Focus on Basics

More Curriculum Structure: A Response to "Turbulence"

by John Strucker

"**A**ttendance turbulence" was coined by Tom Sticht and colleagues to describe the severe absenteeism and high dropout rates that characterize many classes of adult basic education (ABE) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) (Sticht et al., 1998). What's behind this turbulence? A decade of research by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) has shown that adult learners' relatively poor attendance and high dropout rates do not usually occur for trivial or frivolous reasons (see Comings et al., 1999; 2000). Most adult attendance and persistence

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WORLD EDUCATION

Welcome!

It's fitting that the final issue of NCSALL's *Focus on Basics* is filled with reports from NCSALL researchers across the country. Harvard-based John Strucker starts us off. Although adult basic education (ABE) students often have sporadic attendance, their interest in learning doesn't waiver. If we provide more structured curriculum, he suggests, students will be able to continue to study at home when they cannot come to class, and to pick up more easily when they return.

To make this argument, Strucker draws on the research of his NCSALL colleagues at Portland State University in Oregon, Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn. In their article (page 6) they share findings from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning, which, since 1998, has tracked Portland-area adults who dropped out of high school. Many of these adults engaged in self-study to increase their academic skills. Reder and Strawn suggest that as adult educators we should recast our thinking about our students, and redesign our policies and programs to support learners' self-study efforts.

Some adult educators have already done this. Lauri McLellan Schoneck, Florida, describes Seminole Community College's home study program, started and continuously refined since 1985 (page 11). Indiana's Molly K. Robertson describes GED on TV, a program that provides additional support to Indiana learners who are studying for the GED by watching a television series that helps viewers build the skills they need (page 13). A word of caution: both the Florida and Indiana programs experience the same retention problems more traditional ABE programs have. Self-study may be an additional tool; it doesn't seem to be a solution.

Once learners have a GED credential, gained through self- or classroom study or a combination of both, do they use it to enter postsecondary education? On surveys, many GED test-takers profess a desire to do so, but NCSALL researcher John Tyler, now at Brown University, Rhode Island, finds that only a small percentage actually enroll (page 14). While this seems like bad news, Tyler points out that the data come from the period preceding the growing consciousness among adult educators that the GED is not enough. His findings remind us that, to gain more than marginal economic advantage from the GED, ABE needs to strengthen its efforts to move learners into postsecondary education.

Over the past decade, NCSALL's Rima Rudd, based at the Harvard School of Public Health, has been a leader in bringing to light the links between literacy and health. She and Jennie E. Anderson describe a study they conducted to understand and document why navigating hospitals is so difficult. Both health care professionals and adult educators can play a role in making them more accessible (page 16).

We close the final issue of *Focus on Basics* with a piece written by NCSALL dissemination staffers Cristine Smith, Mary Beth Bingman, and Kaye Beall, who took the occasion to synthesize the professional wisdom they have garnered over the past 10 years (page 19). Enabling research to move into practice, they find, requires a simultaneous interplay of efforts: policy from the top down, and practitioners' involvement from the bottom up.

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For the past nine years I have had the privilege of working with adult basic educators as they crafted articles for *Focus on Basics*. Almost 220 people have written pieces, about 155 have served on editorial boards, and every state has been represented. I have learned from each issue and from each of you. I thank NCSALL and the field of ABE for giving me this rich vantage point for so many years. I hope I have been of service and that *Focus on Basics*, available at www.ncsall.net beyond the life of NCSALL, continues to be.

Sincerely,

Barbara Garner

Barbara Garner
Editor

More Curriculum Structure

problems stem from the inevitable demands of adult life: changes in job schedule; the need to take a second or third job; illness (sometimes chronic) of the students themselves, their children, or other family members; marital problems; and housing difficulties, to name just a few. Whether one is working toward a PhD or a GED, it is difficult to be a full-time parent, full-time wage earner, and full-time caregiver while also attending classes regularly.

However, despite adult learners' problems with attendance and completion, we also know that many remain quite persistent in their desire to learn. Research by Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn (2001) has shown that when adult learners drop out of their program-based learning, many reengage by returning to programs at a later date and by attempting to study on their own in the interim. Reder and Strawn also found that many adults in the ABE target population who have not enrolled in programs engage in self-study through personally-owned books, library resources, and Internet exploration (see the article on page 6 for more on this).

It's time to stop blaming adult learners for failing to attend classes regularly because they live adult lives. We need to admit that many learners will have difficulty attending classes consistently and completing programs on schedule. At the same time, we need to take advantage of their persistence and determination. These characteristics have implications for the ABE/ESOL system as a whole. For example, I've always wondered

why more ABE and ESOL programs don't offer weekend classes for people whose work week is full. In recent years the program I taught in, like many around the country, has moved away from open entry–open exit enrollment, which added new students as other students disappeared or completed. I applaud this trend. I also hope programs will avoid the temptation to fill seats by enrolling learners who have only the slimmest chances of

attending regularly or completing the course. Enrolling people who have little chance of persisting and succeeding is hurtful and disrespectful to them. It is also highly disruptive to teaching and to the learning of those learners who are able to stay and attend regularly.

In this article I take into account the realities of adult lives and provide some micro-implications for the classroom — how we design courses and how we teach — and some macro-suggestions for the system as a whole.

Teachers' Responses to Turbulence

When I was an ABE reading teacher, five out of the 10 learners who were present in my class on Monday night were often absent the following Wednesday. In their place

on Wednesday might be three or four learners who had not attended on Monday. Moreover, I knew that only 50 to 75 percent of those who began my classes in September would still be there in January. In any given class, I might be faced with missing students, a core of students with fairly regular attendance, a returning student or two whom I hadn't seen for a long time, and a totally new student enrolled from the waiting list.

I opted to make every class as self-contained and stand-alone as possible, planning each activity to begin and end within a single session. If students could only attend a fraction of their classes I would give them a few precious "reading vitamins" that might somehow pay off down the road. Every night I arrived in class with a brand new lesson in the form of three or four sets of photocopies: perhaps a short story for oral reading fluency, a paraphrased newspaper article with questions and a worksheet for comprehension and vocabulary, a spelling list culled from their writing miscues, and a stimulus for a writing assignment. My lesson plan addressed some components of reading, but it was seldom related to what we had done the night before, much less the week before. And worse, my teacher-made handouts were usually only available the night of the class, hot off the presses.

In retrospect my adaptation to irregular attendance was just plain wrong-headed. Self-contained and disconnected lessons are an especially bad idea for students who struggle with a particular skill or competency. To use an example from sports, imagine you want to learn to play golf, but you are not a particularly gifted athlete. If your golf teacher concentrates on your grip during one lesson, plays a few holes with you the next, works on your backswing during the following lesson, touches on putting next, then reviews the grip two weeks later, your golf game

probably would not improve much. Only the most gifted athletes could learn from such fragmentary lessons, and even they would probably not regard them as a good use of their time and money.

Other teachers I knew responded to turbulence differently, but with equally disastrous results. Like me they were sympathetic to the fact that many students' absences were not the result of irresponsibility or lack of dedication. They took the "lost sheep" approach: when a student missed a class or two — or four or five — they would abandon the rest of the class for 15 minutes or more while they caught up the returning student. Another strategy for sporadic attendance was "reviewing what we've reviewed." These teachers incorporated so much review into each class session that the students who had the best attendance were forced to follow the pace of those with the worst. It must have been disheartening. Why make a commitment to regular attendance if the class is designed to reward poor attendance? Some may have even concluded that with so much reviewing going on, it was a waste of time to attend every class. One step forward, two steps back.

Structure and Sequence

When learners have difficulty with a subject and they are not able to have near-perfect attendance, it is essential that individual lessons follow a predictable routine and be part of a sequence that is recognizable not only to the teacher but also to the students. What does this mean in practice? Imagine a typical ABE student, a single mother who has been attending her intermediate reading class fairly regularly. Without warning, her son's asthma acts up, and she has to take him to the emergency room and then to multiple follow-up appointments. She must also spend several evenings at home caring for him until he

improves. As a result, she is forced to miss six consecutive sessions of her reading class.

Like many adult learners, she is persistent and dedicated, and she returns to class as soon as humanly possible. When she finally returns, imagine how much easier it would be for her if the class had been following a similar routine every night. It would be even easier if those nightly routines were incorporated into a published syllabus that she had been given. She would know what she had missed during her absence and what to expect upon returning.

> **" . . . the teacher needs to employ a syllabus and stick to it . . . "**

For example, she would know that during the first 20 minutes the class would be doing collaborative oral reading from the same novel they had been reading before she left: a book she had been able to read at home and while waiting in the doctor's office. If the teacher was sticking to the syllabus, the student would even know how far the class had read in the novel. She could be confident that the next activity would be a lively give-and-take vocabulary discussion where students learned new word meanings from the teacher, created contexts for their use, and debated their understandings of the new words. The returning student would even know exactly which words had been covered while she was absent and which new words would be discussed that night because she had read the next chapters in the vocabulary workbook while she was absent. The last activity of the evening would be a brief writing assignment based on the vocabulary lesson, or a bit of silent reading from a regular nonfiction text in science or social studies; she would also have a copy of this text at home.

I am not advocating that we revert to multiple-choice workbooks and the "butterfly teacher" who flits from learner to learner, stopping just long enough to place red marks on incorrect answers. I am advocating active teaching: whole group and small group activities with plenty of teacher/learner and learner/learner interaction and abundant real-time feedback to learners. In the hypothetical case above, the vocabulary workbook is intended as a springboard to discussion, not a substitute for it.

Two essential elements create effective structure. Student should own their own books and workbooks, and the teacher needs to employ a syllabus and stick to it, no matter how much turbulence occurs in attendance from night to night or week to week.

Is it feasible for students to own their books? I think it is. If programs cannot afford to supply books free to students, then students would indeed have to buy them. Already many General Educational Development (GED) programs expect students to purchase their own books. And if our students are successful in ABE or ESOL and go on to the next phase of adult education — community college — they will be expected to buy their college texts.

Is it feasible to stick to a syllabus in ABE or ESOL classes? For intermediate, pre-GED, and GED levels of reading and math and for ESOL at intermediate and above it is eminently feasible. However, it won't be a "no-brainuh," as we say in New England. It will take hard work to create workable and effective syllabi. Teachers will have to share knowledge and experiences about what materials work best with various levels of students, and they will have to figure out an optimal pace of instruction, one that works for most students.

Adhering rigidly to the timetable of a syllabus probably does not make sense for beginning reading or beginning ESOL classes. Teachers of beginners need to adjust the rate at

which the basic building blocks of reading or English are presented. Beginning readers have little choice but to attend class regularly because it is almost impossible for them to practice the skills they need on their own or outside of class. Although a fixed timetable may not work for them, beginners thrive on structure. Research strongly suggests that beginning reading should be taught using one of the "structured language" approaches such as Orton-Gillingham or the Wilson Reading System, where the scope and sequence is clearly mapped out, even while the rate at which the material is presented depends on students' progress (Kruidenier, 2002).

With regard to the use of syllabi, why shouldn't adult basic education more closely resemble the "other," more privileged adult education: postsecondary education? When our students reach community college they will find that most teachers employ a syllabus and attempt to stick to it regardless of fluctuations in attendance and enrollment.

To summarize, more classroom structure would enable ABE and ESOL students to know exactly what to expect during each session and exactly what material the class covered when they were absent or had to drop out. The structure would not only help those learners with attendance problems, it would also help those who attend regularly because their progress would no longer be determined by those who attend sporadically. Even students who are eventually forced to drop out for long stretches would at least be able to attempt self study from their books until they can return.

Dream a Little

If we let ourselves dream a little, we can imagine face-to-face ABE and ESOL courses having parallel and supporting online courses. If the online courses were able to employ evolving computer capabilities for speech recognition, intermediate readers could practice oral reading for

accuracy and fluency on their own, or continue to practice reading independently when they could not attend classes. I am not advocating that online learning be substituted for face-to-face learning; the latter is far superior for too many reasons to list here. But parallel online courses could prevent those who are forced to drop out or those who attend sporadically from falling so far behind that they become discouraged and no longer persist.

Dreaming more grandiosely, what if ABE and ESOL courses were closely aligned in structure, scope, and sequence across a whole state or region? ABE and ESOL learners frequently move from place to place in search of better housing, better employment, or for family reasons. Wouldn't it be to their advantage if, when they re-enrolled in a new program, they found the same array of courses they had been taking at their old program? A student could tell the staff of her new program, "Last year I completed ESOL 2 in Cambridge. I think I'm ready for ESOL 3 here in Lowell."

A uniform and consistent curriculum is not as far-fetched as it sounds. To an extent we already have this with the GED: one set of tests and one set of subject areas around which to organize classes. In the

United Kingdom practitioners and researchers took a bold step two years ago by creating national curricula for adult literacy, math, and ESOL. These national curricula allow learners to know precisely where they are in their overall progress and what competencies and skills they will be tackling next. In their famous spirit of muddling through, our British counterparts did not insist that their new curricula be absolutely perfect and completely research-vetted before implementing them. They designed them using the best available evidence and professional wisdom from researchers and practitioners, and they assumed their new curricula would need some tinkering and adjustments as they go along. A major evaluation is now in progress; the results should be very informative.

In Conclusion

When I used to plan those self-contained lessons every night some lessons soared, but others bombed. I was, however, very proud of myself for being so creative. If I were to return to the classroom today and follow my own advice by sticking to the syllabus and making use of texts the students can take home, I might feel less creative. But, as Mary Beth Curtis,

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Exploring These Ideas

You may want to discuss these ideas in a staff meeting. Here are some questions to get you started:

1. Is turbulence a problem at our adult literacy site?

2. How do we think it affects student learning, not just for those who drop in and out, but also for those who persist?

3. How have we tried to cope with turbulence on a site-wide basis? Which of our techniques have been most effective, and why?

4. On a scale of one to five, where one is "varied and highly flexible" and five is "highly structured and predictable", how would we describe our approach to curriculum?

5. Would more structure [in the ways discussed by Strucker] tend to help or hurt our students? Why or why not?

6. If we think more structure would be helpful, what type of learners would most benefit from it?

7. What changes might we want to try based on Strucker's article and our discussion? ❖

the designer of the Boys and Girls Town Reading Program, often reminds teachers who view structure and routine as a curtailment of their creativity, "It's not about you."

This is not a bad mantra as we discuss ways to reform and reshape the ABE/ESOL system. Let's start by building a system that responds to the lives adult learners actually lead. More structured and predictable classes may serve as a counterbalance to the often unpredictable demands of family and work. 📖

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About the Author

John Strucker is the director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education Adult Reading Lab. A NCSALL researcher, he was the principal investigator on two large-scale research projects, the "Adult Reading Components Study" and "Components and IALS," a study done in partnership with Educational Testing Service. He is currently the principal investigator on a study testing an adaptation of the Boys Town Reading Program for use with adults. Before joining NCSALL, he taught adult literacy and ESOL for 11 years at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. ❖

Self-Study: Broadening the Concepts of Participation and Program Support

by Stephen Reder & Clare Strawn

Self-study can be defined as working on one's own to improve reading, writing, or math skills or to prepare for the tests of General Educational Development (GED). We now know that it is a widespread mode of basic skills development among adults who did not complete high school. Self-study occurs widely among participants in adult basic education (ABE) programs as well as among high school non-completers who do not participate in ABE. In 1998, when the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) launched its Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL), the prevalence of self-study among those without a high school diploma may have been suspected but was not well documented.

The LSAL sample started with 940 high school non-completers from metropolitan Portland, Oregon, who ranged in age from 18 to 44 years old and did not have GED credentials in 1997; about 93 percent remain in the study. Five waves of data were collected over the course of seven years. Early data indicated that of those in the study who had participated in a formal ABE class prior to 1998, nearly half (46 percent) had also engaged in self-study to improve their reading, writing, or math skills or to prepare for the

GED. Among those in the population who had never participated in an ABE program, one in three (34 percent) had engaged in self-directed efforts to improve their basic skills. The prevalence of self-study we were seeing broadened our view of how adults create literacy learning opportunities for themselves. To understand better the implications of our initial findings, we added questions about self-directed efforts to the study. In this article we share several new findings that deepen our understanding of self-study and its implications for the field of adult basic education.

Part of a Continuum

The LSAL research indicates that self-study should be viewed as being on a continuum with, rather than an alternative to, classroom-based instruction. Most adults who have tried in one way or another to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED have tried both self-study and participating in a course. By the time we collected the fourth wave of data, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the adults in the study had engaged in self-study since leaving high school. Self-study and program participation appear to be complementary approaches. Some individuals use only one of the two approaches, many use both, and some use neither. The largest group within the study population used both approaches.

Figure 1 shows the percentages, cumulative through the fourth wave of data, of the population in four exhaustive, mutually exclusive categories of participation: individuals who neither engaged in self-study nor

Figure 1: Self-Study and Participation

65% have self-studied

61% have taken adult ed

(between leaving school and Wave 4)
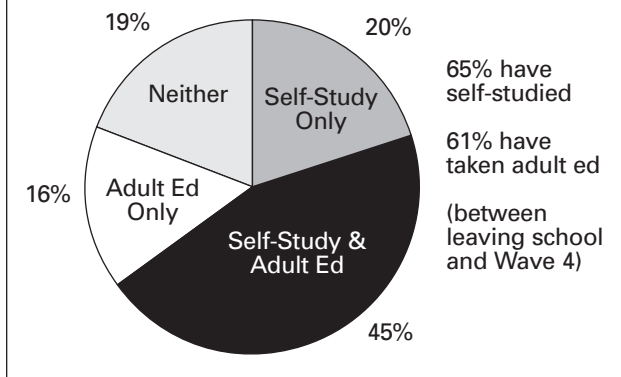
attended a program (19 percent); individuals who attended a program but never engaged in self-study (16 percent); individuals who engaged in self-study but never attended a program (20 percent); and individuals who both engaged in self-study and attended a program (45 percent). When we look closely at the temporal patterns among those who used both approaches, we see examples of individuals who began with a period of self-study and later attended a program, as well as individuals who attended a program and later engaged in a period of self-study. These patterns are consistent with the notion of active learners who use both approaches as resources to support learning, using each as it fits life circumstances or needs for assistance.

Furthermore, the majority of the LSAL population who participated in programs, when asked to describe them, reported that the programs included a substantial amount of individual work in non-classroom settings as well as direct instruction in larger groups or classroom settings. Many of the local ABE and GED programs serving the LSAL population include learning centers or computer labs where learners work individually, supplemented by on-demand instructional assistance. In some respects, existing program practices already include activities similar to facilitated self-study.

Self-Study for What?

Individuals who engaged in self-study were asked whether their self-study was intended to prepare for the GED; improve their reading, writing, or math skills; or both prepare for the GED and improve their skills. About one in four (24 percent) of those who engaged in self-study indicated they did so only to prepare for the GED; nearly one half (45 percent) indicated they engaged in self-study to improve their skills (but not to prepare for the GED); and nearly one in three (30 percent) indicated that they engaged in self-study to improve their skills and prepare for the GED. Thus more than one half (54 percent) of those who engaged in self-study did so (at least in part) to prepare for the GED.

We asked individuals who indicated their self-study was, at least in part, to prepare for the GED about the topics for which they were preparing. Since obtaining a GED requires passing five individual tests, it is not surprising that the majority of those engaging in self-study to prepare for the GED focused on the test topics. Almost everyone focused on math, although more than three quarters also focused on writing and language arts.

Skill Levels Vary

Adults with relatively weak basic skills were just as likely to engage in self-study as those with higher levels of proficiency. In fact, as literacy proficiencies rise, adults in the LSAL sample became less likely to engage in self-study to improve their basic skills. About one half of the adults assessed at the lowest proficiency level had engaged in self-study, with progressively declining proportions as assessed skill levels increased. At relatively high levels of proficiency, of course, one might expect adults' felt needs for improved basic skills to diminish, lowering their tendency to self-study to improve those skills. The fact that a substantial proportion (more than 30 percent) of adults at even the highest levels of proficiency engaged in self-study indicates that adults seek to improve their basic skills even beyond the levels needed to pass the GED tests.

Self-Study with What?

Figure 2 exhibits the frequency that various types of materials were used in self-study activities. The most common types were workbooks

Figure 2: Self-Study: Material Used
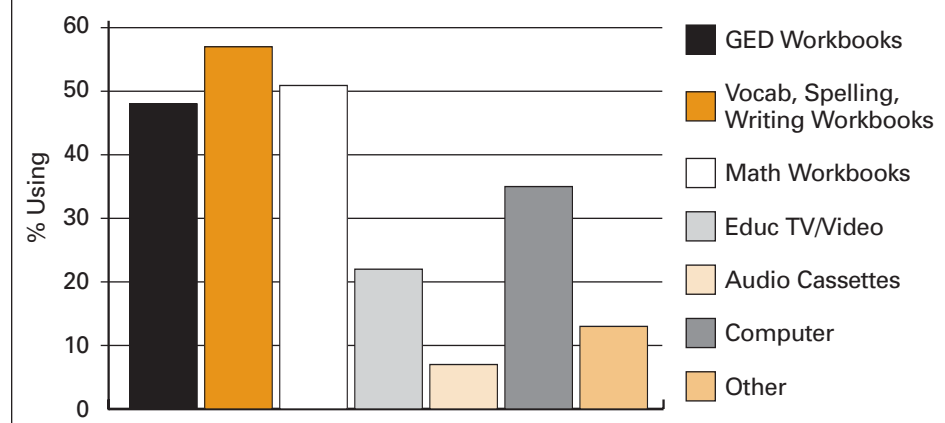
designed specifically for GED preparation and workbooks designed to help individuals improve their math skills or their vocabulary, spelling, or writing. More than one third (35 percent) reported using computer-based materials for self-study when asked in the third wave of data collection in 2000-2001. The rapid increase in the use of computer technologies that we observed in the LSAL population over the four subsequent years suggests that the computer will quickly become the medium of choice for self-study as well.

GED Received?

Figure 3 shows that only 10 percent of individuals who neither participated in a program nor engaged in self-study received a GED. Many in this "Neither" group had no intention of obtaining a GED, but those in the Neither group who received a GED were among the sizable number of GED test takers who report not preparing at all for the tests (Baldwin et al., 1995). About 17 percent of those who participated in a basic skills program but did not self-study received their GED, comparable with 24 percent of those who engaged in self-study but did not participate in a program. The highest percentage of GED attainment (27 percent) was observed among those who did both.

These data seem to indicate that both program participation and self-study, whether occurring alone or in combination, are associated with GED attainment. This is of course what we expect to see for program participation, since GED attainment has been the historical mission of adult education programs. Perhaps less expected is the association between self-study and GED attainment, a relationship that appears at least as strong as that between program participation and GED attainment.

A similar pattern of outcomes can be seen in adults' own perceptions of their skill development. Starting with the second wave of data, in each wave we asked individuals about changes in their reading, writing, and math skills since the preceding wave. For each skill domain, respondents reported changes in their frequency of using the skill in daily life, in using the skill in new ways, and in changes in their

overall skill level. For each skill area, the same ordering of improvement appeared across the four participation subpopulations that we saw for GED

> **"To support this expanded notion of the adult literacy learner, programs need to expand their services to support learning for adults engaged in self-study activities."**

attainment in Figure 3. The least change was reported by the subpopulation that neither went to programs nor engaged in self-study, the most change by the people who did both, with intermediate levels of change in the groups that used only one of the two approaches.

We should be careful interpreting these differences in GED attainment percentages or measures of skill development among these participation groups. Individuals self-select themselves into the four participation groups and the four subpopulations may thus be quite different, so that differences in outcome measures may not directly reflect the differential effectiveness of various modes of participation. Additional modeling and analyses are underway to clarify the interpretation of these data.

Implications for Program and Policy

If adult literacy programs are thought of as supporting self-study as well as providing classes, adult literacy programs could serve more learners (since many adults self-study who never come to formal classes), attract new learners to classes (since some adults who self-study might later attend classes), and increase the

Figure 3: Percent GED Attainment by Program Participation and Self-Study
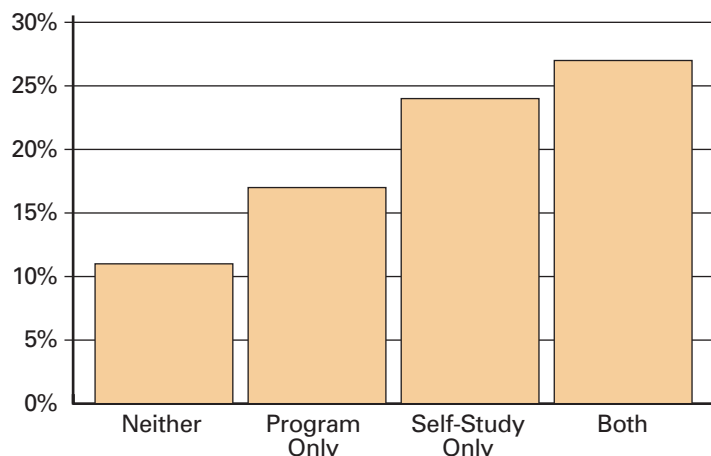
overall persistence of adult literacy learning (since many adult literacy learners engage in self-study and attend classes at different points in time).

Recognizing self-study as a legitimate aspect of adult literacy demands a broader conception of the adult literacy learner. This is a learner who chooses among a range of literacy development strategies and resources, including self-study, attending classes, working with a tutor or mentor, and so forth (Wikelund et al.,1992). Differences among learners' preferred modes of learning, life circumstances, and accessibility of learning resources shape their choices about how to pursue literacy development. Over time, as learners' needs and goals, life situations, and understandings of learning resources change, the literacy learning strategies and resources used may change as well (see, for example, Beder, 1991; Belzer, 1998).

To support this expanded notion of the adult literacy learner, programs need to expand their services to support learning for adults engaged in self-study activities. Such expansion may require changes in policy and program design. Policy changes at the federal, state, or local levels may be needed so that programs can utilize adult education funds to support self-study. Issues may need to be resolved about the eligibility of self-study learners for official enrollment counts, about assessing their skills and progress, and about other aspects of accountability required by various categories of federal and state funds. In many respects, these policy and administrative issues may be similar to those already being addressed by some programs for students engaged in various forms of distance rather than on-site learning activities.

New program designs are needed to facilitate and support the learning of adults engaged in self-study and to link self-study activities with program services. Learners engaged in self-study may benefit from assistance with identifying learning goals, skill assessment, selection of study materials (whether print-based, online, or multimedia), mentoring or tutoring, progress assessment, and so forth. Not all such support materials and services need to be newly developed; many usable materials and services may exist and others could be used in facilitating self-study. LSAL has identified a range of materials in terms of content and media already being used by adults engaged in self-study. Frequently mentioned examples included study guides for the individual GED tests, skill workbooks, and GED practice tests.

Other types of adult literacy services could also be included as learning support resources. On-demand tutoring or mentoring, for example, could effectively be provided to some learners engaged in self-study at home. Homework hotlines, one of which is described briefly in the article on page 13, in which students working at home call in for assistance, may be useful. Many community-based organizations — both those that provide adult literacy programs and those that do not — offer a range of services, social net-

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The LSAL

The Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) addresses four major research questions about adult literacy:

- To what extent do adults' literacy abilities continue to develop after they are out of school?
- What are adult learners' patterns of participation over time in literacy training and education? In other learning contexts?
- What life experiences are associated with adult literacy development? How do formally organized basic skills programs contribute to these learning trajectories? Workplace training? Other contexts and activities?
- What are the impacts of adult literacy development on social and economic outcomes?

The LSAL was designed as a panel study, representative of a local (rather than a national) target population for adult literacy education. This target population was defined as residents of the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area ranging in age from 18 to 44 years old, proficient but not necessarily native English speakers, high school dropouts (i.e., did not receive a high school diploma and were no longer enrolled in school) who had not received a GED or other high school equivalency credential. The LSAL sample contained 940 individuals and was weighted so that population statistics could be estimated from the sample data. A series of five interviews and skills assessments — called "waves" — were conducted with each respondent over a period of seven years. Data from Waves 1 to 4 have been analyzed and are discussed in this article. About 93 percent of the original sample has been retained through Wave 4.

LSAL considers self-study to be "studying on your own to improve your reading, writing, or math skills or prepare for the GED". In each wave, a few baseline questions were asked about self-study, with both question wording and interviewer training designed so that respondents reported only self-study activities intended to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED. In Wave 3, interviewers probed more deeply into the nature of self-study activities, asking respondents about the purposes, timing and intensity of their self-study activities, the particular skills they had worked to improve, and the materials they used in self-study. The researchers distinguished, for respondents who reported both self-study and participation in formal literacy programs, between teacher-assigned and self-initiated study activities.

For more about the LSAL, see *Focus on Basics* 4D (Reder & Strawn, 2001a, b) http://www.ncsall.net/?id=288 and http://www.ncsall.net/?id=287. ❖

works, and contexts essential for engaging, motivating and supporting adult learning. Two examples of programs that support self-study are featured in other articles in this issue, on pages 11 and 13. A broader model for facilitated self-study, the Learner Web, will be piloted and evaluated in selected sites across the country (see the box, below).

In Conclusion

The LSAL has introduced self-study into the national conversation about ABE. With funding from the National Institute for Literacy, a sixth wave of data will be collected. Once the data are completely analyzed, other variables such as age, gender, and whether individuals had the goals of obtaining a GED or improving their basic skills can be considered in more systematic interpretations. Future analyses and publications will explore how

self-study and program participation affect the growth of literacy proficiencies and everyday literacy practices across the adult lifespan. More research needs to be done to understand how effective self-study is carried out and can be supported. In the meantime, teachers and programs can query their students to find out whether they study on their own, and to encourage them to do so. Teachers can find out what kinds of support learners need to self-study, and experiment with providing it. Programs can share their results on the *Focus on Basics* discussion list, so all can benefit as we broaden our concepts of programs and participation.

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About the Authors

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Clare Strawn is Assistant Professor at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, and has worked on the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning since 1997. She is interested in the intersection of learning and community development, social capital influences on learning strategies, and technology. ❖

The Learner Web

The Learner Web (LW) is a Web- and telephone-accessed application that provides customized, guided instructional support to adults seeking to improve their basic skills, prepare for the GED, or pursue other learning goals such as citizenship, family literacy, or college prep. The LW makes resources accessible to learners on their own time and in their own environment. A learner's goals and skill needs are matched to supportive resources available online or offline in the local community. Learners can also be connected with volunteer tutors. The LW is designed to support and enhance, not replace, existing educational programs and resources in the community.

By better connecting adults' self-study activities with programs and other resources in their communities, the LW will extend the reach and enhance the impact of learning already taking place. Using its database, the LW generates a customized list of resources and tools that match a learner's goal, needs, skill level and step of a plan (e.g., online resources for improving basic math skills in preparation for taking the GED Math Test). Adults may find the LW directly on the Internet or be referred to it by local organizations. Individuals can easily create their own logins, using screen names if anonymity is desired. A ZIP code is used to identify appropriate local resources.

Distance education systems, Web sites, print materials, and other supports are entries (called Resources) in the LW database that are matched to adults' individual goals, needs, skills and plans. In this way, the LW connects with and leverages other programs and resources. It connects learners with tutors, helpers, and counselors either through the Internet, over the telephone, or face-to-face in their local communities, depending on the preferences of learners and local partnering organizations. An online learner history and work portfolio can be shared by and help coordinate the efforts of the various assistants who work with a given learner.

For more information about the Learner Web, write to info@learnerweb.org. ❖

More Information Available

Readers interested in more information about the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning, and obtaining future reports of its findings, should check the project's Web site, http://www.lsal.pdx.edu.

Distance Learning as a Backup

A community college's distance learning program also serves those who would otherwise stop out

by Lauri McLellan Schoneck

Adults interested in receiving a State of Florida High School Diploma by passing the tests of General Educational Development (GED) in Seminole County, Florida, can attend GED classes at Seminole Community College (SCC) in Sanford, Altamonte Springs, or Oviedo. Or they can contact the SCC Adult Basic Education (ABE)/GED department and enroll in a distance learning option, now known as GED Home Study/GED Online, and bypass the traditional classroom altogether. Many of the students who choose Home Study have non-traditional work schedules, no transportation options, family obligations, chronic illnesses, or a lack of the funds or the resources for childcare. Still others have never felt comfortable in a classroom setting. The flexibility of any time, any place, anywhere, and any pace is very appealing to this population of adults. Irene Paino, a GED Online instructor, explains, "About 70 percent of our Home Study enrollment is students who have sought out an alternative to the typical classroom." The low cost may also be a draw: The program is free except for the cost of the GED test, which is $50.

During its first 18 years, SCC's GED distance learning program accepted almost everyone. However, the program's lower-level students were experiencing frustration and failure; almost 60 percent dropped out each

term. So, in 2003 eligibility criteria were instituted. To be eligible, SCC GED Home Study/GED Online students must score grade-level 9.0 for reading and grade-level 6.0 for math and language on Form D of the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE). After passing the TABE test, potential students are interviewed. During the interview they learn about the participation requirements, which include completing and returning a weekly activity log, calling or e-mailing the instructor at least once a week, spending at least six hours a week on GED study activities, completing study and test packets in a timely manner, and taking semester-end TABE tests on campus. The impetus for these elements, notes Paino, is the learners' need for structure: "Students need frequent interaction with their instructors to be successful in this program." Paino believes that as a direct result of these requirements, about 20 percent of the students attempt and pass the GED test each 16-week term, receiving (according to Florida policy) a State of Florida High School Diploma.

During the interview, students are also introduced to key program features, such as GED Online, added in 2001 and used by more than half of the Home Study program, and GED on TV, which is offered through Daytona Beach Community College. (See the article on page 13 for more on GED on TV.) As SCC students they can use SCC's disability support services; counseling and advisement center; libraries; and for help with resumes and job placements, SCC's career center. They also receive the bi-monthly *GED Home Study/GED Online Newsletter,* which provides reminder dates, test anxiety and preparation strategies, and practice questions and inspirational quotes.

According to the Home Study coordinator, Sandra Fernandez, "Most students know [by the end of the interview] whether or not they have the self discipline to successfully participate in the program. We refer those who don't to the classroom. There are three ABE/GED outreach study centers and three campus sites across Seminole County."

One of the newer and more appealing features of GED Home Study is the GED Online program. "Over 50 percent of the students that utilize our Home Study program also make use of the GED Online piece," explains Paino. Online enrollment averages 25 students per semester, with last semester having enrolled a record-breaking 37 students. GED Home Study/GED Online student Cathy Fish is excited about the downloadable study materials and worksheets, bulletin boards, instructor chats, tutoring, and other Web-based resources: "It's very beneficial to me [to have GED Online] because of the times you can use it, the programs you can get into, and the help from the coordinators, Irene Paino and Sandra Fernandez. GED Online has helped me, and my test scores are improving."

Stopping Out to Home Study

Nearly one third of the GED Home Study/GED Online program's 115 participants have come from the traditional campus classrooms. Whenever students communicate to their instructors that something has or is going to disrupt their lives, instructors can refer them to the GED Home Study/GED Online Program. Through Home Study, students can keep up with their GED studies while taking care of their immediate or imminent problems.

One such student was a young woman with an anxiety disorder. She thought she could handle being around others while participating in a class, but could not. Home Study gave her a way to prepare for her GED

tests without triggering her social fears. Another student requested Home Study late in a pregnancy so she could care for her newborn and continue studying. Yet someone else severely injured his arm on the job. His instructors had him enrolled in Home Study within a day. The GED Home Study/GED Online Program is a highly regarded resource for our instructors. As an ABE/GED instructor myself, I love the fact that GED Home Study/GED Online exists. There is nothing like helping students see that they don't have to postpone their studies when circumstances prevent them from attending classes. Our best guess is that two or three students go from the classroom to Home Study and then back to the classroom each year, some because they use Home Study as a temporary solution to a life event, others because they realize that they need the classroom structure and routine.

Not Perfect

The potential of the GED Home Study/GED Online program seems limitless. In reality, SCC's Home Study program is plagued by many of the same problems that traditional classrooms face. The program now has an annual dropout rate of 40 percent. As researcher Alisa Belzer (1998) writes, "The question of how to improve student retention cannot be solved with simple or single answers. The same obstacles or supports can create different outcomes for different students. Since often many complicated and interrelated factors are involved in the decision to continue participation in a program, a simple or single solution may make no difference."

SCC's GED Home Study/GED Online Program is neither simple nor does it offer a single solution to the overwhelming challenge of adult student retention. Although the program eliminates many of the obstacles adult students face, it does not eliminate the need for motivation, self discipline, and the time needed to do the work.

Still Evolving

SCC's Home Study Program has been in place for more than 21 years. Since 2001 alone, approximately 575 students have participated. In May, 2006, the total number of students who enrolled in the combined GED Home Study/GED Online program for the 2005-06 school year, which ended the first week in August, 2006, was 89. Soon the program will undergo two more changes. The plan is to purchase the TABE online and eliminate a student's need to come to campus for basic testing. All coordination of score reports and scheduling activities will be done by e-mail or telephone to give students complete at-home service. Also, a grant recently awarded to the program by SCC's Staff and Program Development Committee will enable the GED Home Study/GED Online program to purchase and maintain a lending library. This library will allow home study students to borrow materials such as GED textbooks, calculators, and guides for using the calculators.

From its humble beginnings as an at-home study series in 1985 to the complex and comprehensive program it is now, the program will continue to grow and expand as the demand for alternatives to the traditional classroom increases in our area.

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About the Author

Lauri McLellan Schoneck is a professor at Seminole Community College, where she teaches ABE and GED math courses. A graduate of Florida State University, she has her master's in special education and has taught both K-12 students and adults. She is currently serving a second term on the Florida Department of Education Practitioners' Task Force on Adults with Learning Disabilities as a community college representative. ❖

The GED Via TV

by Molly K. Robertson
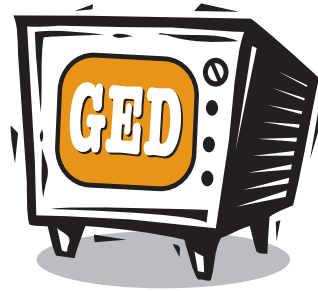
What happens to adult students who are afraid to go to a classroom, who can't afford the gas to drive to classes, who work during the times classes are available, who have small children and no child care, or who simply have no transportation? In Indiana they can enroll in the statewide GED ON TV program. The series of 39 half-hour GED Connection television programs is broadcast throughout the state on the eight Indiana Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) channels and is carried on dozens of cable channels.

The GED Connection series produced by Kentucky Educational Television (KET) includes programs that cover the reading, social studies, science, writing, and math skills many adults need to improve to earn the Indiana GED High School Diploma. Additional practice for each lesson is available online for those who have access to the Internet. Unfortunately, according to our enrollment data, only 40 percent of Indiana's GED ON TV learners have Internet access from home; the other 60 percent make do without the online support.

Enroll by Telephone

Learners call a toll-free telephone number to enroll and receive books by United Parcel Service. The cost to the student is $45, which covers pre- and post-testing, three workbooks, a calculator like the one needed to take the GED, and a voucher to pay for the GED test at any Indiana GED testing site. Testing sites in Indiana are allowed to charge up to $60 for GED testing so it is a bargain for the learner. GED ON TV is funded by the Indiana Legislature through the Indiana Department of Education, Division of Adult Education.

GED ON TV is not for everyone. Potential students take a pretest at home; those who demonstrate a reading level above grade 8.5 and a math level above grade 7.5 on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) may enroll. The most successful students read at the 10th grade level when they begin. Motivation may be the trickiest part for learners who study alone at home. Throughout the series, students receive newsletters and bi-weekly calls from the GED ON TV staff, who ask how they are doing and what help they need. We remind them that if they miss a TV program, they should nonetheless do the homework chapter in the workbook and call for any help they need. A toll-free GED Helpline is also available, but it is not often used. As one student said, "I'm glad to know you're there, but when I have a question I ask my husband!"

The Indiana GED ON TV program recently started offering KET's Pre-GED Connection series for those who read between the sixth and eighth grade levels. It is new this year, and we won't know how it works as distance learning for a while, although five learners have moved on to GED-level study and one has earned a GED. Adults who pretest below the sixth grade level receive a refund and the telephone numbers of local classroom-based programs.

Once Enrolled, Always Enrolled

Since the program expanded to serve the entire state in 1990, more than 7,600 Hoosier adults have earned their GED certificates after studying with the GED ON TV programs from home. Periodically we send a letter to all prior non-completers, reminding them that they can re-enroll and try again. They are always re-enrolled for free and also granted a test-fee voucher. In 2004 a number of re-enrolled learners passed: one who had originally enrolled in 1991, one from 1995, one from 1997, and three from 1998.

The 7,600 GED completers represent 90 of Indiana's 92 counties; 74 percent are women and the average last grade completed is 10th. They range in age from 16 years old to 92. Over the years the age of our learners has consistently decreased. In the first decade the median age was 34; now it is 26. On a 2003 GED ON TV student survey, one learner wrote, "GED ON TV helped refresh my memory on subjects I had learned years ago."

Another wrote, "I taped the programs so that I could watch them over again, especially the math." These adult learners truly value the opportunity to study from home with GED ON TV in Indiana.

About the Author

Molly K. Robertson is the founding director of the Indiana GED ON TV program. She left high school at 16, earned a GED in 1982, and holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's in telecommunications. She lives in Muncie, Indiana, with two large, rowdy, black poodles. ❖

Is the GED an Effective Route to Postsecondary Education?

A Conversation with John Tyler

by Barbara Garner

Recognizing that high school is not enough, growing numbers of adult basic education programs (ABE) are emphasizing the transition to postsecondary education. What impact does earning a certificate of General Educational Development (GED) have on the post-secondary enrollment of high school dropouts? Brown University professor and NCSALL researcher John Tyler and a colleague, Magnus Lofstrom of the University of Texas at Dallas, examined this question using data from Texas. Focus on Basics asked John Tyler to summarize the results and discuss the questions they raise.

"These days," Tyler explains, "a postsecondary degree is necessary for economic success. Most academic programs in postsecondary institutions require some kind of school leaving credential, for example a high school diploma or a GED, for acceptance into the program.

"With about three quarters of a million people a year trying to obtain the GED, a logical question is: To what extent is the GED an effective route to postsecondary education programs relative to what would have happened to dropouts had they stayed in school?"

One challenge in studying the issue is finding an appropriate comparison group to use. The idea is to set up a situation that lets you compare GED holders with people who are similar to the GED holders in all ways but the GED. That makes the GED the difference. We can't randomly assign individuals to drop out and obtain a GED or stay in school and graduate. Instead, statistical methods are used to control for factors that may differ systematically between GED holders and regular high school graduates, such as race, gender, socio-economic status, and academic ability leaving the GED *vs.* the high school diploma as the major difference between the groups.

Uncredentialed dropouts — those with neither a high school diploma nor a GED — face barriers to getting into postsecondary school. "If we were to compare the postsecondary experiences of GED holders to those of uncredentialed dropouts," explains Tyler, "we might be measuring the

effectiveness of the gatekeeping mecha-nism at postsecondary institutions. So we need to compare GED holders with others who hold some kind of school leaving certification, and thus have an equal chance of admission to a postsecondary academic program."

Tyler and Lofstrom used data from the cohort of Texas students who should have graduated from high school in 1998 and who scored similarly on the math portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) they took as eighth graders in the 1993-94 academic years. With these data they created three comparison groups. One group was GED holders. A second group was students who were held back one or more years while they were in high school and eventually graduated, but graduated a year or two after the cohort with which they originally started first grade. The other comparison group was those who were labeled as "at risk" (as defined by the Texas Education Agency) in the eighth grade, but who graduated on time, and also scored similarly to the GED holders on the math portion of the TAAS in eighth grade.

Tyler describes the findings on these 1990s students as confirming what he and researchers Dick Murnane and John Willett (2000) had found using a national data set of students: low postsecondary enrollment rates for GED holders who left high school in the 1980s. In the current study, describes Tyler, "we followed the 1998 [Texas] cohort to 2001. For all high school

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Findings Based on Texas School Panel Data

1998 Cohort using a 3-year window (4-year window for cert. and grad.)

	Enrolled w/n 3 yrs	Accumulated Credits	Certification from 2 yr	Graduated 2 yr
GEDs	20%	7.3	<1%	<1%
All HS Grads	59%	32.8	2%	4%
At-Risk HS Grads	38%	15.6	2%	2%
Late HS Grads	8%	1.8	<1%	<1%

graduates — on time or late graduates — 59 percent enrolled in postsecondary education within three years. Of those at risk who graduated on time, 38 percent enrolled in postsecondary within three years (see the table on page 14). Only eight percent of late high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education within three

> **"**Only 20 percent of GED holders enrolled in a postsecondary institution in Texas within three years of getting the GED. That's not good for GED holders.**"**

years. Only 20 percent of GED holders enrolled in a postsecondary institution in Texas within three years of getting the GED. That's not good for GED holders."

The study revealed that GED holders are only showing 7.3 accumulated enrolled credits within three year (that's enrolling, not necessarily finishing). In contrast, the at risk high school graduates are enrolling for 15.6 credits; all high school grads are enrolling for 32.8. GED holders are really looking different from the groups who completed high school on time. This is important to know because other research (Kane & Rouse, 1995) has shown that even a year of postsecondary credits seems to have an impact on earnings.

Tyler also points out that when they examined the data four years after graduation, fewer than one percent of GED holders had achieved an Associate's degree; about four percent of regular high school completers had earned an Associate's; and about two percent of the at risk students had earned the two-year degree.

"It reinforces," he says, "what

we've found in earlier data. The contribution of this work is that we are able to start with a cohort of eighth graders, match them on observable characteristics such as gender, race, family economics, AND on eighth grade test scores. Perhaps this result is not too surprising. My understanding is that as of 2001 (when we looked at postsecondary outcomes), it had only been a few years since a big emphasis on moving from GED into postsecondary has been made in the field."

Assuming that this snap shot is accurate, and that high school completers enroll in and receive postsecondary credits and degrees at markedly higher rates than GED holders, research on why this happens is needed. If the school environment results in the higher postsecondary enrollment, perhaps more effort needs to be made to re-enroll dropouts in high school. Or, with proper programming, could this effect be duplicated in a GED program? Both may be valid approaches, suitable for different students. The important point is that the GED is not enough.

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Murnane, R., Willett, J., & Tyler, J. (2000). "Who Benefits from a GED? Evidence from *High School and Beyond.*" *The Review of Economics and Statistics,* 82(1), 23-37.

For More Information

For all NCSALL work on the GED, including John Tyler's research and the teaching material "Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices about the GED and Your Future", go to http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=61. ❖
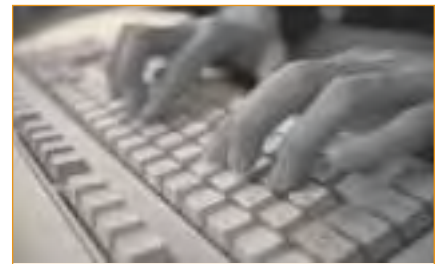
Focus on Basics **Electronic Discussion List**

Focus on Basics electronic discussion list is a forum for discussion about the articles published in *Focus on Basics*. Over the next few months, we will discuss the articles in this issue. The list will remain open until October, 2007.

To participate in the *Focus on Basics* discussion list (it's free!) go to http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/discussions.html. Scroll down to and click on *Focus on Basics*. Follow the directions to subscribe. You will be sent an e-mail requesting confirmation of your subscription.

The manager of this list is Julie McKinney. She can be reached at FOB@Worlded.org. Please DO NOT send subscription requests to this address.❖

Navigating Healthcare

Both educators and medical professionals have roles to play in making healthcare more accessible to all

by Jennie E. Anderson & Rima Rudd

Not long ago, **Focus on Basics** *editor Barbara Garner's son gashed his face and needed stitches. She drove him to the hospital and, despite having been there a number of times, couldn't find the entrance. She was stressed. She thought she had followed the signs, but ended up down a dark alley. Finally a young man in medical garb pointed her in the right direction. Do you have a story similar to Barbara's? Perhaps you were more successful and made it into the building, but couldn't find the office you needed.*

Hospitals are notoriously hard for anyone to navigate, particularly those with language or literacy limitations, and especially when they're under stress. To understand and document what makes healthcare facilities so confusing, and to highlight unnecessary barriers, a National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) research team created the *walking interview*. The team asked teacher/student pairs to find their way to find their way to particular places in a hospital, such as the diabetes center, the medical records office, or the pharmacy. As the volunteer pairs navigated through the hospital, the students talked aloud about the process, describing how they made choices

about where to go. They mentioned the maps, signs, information desks, and passersby they used to find the predetermined locations, pausing during the walk to verbalize decisions like: *"I am now taking a right-hand turn because the sign says 'Medical Records' and points to the right … I'm not sure where to turn here so I will ask the man standing over there."* The teachers in the pairs encouraged them by using "why" prompts such as, *"Why did you stop here?"* and *"Why did you decide to turn left?"*

This activity, conducted a number of times with a variety of people, including adult literacy students and teachers, graduate students, friends, and relatives, was revealing on many levels. One of the most profound results was the impact it had on adult basic education (ABE) teachers, many of whom got lost. As one teacher said, "Now I'm lost and frustrated. Imagine what my students must feel like."

The NCSALL team, known as HALL for Health and Adult Literacy and Learning, also gathered information about the approximate reading grade level of materials found in the hospitals by using the SMOG readability formula (McLaughlin, 1969) and the

PMOSE/IKIRSCH document readability formula (Mosenthal & Kirsch, 1998). This yielded data that could be used to encourage hospital administrators to make their institutions more accessible.

Insights Provided

The initial, exploratory study provided insight about some of the literacy-related barriers that adults, especially those with low literacy skills, encounter in hospitals. One insight was that participants relied more on people than on signs and maps when they needed assistance with directions. The physical layout and structures of hospitals are shaped by a scientific and medical logic that is not necessarily intuitive to people outside of the healthcare field.

The HALL team learned that the format, placement, and complexity of signs made them difficult to read. For example, a hospital wing funded by the Goldenshorn family was labeled "The Goldenshorn Center" in large letters and "for women's health" in smaller letters. A teacher asked "How is my student going to know that that's the name of the person and not the name of the

disease?" Some signs are meant to honor the donor, not to guide the traveler.

Participants were unfamiliar with medical terms. "Nuclear medicine" does not sound like a place to go for tests. In addition, many participants found the abbreviations used on signs and forms problematic. One hospital had a sign that read "ENT" instead of "Ears, Nose, and Throat". The terms used on signs are read by patients as well as medical staff and need to be familiar to all.

The reading grade level of materials such as postings, brochures, and pamphlets ranged from grades eight to 21 (advanced doctoral level). In one patient education brochure the team examined, the first period appears seven lines down into the text. Sentences are lengthy and awkward. Vocabulary is unnecessarily difficult. The writers of these materials do not seem to be trained to communicate with lay readers or readers with limited literacy skills.

Relationship of Health Literacy to Literacy Skills

A commonly used definition of health literacy is: "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). However, some researchers are uncomfortable with this definition because of its focus on individuals. As a result, the US Department of Health and Human Services (2003) and the Institute of Medicine (2004) emphasize a dual responsibility for health literacy. In its 2004 seminal report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion,* the Institute of Medicine (IOM) notes that health literacy is "an interaction between the skills of individuals and the demands of health systems." As a result, the IOM Committee on Health Literacy states that "health literacy

occurs when the expectations, preferences, and skills of individuals seeking health information and services meet the expectations, preferences, and skills of the people providing health information and services." Consequently, it is important to examine the skills of adults in our society as well as the skills of health professionals.

Findings from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey and the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy indicate that about one half of the adults in the United States do not have the reading, writing, and math skills considered to be necessary to fully engage with print materials used in everyday life in order to accomplish

Partnerships Between Literacy Programs and Hospitals

Several years ago, teachers at the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center in New York City began noticing that their students were interested in health issues. Students told their teachers about the negative experiences they had at hospitals, explaining that they stayed away from hospitals as a result. Some students talked of being confused about the physical layout of hospitals: they found them difficult to navigate. They mentioned having trouble finding their way to important services in hospitals. At the same time, several students expressed an interested in pursuing careers in healthcare. Teachers from the Mid-Manhattan Center realized that the best way to explore their students' interests in and issues with healthcare was to work with people directly in the healthcare field. They decided to contact Harlem Hospital.

The medical director at Harlem Hospital expressed an interest in working with the Mid-Manhattan Center, and they formed a partnership, largely as a result of the medical director's enthusiasm and dedication. What followed was a series of illuminating events for both staff at Harlem Hospital and adult learners at the Mid-Manhattan Center.

The first event brought Harlem Hospital staff into adult education classrooms. The heads of the pharmacy, the emergency room, and managed care departments visited three different classes at the learning center and spoke with the students about how to navigate services at Harlem Hospital. The students asked a lot of questions and reported feeling empowered by the dialogue.

The second event, a follow-up to the classroom discussions, brought Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center students, friends, and families to Harlem Hospital for an all-day event. During this event staff from departments, such as maternity and emergency, presented the visitors with an overview of their services. Hospital staff led the visitors on tours of various parts of the hospital. The hospital staff members were very enthusiastic despite the fact that many of them — the director of the emergency room, for example — had been on call all night.

Information about the Harlem Hospital forum spread. The media covered the forum in both print and on local television news. The students were incredibly appreciative of all that the Harlem Hospital staff did for them. When the students returned back to the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, they shared their experiences with their classmates. The adult education students who participated in the event developed a short, widely-distributed video that documents their experiences visiting the hospital and talking with hospital staff.

The leadership from both Harlem Hospital and the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center was critical in forming this successful partnership. The activities helped adult education students and teachers better understand how to navigate hospitals. These activities also made hospital staff more aware of the literacy-related barriers that often make it difficult for people to locate services in hospitals. The positive media coverage of the event at Harlem Hospital enhanced the reputation of Harlem Hospital within the community. Partnerships like the one between the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center and Harlem Hospital can be a great way to identify and address some of the barriers people face as they try to access and navigate services in hospitals. ❖

everyday tasks (Kirsch et al., 1993; Kutner et al., 2005). An analysis of health literacy, based on the 2003 survey, indicates that one half of the adults in the United States have limited literacy skills and are not able to use, with accuracy and consistency, available health materials for everyday activities such as those related to using information on labels of medicine (Kutner et al., 2006).

At the same time, the communication skills of professionals in the health field could also be described as insufficient. More than 800 published studies indicate that the reading grade levels of health materials far exceed the reading skills of the average high school graduate (Rudd et al., in press). That mismatch makes navigation of health systems exceedingly difficult. Rima Rudd often crystallizes the issue by pointing out the absurdity of a sign saying "nephrology." The nephrologists know where they work, she explains. For the rest of us, the sign should say "Kidney Specialists."

Finding Health Literacy Professional Development and Teaching Materials

Adult educators interested in health literacy have many Web sites available to them. We've chosen a few to get you started.

http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/
The Health and Literacy Studies Web Site of the Harvard School of Public Health is the home of the NCSALL Health and Adult Literacy and Learning team. The site is designed for professionals in health and education who are interested in health literacy and is a good place to start to find materials useful for your work.

http://healthliteracy.worlded.org
The Health and Literacy Special Collection, supported by the National Institute for Literacy, is for anyone interested in teaching health to people with limited literacy skills. It includes health lessons and activities, easy-to-read health information, multilingual health information, and health literacy research.

http://www.nifl.gov/mailman/listinfo/Healthliteracy
The Health and Literacy Discussion List provides an on-going professional development forum where literacy practitioners, healthcare providers, health educators, researchers, and policymakers discuss literacy issues in health education programs and in healthcare settings, health education efforts being undertaken within literacy programs, and the readability of health materials.

http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=60
This URL offers links to NCSALL's health-related teaching and training materials, including:

- *Health Literacy Public Health Forums: Partners for Action*
  Rima Rudd and Emily Zobel (2005) (HALL/NCSALL Forum Guide)

- *Skills for Chronic Disease Management*
  Rima Rudd with Lisa Soricone, Maricel Santos, Charlotte Nath, and Janet Smith (2005) (HALL/NCSALL Study Circle+ Guide)

- *Skills for Health Care Access and Navigation*
  Rima Rudd with Lisa Soricone, Maricel Santos, Emily Zobel, Janet Smith, and Winston Lawrence (2005) (HALL/NCSALL Study Circle+ Guide)

http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/webeval/webeval.html
This 16-minute tutorial teaches how to evaluate the health information found on the Web.

http://www.lacnyc.org/resources/publications/harvest/HarvestFall04.pdf
This URL leads to a health-focused issue of the Literacy Assistance Center of New York City's publication, *Harvest*. ❖

Sharing the Burden

The responsibility for making health activities less burdensome and care and services more accessible should be shared. There is a documented need to remove literacy barriers in health-related services. One action is to identify existing barriers and bring them to the attention of those who can make the changes. This can be done via partnerships like the highly successful teaming that occurred between the Harlem Hospital and the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center (described in the box on page 17). The information gleaned from the walking interviews enabled the HALL team to raise issues with their healthcare colleagues. The team has written *The Health Literacy Environment of Hospitals and Health Centers*, a guide that healthcare professionals can use to assess and address the literacy-related barriers in their institutions. And literacy teachers can use the many health-related literacy materials available to build their students' navigation skills. (See box to the left for resources.)

NCSALL's HALL team has started the conversations and provided some of the insight that will eventually make healthcare facilities navigable for everyone. While hospitals, too, must do this work, readers of *Focus on Basics* tend to be adult basic educators. It is up to adult basic educators around the country to continue this work locally, by working with students and by bringing what they learn to the attention of those in charge at hospitals. That way, the next time someone rushes a loved one to the hospital, finding the proper doctor shouldn't be so hard.

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Effective Research Dissemination: Lessons from NCSALL

by Cristine Smith, Mary Beth Bingman, & Kaye Beall

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) conducts and shares its research with the goal of having an impact on the quality of instruction and service to adult learners. Over the past 10 years, we at NCSALL have tried a variety of approaches to disseminating our research in ways that will help us reach this goal. In this article we revisit our journey and share some lessons we learned; we hope you will learn from them, too.

When NCSALL started in 1996, we knew it would be a few years before we would have actual NCSALL research findings to report. This gave us the opportunity to cultivate the interest of adult basic education (ABE) teachers and program administrators in research and what it could offer. It also gave us the time to introduce and build excitement about what NCSALL was studying. Remember that back in 1996, many ABE programs and practitioners had little access to Internet or e-mail, electronic discussion lists were just beginning, wikis were not invented yet, and federal legislation did not prioritize the use of scientific research. The world was a different place.

Cultivating Critical Consumers

We began by producing this publication, *Focus on Basics*, a magazine that, as it states in the indicia, "is

dedicated to connecting research with practice, to connecting teachers with research and researchers with the reality of the classroom, and by doing so, making adult basic education research relevant to the field." The opening letter from the editor urged practitioners to become voracious and critical consumers of research and researchers to seek practitioner input at every step of the research process (Garner, 1997). The very first issue was about how to read different kinds of research critically. To build an audience for NCSALL research findings, subsequent issues introduced the studies that were in process. We made the publication available to programs via each state's director of adult basic education and posted it on the NCSALL Web site. To put into practice our ideal of bringing together researchers and practitioners, we convened via telephone an editorial board of five or six different researchers, teachers, professional development providers, and program administrators for each issue.

In addition to producing and actively disseminating a publication that reviewed research and connected it to practice, we also wanted an initiative with practitioners themselves serving as the link between research and practice. So from 1996 through 2001, we experimented with a research and development effort, the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN). Operating in 14 states (New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the Southeast), the heart of the PDRN was a practitioner leader in each state: an ABE or English for speakers of

other languages (ESOL) teacher or program administrator who would provide information about research to others in his or her state. Practitioner leaders presented at conferences and wrote for state newsletters, providing information about NCSALL and the research in progress.

> **" . . . in 1996, many ABE programs and practitioners had little access to Internet or e-mail, electronic discussion lists were just beginning, wikis were not invented yet, and federal legislation did not prioritize the use of scientific research. The world was a different place."**

By the second year of the PDRN, the practitioner leaders realized that playing the role of spokesperson for NCSALL made them uncomfortable because they felt they needed to memorize information about NCSALL's many research studies, so we changed tactics. We trained the practitioner leaders to do their own classroom research on adult student persistence, a topic being studied by a NCSALL research team. This proved to be engaging and worthwhile for the practitioner leaders and for the NCSALL researchers; we convened them on several occasions to learn about each others' research. The practitioners' research results enhanced and informed the findings of the university-based researchers, leading to mutual respect between the two groups. Another asset was that the practitioner leaders found that conducting their own research helped them feel like researchers and professionals, feelings they valued highly

(Smith et al., 2002).

However, while we were starting to break down walls between research and practice, the PDRN was reaching only a small number of practitioners in 14 states. Although practitioner leaders went to state conferences and presented confidently about their own and the corresponding NCSALL research on the topic of adult student persistence, this wasn't helping the many practitioners who still did not even know that NCSALL existed. For wider dissemination, even within the 14 states, we needed training that practitioner leaders could lead. Therefore, we wrote study circle guides, which trainers could use to lead groups of eight to 15 teachers and program administrators in reading NCSALL research reports, briefs, and articles from *Focus on Basics* before discussing the findings and how they could be applied in the participants' classrooms and programs. The practitioner leaders piloted the three-session study circles on NCSALL research topics such as adult student persistence, health and literacy, and accountability.

In NCSALL's fifth year, we evaluated PDRN (Smith et al., 2002), asking NCSALL researchers, practitioner leaders, dissemination staff, and PDRN-states' Department of Education staff about the efforts to connect research and practice. We learned that:

- Practitioners and researchers who conducted and then shared research on the same topic helped practitioners understand the research and

the research process and gave the researchers new understanding of practice.
- Professional development activities, such as study circles, were well-liked. Teachers and program administrators reported that professional development activities helped them access, understand, judge, and use research better than they had before.
- While NCSALL made some progress in research influencing practice, we had little impact with enabling research to influence state and federal policy.
- Connecting practice and research requires an infrastructure that supports practitioners to conduct research and to attend study circles about research, and this would require systematic efforts and policy support at the program, state, and national levels.

The PDRN taught us that practitioners did want to use research, but that they needed support and systems to do so. With the refunding of NCSALL in 2001, we applied what we had learned from the PDRN to create a national model for research dissemination. Our goals for the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research (CPPR) initiative were:

- To work with partners to build a national system that connects research, practice, and policy;

> **"Dissemination must start with a focus on practitioners and an understanding of how practitioners view research."**

- To create a flexible system to account for differences among states;
- To develop mechanisms for reviewing all adult basic, literacy, and language research (not just research conducted by NCSALL) and creating appropriate pro-

fessional development activities and other "tools" for helping practitioners to access, understand, judge, and use the findings from such research; and

- To provide a systematic way for practitioners and state policymakers to have input into a national research agenda, so problems faced in the field would be the problems researchers would be funded to tackle.

NCSALL decided to focus on the state, program, and practitioner aspect of the system, working with states to learn what would help or hinder them. We also continued to pilot and develop professional development tools, such as a training workshop to help practitioners conduct their own practitioner research, self-explanatory seminars and self-study courses that could be accessed from NCSALL's Web site and used by staff in programs, and, with the National Institute for Literacy (the Institute), videos of researchers and practitioners discussing the applicability of specific research findings. We created teaching materials that ABE teachers could use to help students understand what reading really is and why going beyond the GED to post-secondary education is critical for economic success. We helped state and professional development staff in Arizona, California, Colorado, and Louisiana train study circle facilitators. We continued to develop study circles on topics on which NCSALL

had conducted research, including reading instruction, adult multiple intelligence theory and practice, adult development theory, and authentic/contextualized instruction.
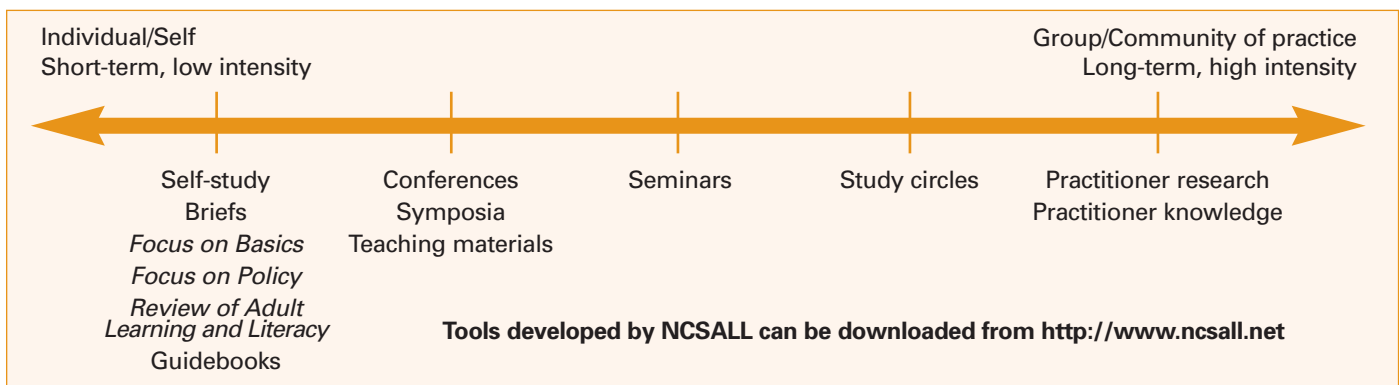
Experimenting with new ways to connect practitioners and researchers, NCSALL researchers from Oregon came together over the course of a year with practitioners from California, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. The researchers presented their findings from research with beginning-level adult ESOL students, and the practitioners later presented their experiences trying out the new instructional methods indicated by that research. We organized sessions focused on research findings at major conferences such as COABE and ProLiteracy Worldwide and collaborated with California to develop a three-day meeting in which researchers and practitioners examined the practical applications of NCSALL research, which will be repeated in 2006. With the Institute, the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, and state ABE directors, we led workshops on the terms "evidence-based practice" and "scientifically based research." Last, but not least, we created a sourcebook for ABE program administrators in which the findings from most of the NCSALL research are presented in a way that enables readers to consider the implications of the findings for their programs.

Synthesizing the Experience

After 10 years of dissemination, including five years of learning from the CPPR initiative, we believe strongly that:

- **Dissemination must start with a focus on practitioners and an understanding of how practitioners view research.** Most practitioners start by being interested in an issue or problem they face in their work, not by being interested in research in general.
- **Researchers and dissemination staff alone cannot disseminate findings from research.** No single researcher or research center can expect to reach the thousands of practitioners across the country. Adult educators needs a range of publications, tools, and activities, and assistance from professional development staff who can help practitioners access, understand, judge, and use research. See Figure 1 below.
- **Research-based changes in practice are not possible without policies, funding, and structures that support practitioners to make such changes.** Teachers need research information, time to prepare new strategies, and funding to share ideas and experiences with other teachers. Program administrators need the freedom and funding to give these supports to teachers.

Figure 1: Continuum of Dissemination Tools

Individual/Self
Short-term, low intensity

Group/Community of practice
Long-term, high intensity

Self-study
Briefs
Focus on Basics
Focus on Policy
Review of Adult Learning and Literacy
Guidebooks

Conferences
Symposia
Teaching materials

Seminars

Study circles

Practitioner research
Practitioner knowledge

Tools developed by NCSALL can be downloaded from http://www.ncsall.net

Change cannot be achieved only at the teacher or classroom level. An intensive and long-term systemic change process, supported at the federal level, is needed.

- **Dissemination is cyclical, not linear.** Helping practitioners and policy makers access, understand, judge, and use research is easier when the research questions come from the field rather than from the researchers. However, this is easier said than done. Adult education does not yet have a systematic mechanism through which stakeholders can generate questions as part of a continually evolving research agenda. Such a mechanism would include the elements illustrated below in Figure 2.

Where Are We Now?

After a decade of conducting and reflecting upon dissemination, we believe more than ever that practitioners have to be at the heart of research dissemination efforts. ABE needs a unique system of connecting research and practice that takes this into account. Only with such a system will research have an impact on the quality of instruction and service to adult learners.

In March, 2007, NCSALL will end. The research is winding down and final reports are being written. They will be available on the Web site, http://www.ncsall.net, along with NCSALL's other publications. The CPPR is all but over, and the *Focus on Basics* issue you are currently reading is the last. While we were not able to create a national system for connecting research, policy and practice, we did create a gold-standard publication for practitioners, as well as teaching and training materials that practitioners and professional developers can continue to use.

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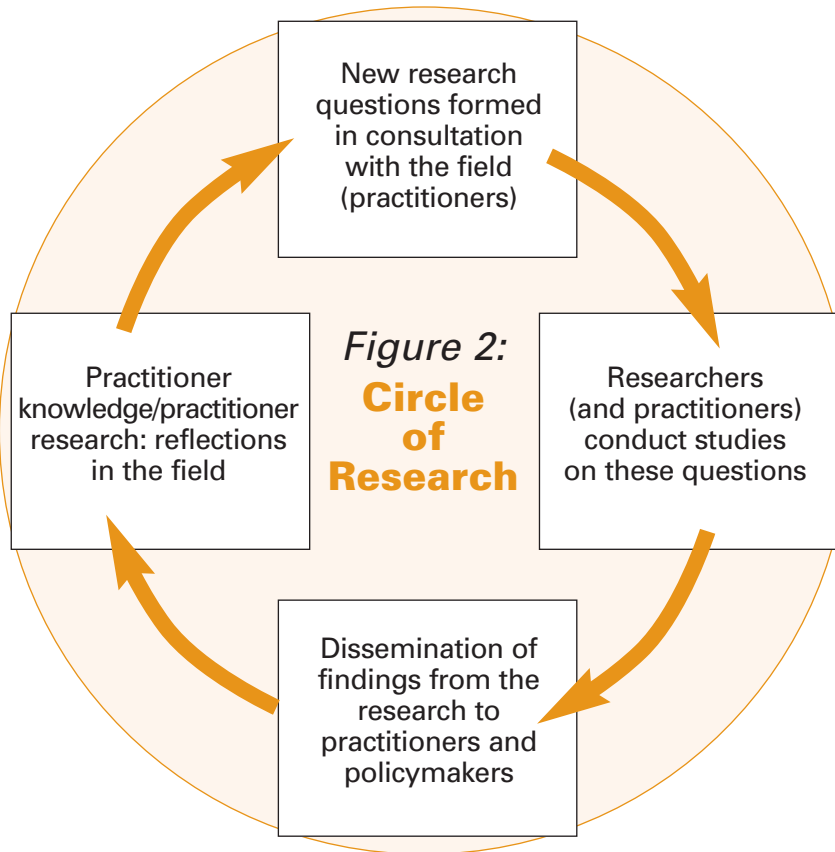Smith, C., Bingman, M. B., Hofer, J., Medina, P., & Practitioner Leaders (2002). *Connecting Practitioners and Researchers: An Evaluation of NCSALL's Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network. NCSALL Reports #22.* Boston: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. Retrieved August 1, 2006, from http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report22.pdf

> **"***Research-based changes in practice are not possible without policies, funding, and structures that support practitioners to make such changes.***"**

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Figure 2: **Circle of Research**

New research questions formed in consultation with the field (practitioners)

Researchers (and practitioners) conduct studies on these questions

Dissemination of findings from the research to practitioners and policymakers

Practitioner knowledge/practitioner research: reflections in the field

New From NCSALL

NCSALL on the Web

Do you want to…
- **plan a professional development activity?**
- **learn about the latest research on a particular topic in the field?**
- **find a new teaching technique or idea?**
- **prepare a proposal to seek additional funding?**

Our **Subject Index** allows you to access easily all NCSALL publications by topic.

NCSALL Occasional Paper

Transitioning Adults to College: Adult Basic Education Program Models, by Cynthia Zafft, Silja Kallenbach, and Jessica Spohn, describes five models that the staff at the New England Literacy Resource Center categorized after surveying adult education centers with transition components. The models are Advising, GED-Plus, ESOL, Career Pathways, and College Preparatory. The paper includes recommentations that others contemplating adult transition services might find helpful. To download, go to http://www.ncsall.net/?id=26.

NCSALL Teaching and Training Materials

Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices About the GED and Your Future. Revised to include new data and information available on the Internet, this set of lesson plans for GED-level students addresses the economic impact of the GED. It also gives learners an opportunity to practice writing, use graphs, read charts, and analyze research findings. To download, go to http://www.ncsall.net/?id=35.

Practitioner Research Training Guide: Research-based Adult Reading Instruction. This training guide provides comprehensive instructions for facilitating a 31-hour training that guides practitioners through the steps needed to conduct their own classroom research on a problem related to reading. To download, go to http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=1143.

Seminar Guide: Implications of NCSALL Research for Program Administrators. This seminar guide was created to assist program administrators in accessing, understanding, judging, and using research for themselves and for their staff. Participants explore the *Program Administrators' Sourcebook: A Resource on NCSALL's Research for Adult Education Program Administrators* and other training materials available from NCSALL. To download, go to http://www.ncsall.net/?id=1117.

Training Guide: Study Circle Facilitators. This training guide provides instructions so that experienced adult education practitioners can facilitate NCSALL study circles. The training focuses on the NCSALL study circle *Research-based Adult Reading Instruction.* However, the training can be adapted to prepare facilitators to use other NCSALL study circles. To download, go to http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=1137

Study Circle Guide: Adult Student Persistence. Revised to include the second phase of the NCSALL research on adult student persistence, this guide provides instructions for facilitating a 10-hour study circle. It explores what the research says about adult student persistence and ideas on how to apply this classrooms and programs. To download, go to http://www.ncsall.net/?id=896.

NIFL/NCSALL Panel Discussion Videos

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy and the National Institute for Literacy announce two 30-minute videos:

Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel. NCSALL director John Comings presents a working definition of persistence, examines existing research, and describes NCSALL's study of the factors that support and inhibit persistence. Other panelists include two practitioners, Kathleen Endaya and Ernest Best. To view in streaming format, go to http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/webcasts/persistence/persistence_cast.html.

Adult Reading Components Study Panel. This panel discussion focuses on adult reading research, and in particular on the Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS). The ARCS was conducted by NCSALL researchers John Strucker and Rosalind Davidson. To view in streaming format, go to http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/webcasts/20040204/webcast02-04.html.

Research on the Economic Impact of the GED Diploma Panel. This panel discussion focuses on the economic benefits that accrue to holders of the General Educational Development (GED) credential. It is based on a review by John Tyler of eight recent (published and working) research papers on the GED. To view in streaming format, go to: http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/webcasts/ and click on ged, then click on webcast_ged.

To order in DVD for $5.00 from NCSALL, go to: www.ncsall.net/?id=675

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