductive reasoning.) Just as tuning in a TV show becomes a habit, you can establish the habit of coming to the classroom. If a student comes faithfully for two weeks, the habit is established. They won't want to miss the next exciting episode.

Have An Open Door Policy

Even if you have a beautiful classroom, a rock star scheduled to speak and games with movie tickets as prizes, some students are going to miss class. And that draft you feel in your classroom is not from the masses leaving, but because of your open door policy. Adult students who are inconsistent in attendance must feel that they CAN return. Avoid putting up barriers to that return. You can't teach a student who isn't there.

To encourage students to return and make clear your open door policy, be sure to notice when a student is absent. Does that seem odd? Yet noticing when a student is absent doesn't mean you will fuss at a student

for being absent. A simple phone call to a student's home when he has been out for two days says loud and clear that you care and that you want him to come back. Make sure you talk to the student, not his roommate. Let him know you believe what he tells you. Don't wait a week to call. If the absence results from a problem in the classroom, you need to get on it right away. If it is an illness, you need to arrange for someone to pick up materials for the student to work on.

Students will be more likely to return if they feel they can talk to you. Listen to student problems. Whether baby-sitting, transportation, job hours, or a demanding spouse keeps a student from class, empathize and allow the student to confide in you. It goes without saying that a private place for talking needs to be available. It is not your job to solve the problem, but it is your place to lend an ear to the student's predicament.

Accept a returning student with open arms. There is no advantage in berating anyone about past absences. The student is back. Let him or her know they were missed. The other students will observe your behavior and know that they can come back if circumstances prevent their coming for a time.

Be flexible. Adults' lives are very demanding. Perhaps John cannot arrive until 30 minutes after class starts. Perhaps Mary cannot attend on Tuesdays. Accept what they can do and praise them for their efforts. Make sure that open door works for all students and for all situations.

Remember Whose Education It Is

Unless you are skilled in wrangling, you will not be able to lasso a reluctant student into the classroom and keep him there. His own effort and motivation keep the student there. Therefore, make the student responsible for his own education.

At intake, be certain he has a written list of classroom hours and expectations. Explain that what he learns depends on him, that you are only the facilitator for that learning. Make it clear to him - and to yourself - that your job does not depend on whether or not he attends, but his education and future rely upon whether he does.

You will at times have to address the issue of the student who is yo-yoing (coming for one session, missing the next two, etc.). First, try to determine the reason - job, children, or immaturity. Secondly, discuss with the student that you feel you cannot give him the education he needs because of your class hours. (Notice this is an “I” statement on your part, not an accusation of his laxity.) Offer to find him another class to attend that is more suited to his schedule. Many times this will shock the student back into regular attendance.

Do not take it personally if a student simply fails to attend class. Some adults still are not ready to learn.

Without A Lasso, How Do We Hold On?

Learn each student's dream; refresh it in his memory when you talk to him.

Expand awareness with new experiences - speakers, field trips.

Celebrate holidays and birthdays and learning the Times Table!

Keep them guessing. What will she do next? Vary the tools of your trade. Use videos, whiteboard, flip charts, posters, music.

Be human; tell of your experiences - successes and failures.

Encourage partnering and group work. Let the students teach each other.

Build student trust by demonstrating preparedness and confidence.

Exert enough control of your classroom to vary your established routine.

In Conclusion

Students come back when work in the classroom is meaningful, when they feel a part of the classroom group, when they feel they are important to the teacher and when their lives allow it. If you build a good classroom environment, they will come as much as humanly possible when they are ready. So build.

Editor: Margaret Wright-Cleveland
Contributing Writers: Fran Riotte
Margaret Wright-Cleveland
Editing: Glenda Anderson
Glenda Norvell

This newsletter was developed by the Adult Basic Education Practitioners' Committee with an Adult Education State Leadership Grant, 2002-2003, from the Florida Department of Education, Office of Workforce Education.

We hope you enjoy this newsletter. If you have any comments or questions, please contact Lynn Cunill, Leon County Schools Adult & Community Education, (850) 922-5343, cunilll@ACE-Leon.org