



LITERACY UPDATE

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Literacy Assistance Center

IN THIS ISSUE

- 3 How We Pay for Low ESOL Funding 4 Should Assistive Technology Be Used for Reading?
6 & 7 Fall Professional Development Opportunities
8 Creating a Successful Learning Environment 10 Dancing Our Way to Better Health

Program Performance Improves on All Fronts

> Venu Thelakkat *Director of ALIES® and Data Analysis*

Literacy programs statewide improved their performance on all NRS measures, sometimes dramatically, according to newly released tables prepared by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) with the assistance of the ALIES® staff at the Literacy Assistance Center.

“Much of this across the board improvement reflects the extensive training and technical assistance that has been provided through the Regional Adult Education Network (RAEN), the LAC, and the field staff of the Adult Education and Workforce Development Team (AEWD),” commented Tom Orsini, AEWD team leader. “For the past few years the AEWD has been frustrated that the numbers that appear on the state’s National Reporting System (NRS) report were not

indicative of the high quality of service provided by the state’s adult education programs, many of which are among the country’s best. Many educational gains and core outcomes (entering employment, entering postsecondary education, and obtaining a secondary school credential) have gone unreported due to misunderstandings about the NRS and lack of training in goal setting, data management, and proper administration and reporting of adult education assessments.”

Orsini noted that the Individual Technical Assistance Plan (ITAP) introduced by NYSED in the 2005–06 program year played an important role in ameliorating this situation. Rolled out in 20 of the state’s largest adult education programs, ITAP included a thorough review of data quality, the student

data system, and the use and analysis of student achievement data for program improvement. Most of the participating programs registered significant progress in student achievement.

The report covers program activity between July 1, 2005 and June 30, 2006. It registered a statewide student population of 158,779, 45 percent of them in adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) classes; 55 percent received instruction in English as a second language (ESL). Even though the total number of students was the same as in the previous year, the distribution shifted significantly—many categories registered slight increases, while ABE beginning literacy enrollment fell 23 percent and the number of learners in ESL high advanced classes dropped 33 percent.

continued on page 9

Thank You

> Elyse Barbell *Executive Director*

You are probably reading this just after we have sent off our competitive bid—the first time this was required—to provide data services to our state’s adult literacy community. The New York State Education Department has informed us that it will make a decision by early February. In this small window of time before any reflections acquire a gloss of gloating or sour grapes, I would like to share a few thoughts on what providing you with this service has meant to us.

Data collection is esteemed in some quarters as an objective measure of literacy progress. It is not. Subjective choices determine what is measured and what isn’t. Programs feel pressured to shape their programs accordingly, often at the expense of concepts and skills they believe would benefit learners more. Even with the best of intentions and the most rigorous construction, data cannot register our most valuable achievements: the mom reading to her child, the immigrant navigating the subway, the young adult filling out an employment form and going to work without fear of failure. Often, data can be cruel, a distorted mirror in a cheap, ill-lit dressing room, leaving the staff of a beautiful program feeling frustrated and depressed. Just as frequently, the impersonal data reporting deadline does not wait for the wonderful moment every teacher has experienced, when a learner who has been stuck in the same place for months suddenly begins to grasp and assemble the building blocks that will become the foundation for higher literacy skills.

Compounding these conceptual failings, the process of data collection can be exasperating. If we didn’t realize it ourselves, you’ve certainly told us, many times in many ways over the years. With your feedback and assistance, we have been able to tailor ALIES® to the specific needs of New York State—if you have any doubts about what a boon this is, ask a few colleagues in other states about their data collection process. The fruits of our partnership with you are evident on page 1, where ALIES® director Venu Thelakkat describes the extraordinary gains recorded throughout the state in this year’s NRS report to the federal government. This success would have been impossible without your patience as our teachers. Your consistent willingness to collaborate with us on eliminating kinks and confusions has enabled the state’s literacy community to perform an onerous task more smoothly each year, making it that much easier for all of us to get on with our mission of spreading literacy.

The NYSED RFP calls for a web-based system, which should make your data collection and analysis even easier by enhancing your capabilities. It will give you the ability to enter and read your data on any computer, to use new software without having to upload it from a CD, and to track the progress of students who move to another program.

If NYSED accepts our proposal, your migration to the new system will be seamless, thanks to the compatibility of the software and our commitment to training your staff in how to use it as effectively as possible.

If the LAC is not selected, please know that the opportunity to serve you in this capacity has been a source of great pride and satisfaction to us. We honor your work. We share your passion. We will continue to serve you in any way we can.

Happy New Year. ●



LITERACY UPDATE

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Report Finds Discrepancy between Need for ESOL Services in New York State and Services the State Provides

> JoAnne Steglitz Associate Director of Communications

“Cities in nearly every corner of New York State have been experiencing a sharp rise in immigrants,” according to *Lost in Translation*, a new report from the Center for an Urban Future and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, “but state-run ESOL programs aren’t keeping pace with the growing demand.” In 2005, more than 1.6 million working-age New Yorkers had limited English skills, the report noted; yet state-run English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs had space for only 86,433 learners. State-administered financial support for these classes came to \$73.9 million.

“This report does an excellent job of documenting the grossly inadequate ESOL funding, given the overwhelming need for services throughout New York State,” said Ira Yankwitt, LAC staff member and director of the NYC Regional Adult Education Network. “State and local policy workers are leaving behind hundreds of thousands of hardworking immigrants and need to increase their investment in the future of our state dramatically.”

The number of foreign-born residents has grown by nearly 1.3 million since 1990; they now make up 27 percent of the state’s population. In the same period, the report notes, adult ESOL programs administered through the State Department of Education have added only 15,000 new seats. The ratio of supply to estimated need has dropped to 5.3 percent.

“There is a growing number of immigrants needing very basic ESOL literacy,” Susan Dalmas, the adult literacy program director at Queens Library, told the LAC. “This includes adults who are either non- or semi-literate in their own language. This group needs a special class, which requires separate funding and specialized instruction.” To make room for them, the library has to turn others away, she explained. “We were told not to enroll students who score above 540 in the BEST Plus Test, although many students scoring above 540 still need ESOL instruction since they still lack the language skills.” Dolmas added that many of the adult immigrants needing ESOL services are working long hours and can hardly find time to attend classes. “Some have child care issues, which is why evenings and weekends are the most popular schedule. However, they cost more to run compared to the regular weekday offerings, since programs need to provide child care support so parents can attend classes.” To make matters worse, some agencies located in areas where there is a high concentration of immigrants have been defunded, according to Dalmas.

A Statewide Problem

In New York City, where programs can accommodate only 3.4 percent of estimated need, the importance of expanding ESOL services is widely recognized. However, the gap is sometimes even greater Upstate. Albany County was home to 4,606 adults with limited English language skills in 2005; only 103 of them—2.5 percent— were enrolled in state-funded ESOL classes. Dutchess County had 10,210 adults in need of ESOL services and seats for just 321—3.1 percent.

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of our state.” Ira Yankwitt

The report, informed by more than 50 interviews with local and state officials, employers, service providers, and other stakeholders, concludes that limited English skills among New York’s immigrant workforce are a constraint on the entire state’s economic competitiveness, as well as the workers themselves. “As immigrants come to comprise a growing share of the state’s workforce,” the report warns, “New York’s competitive position will increasingly depend upon getting them the skills that employers need; if not, businesses looking to relocate or expand in the Empire State may very well go elsewhere.”

Lost in Translation concludes with a list of recommendations, including increased state funding for ESOL; improvement in government programs to measure, manage, and promote ESOL services; and reorganization of the Employment Preparation Education program to improve services and eliminate misdirected surplus. It also calls upon the business community to provide funding and release time for employees in need of instruction.

A full PDF version of the report is available at on the LAC website www.lacnyc.org/resources/adult/LostInTranslation.pdf. ●

RESOURCES >> Turning on the Light Assistive Technology for Reading

> Dr. Dave Edyburn

People who encounter the words assistive technology for the first time are likely to think of crutches, wheelchairs, and other devices designed to overcome limitations imposed by physical and sensory impairments. These images are accurate, but the term has a broader meaning.

According to the federal definition, an assistive technology device means “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability.” Since its appearance in the 1988 Tech Act, this definition has been cited in every federal law involving technology and individuals with disabilities. All 50 states have adopted some version of it.

Inclusion of the word “any” in official definitions is significant. The essence of assistive technology is using tools and solutions to augment and extend ability. If a device was created to assist people with disabilities, it qualifies. The telephone, for example, could be considered assistive technology, since it was originally invented as a system to enhance communication with an individual who was hard of hearing. Similarly, audio books, originally developed for blind people, are popular among car drivers and others who can see without difficulty.

In debates on the application of technology for enhancing reading performance, the question of whether or not to accept the broad federal definition assumes critical importance. Like cloning, gene therapy, and other fields where scientific and technological advances have a direct potential impact on human life, the use of assistive technology to enhance cognition generates considerable controversy. Among the contentious questions are: When is it proper to supplement our instructional efforts with compensatory technologies that bypass the decoding aspects of reading and allow struggling readers to focus on the comprehension components and application of new information? Is use of assistive technology justified when a struggling reader spends more time reading or simply gets more enjoyment out of reading? Should we only use a tool if it significantly narrows achievement gaps?

Some adult educators object to almost any use of assistive technology in reading. One common argument is that listening to a text is not the same as reading a text; that converting print into an auditory format (e.g., books vs. audio books; text vs. text to speech) engages different cognitive processes that should not be considered equivalent to what is called reading. To me, saying reading with assistive technology isn't really reading is equivalent to contending that someone who uses cruise control on the highway is no longer driving, only steering. Denying that listening to an audio book is reading represents a form of what Hehir (2005) has characterized as “ableism,” an insidious form of discrimination in which the cultural attitudes of the able-bodied create barriers for individuals with disabilities. This bias can be so embedded in popular consciousness that it is hard to detect. One example Hehir cites is that most people value intrinsic spelling ability and devalue the performance of those individuals who rely on spell-checkers.

Another argument against assistive technology in reading is that once learners use it they will become dependent on it and not work on developing reading skills as traditionally defined. To my mind, the same logic could be invoked to contend that experienced writers should abandon their word processor and cashiers should forsake their scanner and cash register.

Relationships between an individual, a task, a tool, and functional performance are usually far more complex than they appear at first glance. We know little about the long term effects that using assistive technologies can have on struggling adult readers. However, we do know that readers who fail to master the developmental processes of decoding, word recognition, and other basic reading skills will not have an opportunity to acquire higher level skills of comprehension, thinking/problem solving, literature appreciation, etc.

When difficulties with fundamentals obstruct reading, adult educators should consider assistive technology as a solution. In some cases, it can serve as a temporary tool, a scaffold that enables learners to bypass deficiencies and engage in higher level reading/thinking skills. In other cases, assistive technologies may serve a performance support function, and always be necessary. Either way, these tools can help struggling readers overcome an internalized message that because they can't read they can't learn. In my experience, the impact is rapid and powerful: “Why didn't someone show me how to do this before?” “I can do this.” “This means I can read anything I want.”

Whatever form their reading takes, adult learners derive great satisfaction from absorbing texts on their own. For this reason alone, it would be hard to deny that reading assistive technologies can be a worthwhile social investment. ●

Reference

Hehir, T. (2005). *New directions in special education: Eliminating ableism in policy and practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Publishing Group.

Dave L. Edyburn, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Exceptional Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Assessing Needs

A number of individuals and groups have developed protocols for assessing the need for assistive technology. Ideally, the results will point to specific types of tools that would be worth exploring with a struggling reader to determine whether or not they would enhance his or her functional performance. Here are four:

Hey! Can I Try That?

www.otap-oregon.org/Stuhdbkhey.PDF

A free student handbook for choosing and using assistive technology.

Texas Assistive Technology Network

www.texasat.net/default.aspx?name=trainmod.reading

A vast compendium of resources.

Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative (WATI) Assessment Forms

www.wati.org/Products/pdf/Assessment_Forms_only.pdf

A comprehensive collection of reproducible assistive technology assessment forms.

Fritschi's Assistive Technology Tool Chart

<http://fritschi.home.mindspring.com/tools2.html>

A chart that organizes a variety of assistive technologies by area of need, with vendor links.

continued on page 11

Call for Nominations for Literacy Recognition Awards

The LAC invites you to join us in celebrating the achievements of the NYC literacy community by nominating outstanding NYC literacy practitioners to be honored at the 22nd annual Literacy Recognition Award Ceremony. The ceremony will take place in late May or June 2007. Each honoree's program will receive a library development grant from the Bookbinders' Guild of New York.

Eligible candidates must be:

- > Administrators, teachers, volunteers, counselors, staff developers, or support staff members
- > Currently working in a BE, ESOL, math, BENL, GED, family literacy, health literacy, or related program that serves learners age 16 and over
- > An outstanding contributor to the success of their students, their program, and/or the NYC literacy community

For nomination guidelines and to download a nomination form, visit our website at www.lacnyc.org. Nominations are due by February 15.

Call for Student Artwork

The LAC is currently seeking an outstanding piece of student artwork to serve as the logo for the 2007 and future Literacy Recognition Award materials. We would like a two-dimensional black-and-white or color piece that suggests the power that literacy has to change lives or make connections. The program that submits the artwork we select will be awarded a library development grant from the Bookbinders' Guild of New York. Our submission deadline is February 28. For more information, including submission guidelines, go to www.lacnyc.org/about/announcements, email lacpublications@hotmail.com, or call 212.803.3332.

The LAC Welcomes New Program Staff

The LAC recently welcomed two new additions to its professional development team. Marilyn J. Rymniak has joined the LAC as project leader for the NYSED initiative to create a Statewide Professional Development System. Marilyn has over 30 years of experience as an ESOL specialist and adult educator, including stints in corporate, workplace, and campus-based English language training programs. She was the executive director of the TOEFL Program at Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey and the principal architect and developer of the Kaplan Access America™ language training program. Before coming to LAC, she served as executive director of a WIA/Title II-funded Adult Education/Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education program at the International Institute of New Jersey. She is the author of four English training textbooks.

Estella Natal has joined the LAC as a professional development associate for our Health Literacy Initiative. She has taught BE, GED, workplace literacy, and ESOL for CUNY and HRA BEGIN, as well as English and Spanish at Parlamondo Centro Linguistico in Gallarate, Italy. Her other jobs have included writing instructor and counselor at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. The LAC Health Literacy Initiative is benefiting from her skills as a health and sexuality educator, a certified breastfeeding counselor, and a medical interpreter.

NYC Consortium for ABE Conference, Call for Presenters

The New York City Consortium for Adult Basic Education recently announced a call for presenters for its 28th annual conference, to be held on Saturday, May 5, at Fashion Industries High School in Manhattan. The theme of this year's conference is "Creating Success Stories for Adult Learners." The consortium invites presentations that highlight outstanding and innovative practices and deal with issues relevant to the field. Submissions should be postmarked by February 15.

Submission forms are available on the LAC website at www.lacnyc.org/about/announcements. For more information, contact Carolyn Fernando at 212.243.5458 or sonofhendrick@yahoo.com.

CONFERENCES

March

16th Annual National Conference on Family Literacy

Achieving the American Dream through Literacy
March 4–6, Orlando, FL
www.familit.org/site/c.gtjWJdMQIsE/b.1574477/k.110C/National_Conference_on_Family_Literacy_2007.htm

Women Expanding/Literacy Education Action Resource Network (WE LEARN), 4th Annual (Net)Working Conference

What Can We Learn from Women-Focused Programs?
March 8–10, Boston, MA
www.litwomen.org/conference.html

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), 41st Annual Convention and Exhibit

Spanning the Globe: Tides of Change
March 21–24, Seattle, WA
www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=1244&DID=6071

No Teacher Left Behind: A Practitioner's Conference

The Teacher Education Program and the Arts Literacy Project at Brown University
March 23–24, Providence, RI
www.artslit.org

Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE), 2007 Annual Conference

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Learning
March 25–28, Philadelphia, PA
www.coabe2007.org

April

American Educational Research Association (AERA), 2007 Annual Convention and Exhibition

The World of Educational Quality
April 9–13, Chicago, IL
www.aera.net/annualmeeting

Jan. 12

BEST Plus Test Administrator Training

Friday, January 12, 9:30 am–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Alecia D'Angelo

Become a certified BEST Plus administrator. Practice administering the print- and computer-based versions of the test and familiarize yourself with the scoring rubric. Participants will receive a test administrator guide and practice CDs.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

Jan. 17

TABE Test Administrator Training

Wednesday, January 17, 9:30 am–12:30 pm

Facilitator: Mariann Fedele

This workshop will introduce participants to the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), Forms 7 & 8 and 9 & 10—the main test used by adult literacy programs funded by the State Education Department to place students in adult basic education (ABE) classes and measure educational gain. Participants will become familiar with the content and format of the test, learn about effective test administration and how to use the scoring tables, and discuss the relationship between TABE test scores and National Reporting System (NRS) levels.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

Jan. 19

ESOL Teacher Share

Friday, January 19, 2–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Winston Lawrence

Explore and discuss appropriate methods for teaching English language learners (ELLs). Share promising practices from your own classrooms, and receive feedback from your peers. Designed for ESOL instructors, the ESOL Teacher Share is an opportunity for you to develop a network that you can go to for professional advice and support.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

Jan. 26

Storytelling in the ESOL Classroom

Friday, January 26, 1–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Regina Ress, ESOL Consultant

Storytelling dynamically engages us in the act of learning and is a wonderful activity to include in any ESOL class. In this highly participatory workshop, popular storyteller Regina Ress demonstrates a variety of activities that support a creative and communicative classroom. Learn how to use storytelling to enhance the practice of the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and to teach vocabulary, functions, and grammar. These activities make teaching and learning fun.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

Jan. 30

ALIES® Data Entry

Tuesday, January 30, 9:30 am–4:30 pm

This training session provides a comprehensive introduction to the ALIES® data entry process. Highlights include navigating ALIES® data entry screens; upgrading ALIES®; backing up data; inputting student, class, and instructor information; and updating outcomes, tests, and contact hours.

RSVP: ALIES® Support at 212.803.3357 or aliesupport@lacnyc.org.

Feb. 2 & Mar. 2

Teaching Health Literacy, Foundation Study Circle

Friday, February 2, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Friday, March 2, 9:30 am–1:30 pm

Facilitators: Winston Lawrence and Estella Natal

Health literacy—the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions—is a vital part of adult literacy education. This two-part series will focus on identifying the skills needed to navigate the health care system and on developing ways to integrate these skills into the ABE and ESOL curriculum. Participants will develop lesson plans and try them out in their classrooms. Participants are required to attend each session.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

Feb. 2

EL/Civics Workshop: Effective Techniques for Teaching the US Citizenship Test

Friday, February 2, 1:30–4:30 pm

Facilitator: Emily Rubenstein, Project Reach Youth

This workshop will cover proposed changes to the test and how these changes might affect foreign-born learners. Participants will explore how materials from the current and the proposed test can be incorporated into lessons that will benefit all students. They will also receive lesson planning materials.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

**Unless otherwise noted,
all LAC events take place
at 32 Broadway, 10th floor.**

Feb. 9

Reading Skills Workshop

Friday, February 9, 9:30 am–3:30 pm

Facilitator: Ken English, Director of the NYPL Adult Literacy Program

This workshop will introduce practitioners to research-based approaches to alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension instruction and review technology that supports this type of instruction. Using the National Institute for Literacy's text *Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers*, this workshop will focus on hands-on and practical approaches for working with students reading at NRS levels 1, 2, and 3 (below the 6th grade level) and students with learning disabilities. Participants will be better prepared if they review the text and read the executive summary thoroughly prior to attending. The text can be downloaded at www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/applyingresearch.pdf.

RSVP: LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323 or rsvp@lacnyc.org.

Feb. 15

ALIES® Data Entry Training

Thursday, February 15, 9:30 am–4:30 pm

See January 30 for event description.

RSVP: ALIES® Support at 212.803.3357 or aliessupport@lacnyc.org.

LAC Literacy Referral Hotline

Call or email us to:

- Refer students in need of programs
- Refer volunteers in search of rewarding experiences
- Let us know if you have unfilled classes or openings
- Update your program information in the Hotline referral database

In New York City: **212.803.3333**
Upstate and Long Island: **888.683.7323**

Or email Jaynell Walls, literacy referral specialist, at jaynellw@lacnyc.org

LAC Professional Development Center Open Hours

Every Monday, 1–5 pm

Computer Learning Center

Visit our 16-station Internet-connected computer lab to explore ways to use computers to enhance instruction. Browse the web for sites that lend themselves to your lessons, or build a project that uses common office software to enhance communication skills. For information, contact Mariann Fedele, 212.803.3325 or mariannf@lacnyc.org.

Dan Rabideau Clearinghouse

Explore the city's largest collection of materials for adult literacy education. The collection of books, journals, and audiovisual materials encompasses professional development materials as well as curriculum and reading materials for ESOL, ABE, and GED learners. For information, contact Dr. Winston Lawrence, 212.803.3326 or winstonl@lacnyc.org.

Creating a Successful Learning Environment

> Deborah Yoho

Early in my career as an adult educator, I was convinced that the success of each learner, particularly at the lowest levels, depended mostly on applying the right tool at the right time. Over the years, however, I have come to believe that important as appropriate resources and techniques may be, the most effective measures we, as educators, can take are to eliminate attitudes, customs, policies, and rules that stifle learning. With this in mind, here are some lessons that I have learned:

Make sure policy, volunteer training, staff expertise, and the expectations of learners are all in alignment.

In plain language, we can't just talk the talk; we have to walk the walk. Our program began that journey by defining its core values. Now we try to make sure that everything we do honors them. You can see what they are by going to www.literacycolumbia.org and clicking on About Us. If you do, you'll see that one core value is "The process begins by starting where the learner is."

That one came to mind when our lab instructor informed me that a learner was rocking back and forth while she used the computer. "Other people are finding this distracting," he said.

"Is she new?" I asked. As a former special ed teacher, I was pretty sure what the answer would be. When the lab instructor confirmed my guess, I suggested he not say anything to the learner, but let me know if the rocking didn't stop by the end of the session. It did.

On another occasion, the lab instructor asked me what to do about a learner who was constantly getting up to take a smoking break outside. We got a timer, and made an agreement with her to wait for the bell—at first it rang after five minutes, then 10, and so on. It worked.

Another of our core values is "We are providing opportunities for lifelong learning, not remedial education." Our service center has no signs saying "Office use only." When learners want to fax a form, copy a legal document, or conduct other sorts of personal business, they know they can use the center facilities, with our help if necessary. Usually, they respond to these privileges with business-like, purposeful behavior. Not too long ago, however, a learner seized an office phone rudely and completed a call in a loud, disruptive voice. Afterward, we took him aside and quietly and sensitively taught him how to make polite requests at the appropriate time to the appropriate person. In situations like this, we've found that politely guiding people in an adult way always results in improved behavior.

Create environments and procedures that encourage learners, administrators, professionals, and volunteers to work together as members of a team.

A comfortable physical environment that resembles the atmosphere of an office or a library (without the "shhhh!") can make a major difference in the perceptions of attitudes of both learners and staff. Even when someone offers to donate them, we politely refuse those confining torture chambers, one-piece student-style desks.

Actively recruit volunteers.

In our experience, volunteers are essential for one-on-one instruction, especially when learners are at the lowest levels. Just as important, they have caring hearts. Many of our volunteers have been instrumental in

resolving situations involving domestic violence, problems with the law, health concerns, and interactions with the public schools. With training, they readily understand the points at which they should call on others for assistance.

One such occasion arose when an undocumented immigrant told her volunteer tutor that she was being sexually harassed on the job. She probably would not have shared this directly with a paid staff member, even an employee of a non-governmental agency like ours. The tutor, however, was able to persuade her that I should be informed. We contacted the right people and the harasser was fired, without compromising the learner's job.

Teamwork begins with an egalitarian vocabulary.

At our center, we say learner, not student; assessment, not testing; instructor or tutor, not teacher; learning or service center, not classroom; and invitation, rather than requirement or expectation. Our goal is to model behavior that asks, rather than assumes; that suggests, rather than insists. We avoid bureaucratic-sounding terms like "contract," "procedure," and "rules and regulations." When something must be done solely to meet a requirement—say, filling out a form—we make sure everyone understands why it is necessary. Above all, we avoid the word "should" when speaking with (never to!) a learner.

When we do establish rules, they are created with a clear purpose and imposed within a patient and flexible environment. One example is assigned times at the computer lab, established to teach time management skills. Last week, three people arrived at the computer lab after their scheduled period was over. The lab instructor welcomed them, ignoring their tardiness. All three went to work; each renegotiated his appointed time before leaving. If learners come outside their allotted time and no computer is available, we invite them to wait. Some learners have trouble sticking to a schedule or following guidelines. Our working assumption is that when they do, it is for a very good reason.

Instruct the person, not the subject.

We never allow content to take precedence over relationships. Adult learners, particularly those who struggle hardest, cherish personal relationships. Nurturing and safeguarding them requires humility as well as time and effort. This means being prepared to say "I was wrong," or "I don't know," and treating a learner as a peer.

Sometimes, acknowledgement that what our learners know is as important as what we know takes us in unexpected directions. For a long time, I was convinced that instructional materials designed for children should never be used with adults. "Ducks and rabbits," I declared, "have no place in this curriculum." Then one day a tutor informed me that she had ignored my pronouncement and was using a basal reader series written by the Amish—with great success. To my embarrassment, I realized that however well-intentioned my position had been, it was a product of my suburban upbringing. I had forgotten that many of our learners, especially older ones, had grown up on farms. They felt very comfortable with books set in the horse and buggy environment of the Amish, as well as with the series' strong ethical messages about sharing, working, and being obedient.

continued on page 12

Program Performance Improves *continued*

The table below shows the two-year enrollments in each NRS level.

| Beginning Educational Functioning Level | Student Enrollment | | Percent Change |
|---|--------------------|--------|----------------|
| | FY05 | FY06 | |
| ABE Beginning Literacy | 7002 | 5430 | -22.5% |
| ABE Beginning Basic Education | 11395 | 11415 | 0.2% |
| ABE Intermediate Low | 18999 | 20265 | 6.7% |
| ABE Intermediate High | 22533 | 22696 | 0.7% |
| ABE Subtotal | 59929 | 59806 | -0.2% |
| ASE Low | 6732 | 7064 | 4.9% |
| ASE High | 4714 | 5064 | 7.4% |
| ASE Subtotal | 11446 | 12128 | 6.0% |
| ESL Beginning Literacy | 44523 | 47465 | 6.6% |
| ESL Beginning | 13544 | 12541 | -7.4% |
| ESL Intermediate Low | 8418 | 9334 | 10.9% |
| ESL Intermediate High | 7326 | 7621 | 4.0% |
| ESL Low Advanced | 5600 | 5421 | -3.2% |
| ESL High Advanced | 6700 | 4463 | -33.4% |
| ESL Subtotal | 86111 | 86845 | 0.9% |
| Total Enrollment | 157486 | 158779 | 0.8% |

The improvement in performance at every NRS level was striking, as shown in tables below.

| Beginning Educational Functioning Level | Percentage of Students Advancing to the Next Level | | Increase from FY05 to FY06 |
|---|--|-------|----------------------------|
| | FY05 | FY06 | |
| ABE Beginning Literacy | 30.6% | 34.5% | 3.9% |
| ABE Beginning Basic Education | 33.6% | 37.9% | 4.3% |
| ABE Intermediate Low | 33.2% | 36.8% | 3.5% |
| ABE Intermediate High | 25.7% | 29.3% | 3.6% |
| ASE Low | 24.0% | 30.6% | 6.6% |
| ASE High | 35.4% | 36.2% | 0.9% |
| ESL Beginning Literacy | 26.9% | 33.9% | 7.0% |
| ESL Beginning | 39.7% | 48.6% | 8.9% |
| ESL Intermediate Low | 40.1% | 47.0% | 6.9% |
| ESL Intermediate High | 37.4% | 45.2% | 7.8% |
| ESL Low Advanced | 36.8% | 41.4% | 4.6% |
| ESL High Advanced | 18.1% | 26.8% | 8.7% |
| Total | 30.5% | 36.4% | 5.8% |

The improvement in performance was even more remarkable in the four NRS follow-up outcome measures, jumping an average of 40 points.

| Follow-up Outcomes | Percentage Achieving Outcome | | Increase from FY05 to FY06 |
|---|------------------------------|-------|----------------------------|
| | FY05 | FY06 | |
| Entered Employment | 37.1% | 74.6% | 37.6% |
| Retained Employment | 30.3% | 69.3% | 38.9% |
| Obtained a GED or Secondary School Diploma | 42.9% | 83.3% | 40.4% |
| Entered Postsecondary Education or Training | 38.0% | 83.0% | 45.0% |

These results reflect programs' more sophisticated understanding of both NRS guidelines and the ALIES® reporting system, as well as their greater effectiveness in helping students achieve their desired outcomes. Programs throughout the state identified more students with employment goals and conducted more thorough follow-up surveys (as evidenced by higher percentages of students responding to surveys), while still showing better performance in each measure. The table below displays the percentage of students who responded to surveys conducted for each follow-up outcome.

| Follow-up Outcomes | Percentage Surveyed | | Change |
|---|---------------------|------|--------|
| | FY05 | FY06 | |
| Entered Employment | 46.9% | 64% | 16.9% |
| Retained Employment | 58.2% | 63% | 4.9% |
| Obtained a GED or Secondary School Diploma | 57.8% | 72% | 14.4% |
| Entered Postsecondary Education or Training | 48.9% | 68% | 19.3% |

“While we are encouraged by our 2005–06 performance, we anticipate even more gains in 2006–07,” predicted Tom Orsini. “In May, AEWD issued a guidance document regarding the administration of the TABE that should reduce, if not eliminate, incorrect practices that adversely affected the state’s overall numbers. This year, the Center for Applied Linguistics is rolling out follow-up training designed to increase the accuracy and reliability of BEST Plus assessments. The LAC, under its recently awarded contracts with the State Education Department, will continue to provide intensive data quality reviews for programs selected to participate in the ITAP program; it will also design a state curriculum for professional development.

“We have some of the best instructors and programs anywhere,” he concluded. “We need to accurately depict what is happening in these programs.” ●

How We Danced Our Way to Better Health

> Beda T. Vergara

The competition was fierce. It was, after all, the finals, featuring the survivors of tough first-round competitions held in each class. Display boards from each group lined the hallway, drawing the admiration of students and guests. “The Celery Way” distributed food samples. “High Blood Pressure” showed their colorful cards. “HIV and AIDS” put on skits featuring a condom and a doll. “The Aloe Vera Way” had a well-rehearsed routine and a delicious drink. But when the “Obesity” group ended their lively show with a dance that brought the house down, the two judges from the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) and one each from Urban Health Plan and the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (SoBRO) had their choice for the winners’ trophy. Everyone else got a medal; they all deserved it. Our first Health Awareness Day at SoBRO had been an unqualified success.

Name almost any health problem prevalent in New York, and I could tell you that the South Bronx has more of it than almost anywhere else in the city. At SoBRO, health literacy seemed an obvious topic to include in our basic education (BE) curriculum. The question was how someone like me, an adult basic education (ABE) teacher, not a health educator, could do that effectively.

The answer began to take shape early in 2006, when I participated in a health literacy study circle at the LAC. By the time it ended, I had begun developing lessons that integrated health into my curriculum, focusing on the underlying language and literacy skills that adult learners must have to complete the many health-related tasks they confront on a regular basis.

After I completed the study circle, Dr. Winston Lawrence and Irrit Dweck of the LAC met with Maria Berrios-Cronin, director of our adult education program, to discuss possible health literacy-related activities at SoBRO. They suggested including a partnership with a health facility as a supplement to curricular work. At a SoBRO retreat in July, we fleshed out our plans for the coming academic year, agreeing that health literacy, financial literacy, and skills for seeking employment should all become part of our curriculum. We then discussed the objectives and procedures we would adopt in each of these areas.

From there, our health literacy program developed rapidly. In discussions with the LAC health literacy specialists, we agreed that our partnership should be with a local health clinic and work on the full array of health needs faced by our learners. The LAC assisted us in identifying Urban Health Plan Inc. (UHP) as an excellent choice. At our first meeting, they proved to be as enthusiastic as we were.

Our initial project was a needs assessment. We asked our students to tell us what illnesses they thought were common in the community. Based on their responses, our program manager created a questionnaire to get more details on the students’ health related problems and determine the best ways we could work on them.

The November 28th Health Awareness Day culminated a month-long health literacy immersion program involving all of SoBRO’s adult literacy classes—ABE, ESOL, and EL/Civics. Our teachers began the program by dividing their learners into groups of four or five and asking each to select a health topic. Once their group had a topic, every member

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joined in research on it—in the library, in newspapers, in magazines, on the Internet, and by contacting health organizations. Each group was given a display board to post pictures, articles, or stories about the selected topic for presentation. The degree of engagement was extraordinary. Our students were learning about things they knew could make a difference in their daily lives, and having fun in the process. They spent hours doing their research, then more hours designing their displays and creating and rehearsing their presentations.

With the assistance of LAC staff member Estella Natal, a group of our students made their first visit to the UHP clinic, where Matilda Cruz, director of Health Programs, Alex Sonera, senior administrator, and Ivy Fairchild, chief development officer, gave them a warm welcome with a continental breakfast. They briefed their guests on the health services that UHP offers and gave them a tour of their new facility from the 4th floor on down. Our visit concluded with a presentation by UHP staff members on different health plans and how to apply for them.

The Health Awareness Day display boards are gone, but student awareness of health issues has continued to grow. Several of my students have already gone to UHP for health care; many more intend to, now that they are aware of the range of services available to them. We are already planning our next health project: a Health Literacy Corner for all of our students, with leaflets, booklets, and pamphlets on a variety of health topics. UHP has agreed to assist us by supplying materials.

In just a few months, we have succeeded in making health literacy a part of our curriculum in a way that engages our students and accelerates their progress in a wide variety of literacy skills. Better yet, this initiative is helping us create a healthier and more productive community. ●

Beda T. Vergara is an adult education teacher at the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (SoBRO).

Turning on the Light *continued*

Practical Problems, Potential Solutions

Assistive learning technologies are not the answer to every challenge encountered in adult education programs. Here are some ways to assess whether common barriers that they could help overcome exist, along with specific response strategies.

Is the problem inability to read small print?

Strategy: Use the screen magnification tools found inside the Access Control Panel on your computer. These built-in tools allow you to magnify the screen, control the mouse speed, modify output for hearing problems, and more. These tools are already installed on every computer shipped in the U.S. However, your technology staff may have locked out your ability to access them. You can learn more about them with the following tutorials: Windows Access Control Panel (www.microsoft.com/enable/products/windowsxp/default.aspx), Macintosh Access Control Panel (www.apple.com/accessibility).

Is reading slow and laborious? Is inadequate reading fluency interfering with comprehension?

Strategy: Part of the attraction of the term “print disabled” is that it suggests interventions that simply bypass the decoding aspects of reading in order to focus on acquisition and use of information. That is, if adults are truly print disabled, why not teach them as if they were blind?

Strategy: Provide evidence of a print disability and subscribe to BookShare.org (www.bookshare.org) to obtain digital copies of copyrighted books. These digital files can then be used on a computer to listen to books an individual could not read independently.

Strategy: Provide evidence of a print disability and qualify for free audio materials from the American Printing House for the Blind (www.aph.org) or Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic (www.rfb.org).

Strategy: Purchase commercial audio book products from Audible.com (www.audible.com) or Books Aloud (www.booksaloud.com). Or, locate free audio books (www.audiobooksforfree.com).

Strategy: Teach the learner to copy digital text and paste it into a text to speech program. Examples of free products include [Windows] ReadPlease (www.readplease.com) and [Macintosh] TextEdit (Macintosh System Software). This strategy may also be used with commercial talking word processors such as WordQ (www.wordq.com) and Write OutLoud (www.donjohnston.com).

Are learners in a situation where they must read materials beyond their level?

Strategy: Use scan and read systems—integrated technology solutions that use a scanner, specialized optical character recognition (OCR) software, and a computer. These systems were developed as a tool for blind people. Three leading products are Kurzweil 3000 (www.kurzweilededu.com), Read and Write Gold (www.texthelp.com), and WYNN (www.freedomscientific.com/LSG/products/wynn.asp).

Does the client need reading support in multiple environments?

Strategy: Teach the client how to use Key to Access (www.readingmadeez.com/KeyToAccess.php). This pocket-key-chain-sized portable USB drive for Windows computers contains 8 programs that enable learners to use their assistive technology tools available on any computer without installing special software. The tools include a talking word processor, as well as a scan and read tool.

Does the learner need reading support to practice skills away from the classroom?

Strategy: Get a talking web browser, which makes the entire Internet talk. BrowseAloud (www.browsealoud.com/) [Windows and Macintosh] is free. You can also get a 30-day trial version of Reading Bar (www.readplease.com/english/readingbar.php) [Windows, Internet Explorer]. Once it is installed, the learner can open any web page, highlight any word, sentence, or page, and click the play button to hear it spoken.

Finding Appropriate Tools

Making decisions on whether and when to introduce assistive living devices, even those that are not costly, is particularly difficult in adult literacy. When educators are developing an individual education plan for a child or youth, federal law requires them to consider the use of assistive technology. No similar mandate exists in adult literacy. Deciding whether or not a learner could benefit from assistive technology to enhance functional reading performance remains at the discretion of the individual program or teacher. This places them in what I call the assistive technology consideration paradox: being asked to make a decision on using tools and solutions without knowing which ones are available, let alone how effective they are.

The use of technology to mitigate impairments involving cognition is too new for us to have the legacy of knowledge, products, and research that educators can draw on in many other areas of assistive technology. We still lack high-quality training materials and decision support aids; clear indicators of performance deficits; and an understanding of how specific technologies could be expected to compensate for limitations in ways that we could document. Our best current resource is the online tools a variety of individuals and organizations have created to help educators identify the most appropriate assistive technology. Even with this support, finding the best solutions requires a great deal of research, as well as a process of trial and error to identify the right combination of assistive technology tools to enhance the reading abilities of each individual.

Until fairly recently, application of assistive technology was more art than science. Individuals arrived with a performance problem and left with some sort of solution. If the program collected any data, the questions related to user satisfaction. Calls to formally measure outcomes first appeared in the literature in 1995. While some progress has been made in the past decade, we are far from having recognized, reliable, and valid outcome measures. The research literature remains primarily descriptive and case-based. It would be fair to say that more research is needed in almost all areas of assistive technology application. Even so, we do have sufficient evidence to make informed decisions in many areas.

As in buying a new computer, the best strategy is often to review the range of evidence available about different components and then decide which solution is most appropriate. One resource is my annual review of the literature to determine what have we learned lately. Basically, I review the contents of 31 journals to extract the most relevant articles related to technology in special education and then create a comprehensive index that allows users to locate what we have learned by disability, curriculum area, grade level, and technology topic. If you only have time to read one article a year, this one will help you stay current. To learn more about the review process and access online copies of the published reviews (1999–2003), visit www.uwm.edu/~edyburn/what.html.

Creating a Successful Learning Environment *continued*

Assessment, instruction, and progress checks need to be seen as components of a single process.

Recently, one of our learners finished a formative assessment, found she had advanced a full grade equivalent, and let out a “whoop” in the middle of our open-space environment. All activity stopped as learners and staff members rushed over to slap her back and offer their congratulations.

Despite accountability pressures, our center downplays the importance of formalized testing. We treat regular assessment as a way of gaining information about learner needs and nothing else, and make it a routine part of the learning process, not a separate activity—certainly not a mysterious one.

Usually, our assessments do not take place in absolute privacy. Results are discussed matter-of-factly, using easy-to-understand grade equivalent scores. We want to be a place where people experience the joy of learning. Feeling pressure to do well on a test is not conducive to that.

Establishing and maintaining a successful learning environment is a subtle and continuous process. Its characteristics, however, remain constant: intimacy; flexibility; a climate that welcomes, respects, celebrates, and informs our learners, and, most of all, lets them know how much we care. ●

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