

Appendix B

To be sent to participants
two weeks before first session

Pre-Meeting Packet of Readings and Handouts

**Participants need to receive this packet at least ten days
before the first session of the Study Circle.**

Contents

Cover letter: “Information about the Learner Persistence in Adult Basic Education Study Circle”

Handout A: “What is a Study Circle?”

Handout B: “What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison”

Handout C: “The Role of the Participant”

Handout D: “Schedule/To Do Form”

Reading #1: “Power, Literacy, and Motivation”

Reading #2: “Getting into Groups”

Dear Participant:

Thank you for registering to participate in the Learner Persistence in Adult Basic Education Study Circle. I really look forward to meeting with you. This Study Circle was developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), through its Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN). The goal of the PDRN is to develop partnerships between university researchers and practitioners, promote practitioner research, and help practitioners use research results in their work in adult basic education.

I believe there will be NUMBER OF teachers participating in the Study Circle. We will meet three times. The first meeting is at LOCATION on MONTH/DAY/YEAR at TIME.

At each session, we will be discussing readings about learner persistence, motivation and retention in adult basic education. We'll discuss the findings of NCSALL'S research on learner persistence, which was directed by John Comings of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and examine articles from NCSALL's quarterly magazine for practitioners, *Focus on Basics*.

Before the first meeting, please read the three handouts on Study Circles. Also, please read Reading #1 and Reading #2. We will be discussing these at the first meeting.

I have enclosed a folder for you to keep all of the materials for this Study Circle. Please bring this folder and all the materials with you to each of our meetings.

If you have any questions about the Study Circle in general or about what to do before our first meeting, please call me at YOUR PHONE NUMBER or send me an email at YOUR E-MAIL ADDRESS.

I'm looking forward to some great discussions with all of you.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME AND TITLE



What is a study circle?

A study circle:

- is a process for small-group deliberation that is voluntary and participatory;
- is a small group, usually 8 to 12 participants;
- is led by a facilitator who is impartial, who helps manage the deliberation process, but is not an "expert" or "teacher" in the traditional sense;
- considers many perspectives, rather than advocating a particular point of view;
- uses ground rules to set the tone for a respectful, productive discussion;
- is rooted in dialogue and deliberation, not debate;
- has multiple sessions which move from personal experience of the issue, to considering multiple viewpoints, to strategies for action;
- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concern;
- provides an opportunity for citizens to work together to improve their community.



What study circles are, and are not: A comparison

A study circle IS:

- a **small-group discussion** involving deliberation and problem solving, in which an issue is examined from many perspectives; it is enriched by the members' knowledge and experience, and often informed by expert information and discussion materials; it is aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

A study circle is NOT the same as:

- **conflict resolution**, a set of principles and techniques used in resolving conflict between individuals or groups. (Study circle facilitators and participants sometimes use these techniques in study circles.)
- **mediation**, a process used to settle disputes that relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement. (Mediators often make excellent study circle facilitators, and have many skills in common.)
- a **focus group**, a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Respondents (who are sometimes paid) are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.
- **traditional education with teachers and pupils**, where the teacher or an expert imparts knowledge to the students.
- a **facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome**, such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. A study circle begins with a shared interest among its members, and unfolds as the process progresses.
- a **town meeting**, a large-group meeting which is held to get public input on an issue, or to make a decision on a community policy.
- a **public hearing**, a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.



The role of the participant

The following points are intended to help you, the participant, make the most of your study circle experience, and to suggest ways in which you can help the group

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.
- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.
- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.
- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.
- **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.
- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.
- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.
- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.
- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

Schedule/To Do Form

What To Do To Get Ready

Session	Date	What to do before session
Session One		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Handouts A, B, and C and Readings #1 and #2 that you received in the Pre-Session packet. • Highlight interesting points and jot down any questions that come to mind.
Session Two		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Readings #3 - #5. You will receive these readings during Session One. • Write down at least one reaction you have to the authors' ideas in each of Readings #3 - #5. • Think about how the concepts presented in each reading might apply to the adult learners you work with.
Session Three		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Readings #6 and #7. You will receive these readings during Session Two. • Jot down some of your impressions and questions as you read these sections.

Power, Literacy and Motivation

by Greg Hart

Focus on Basics, Vol. 2, Issue A, pp.1, 3-5, March 1998

"Will you support the construction of an adult education center on the south side of Tucson? Please answer YES or NO." Lina Prieto, working on her GED, the single mother of two sons, put the question to each city council member and each county supervisor as they stepped up to the microphone. It was September, 1996, and 2,000 people in the auditorium waited for each to answer. An occasional "grito" (shout) rose up out of the crowd. Even the children waited intently beside their parents, aware that something unusual was happening. Signs demanding support for adult education lined the huge room at the Tucson Convention Center and bobbed above the crowd. The politicians stepped up to the microphone one at a time to answer her. "Yes!" "Yes!" "Yes!" Eleven times "Yes!", eleven times a huge eruption of shouting from the crowd, and on the last "Yes!" we rose to our feet and raucously celebrated victory. We -- immigrants, drop outs, single mothers on welfare, minimum-wage workers, under-paid part-time adult educators -- hugged one another, waved our signs, and gave "high fives" all around. The politicians looked out with wonder over the scene until they, too, were engulfed by the thrill loose in the room. A building for adult education was going to be built, for sure, but this jubilation was about more than that. It was about power.

At Pima County Adult Education (PCAE), we have come to believe that literacy is a means to greater power and personal freedom, not an end in itself. It is the prospect of achieving power and not the concept of literacy that truly motivates both students and teachers. Lina Prieto, the other adult education students who had spoken before her, and the audience itself were acting with intent to influence their own destinies and their community. Literacy had helped them to act, but the excitement and satisfaction they felt arose from the knowledge that they were, in those moments, powerful.

My colleagues and I at PCAE have grown weary of working with people desperate to change their lives, only to contend with the fact that from one year to the next about 50 percent of PCAE's 10,000 students drop out before achieving their learning goals. We know that the reasons for that are numerous and complex, and that many are associated with what it means to be poor. We also know that some students leave because what we are able to offer as a program simply doesn't appeal to them. We believe that many students sense what some adult educators already know: that our own status as adult educators relative to other public educational institutions is a mirror image of their own powerlessness. We think that far too many conclude that getting a GED or learning to read at a higher level probably won't change their lives, and, painful as it is to admit, at PCAE we believe they may be right.

An Investment

We held a series of formal and informal meetings and discussions throughout 1992 and 1993, some in the context of a series of day-long staff retreats. As a result, we decided to invest time, energy, and money to introduce the potential for power and civic engagement in an integrated way into our curriculum. We did this to motivate students to use and respect literacy as a tool of action rather than to regard it as a concept unrelated to the reality of their lives and their

powerlessness. We also did it to motivate ourselves through deepening our commitment to the meaning and potential of our work as adult educators. The philosophies and practices of Myles Horton, the great plain-speaking American adult educator, and, to a lesser degree, his friend, the great and courageous Paulo Freire, provided fodder for our discussions and models for our actions.

An experience in 1988, when PCAE students and staff staged a large public demonstration that led to a 200 percent increase in funding, had taught us something important: students and adult educators changed when they felt they had some say in their lives. Students involved in planning and organizing the demonstration stayed involved with the program for years, some as paid teaching aides. Teachers involved in and inspired by the powerful impact on themselves and their students grew increasingly discontent with the standard academic, skills-based curriculum that, despite endless tinkering, never seemed to have an impact on attrition levels.

Despite that previous experience, however, we still didn't know how to introduce and sustain ongoing engagement with our students about power. We weren't entirely sure how to identify issues of common concern or how to organize broad-based civic actions and interventions designed to address them, or how we would connect all of that to the adult education classroom. We needed help to proceed. We got it, from the Pima County Interfaith Council (PCIC), an organization associated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), founded in the 1940s by the late organizer and radical Saul Alinsky. The PCIC worked originally with faith-based constituencies and a few secular institutions to research issues of importance to the Tucson community, especially those affecting the poor. Some of the issues coming to light based on PCIC's work included lack of child care and transportation, inadequate job training for living-wage jobs, low wages, latch-key children, and the disintegration of families, neighborhoods, and schools. PCIC's lead organizer and I began to meet and form the basis for a working partnership that recognized mutual interests. With PCIC's help and guidance and PCAE's commitment of training, staff time, and leadership -- including the creation of the position of Coordinator for Civics and Citizenship -- we began to convene forums and one-to-one meetings for students and staff to identify issues affecting their lives.

During these forums and one-to-one meetings, student and staff leaders began to emerge. Issues such as low wages, gang and crime-burdened neighborhoods, and parents' sense of disconnection from their children's schools came to the fore. At times with and at times without teacher guidance, small groups of students began to research issues. Their research included the analysis of public policy documents, the development of effective questions and agendas for meetings with public officials, the preparation of speeches and position papers, and learning how to reach consensus on strategy and conclusions through dialogue. The use of high level literacy skills was, of necessity, essential to all of these tasks. Training for staff and students also included public speaking skills, the mechanics of presenting at large public meetings, and conducting smaller group meetings with public officials and others. In fact, most of these activities were pointed towards meetings with public officials, of which there were eventually many. Student and staff skills were tested and refined during those encounters.

Under the guidance of the Civics and Citizenship Coordinator, six student leaders took paid positions with PCAE as student advocates and student mentors. Their responsibility included, among other things, assisting student councils and identifying other students with leadership potential. Eventually, a core group of about 40 students and staff formed a group called the

"Friends and Students of Adult Education." They continue to meet regularly and to take an active and public role in issues of concern to adult education students and adult education in general.

Staff and student participation in this civic process was and remains a matter of self selection at PCAE. Individuals determine whether or not they want to be involved and their level of involvement. They demonstrate their interest through attendance at meetings and their willingness to volunteer for assignments such as research, meetings with public officials, or disseminating and explaining information to other students and staff. At any given time at PCAE, we may have 25 or so student leaders who are actively involved and a few of hundred who stay informed by attending student council meetings and meetings of the "Friends and Students."

In the beginning of our relationship with PCIC, some of our approximately 170 staff were immediately interested, and others were skeptical. Some of those who were most cautious have since become ardent proponents of civic involvement. Others were ambivalent at the inception, and remain that way to this day. Everyone had questions and concerns: Is this type of civic involvement appropriate for an educational program? Might we lose our funding if we antagonize the powers that be or get caught up in partisan politics? Does PCIC have a hidden religious agenda? Will my job be threatened if I choose not to participate? Today, most teachers appear to be comfortable or are becoming more comfortable with PCAE's efforts to link adult literacy education with the notion of power. Clark Atkinson, a teacher with more than 25 years of varied experience as an adult educator and a strong advocate for teachers' rights, was one of the most dubious at the outset of our involvement. He said recently that he believes that our work with civic engagement has been the most important thing PCAE has ever done.

We have had a number of outward successes based on the issues identified and addressed by students and staff. They include hosting the candidates for Governor and State Superintendent of Public Instruction in our classrooms, where they were challenged to publicly commit and demonstrate support for adult education. This later materialized into a statewide family literacy initiative. Adult education students played pivotal roles in the development of a city-wide program that nearly doubled the number of after-school programs for elementary-age children. In partnership with teachers, they have formed a non-profit corporation called Adults for Community Transformation (ACT). They confronted powerful local bureaucrats over the placement of a swimming pool at a local neighborhood center instead of a long promised adult education center. Ultimately, they got not one facility, but two. They worked with staff and parents at a troubled high school to create a jobs program for students that is now being lauded and duplicated throughout the city. Hundreds of students studied interviewing skills and participated in a walking canvass of some of the city's more troubled neighborhoods and later helped to present the results to the City Council and the County Board of Supervisors. Working with some of the city's most influential political and business leaders, they have been instrumental in the creation of a new job training strategy that guarantees employer-pledged, living-wage jobs with a career path. In the spring of 1997, students worked with the Board of Supervisors to get \$2.25 million included for adult education buildings in a county bond issue. After the bonds passed in a very tight election, 500 attended a County Board of Supervisors meeting in July of 1997 to successfully request that the money be allocated ahead of schedule.

These successes speak for themselves. But what about the impact on students, their learning, and their willingness to stay involved? Skills of involved individuals have certainly grown. Right now, our attrition rate remains about the same, and we report about the same number of student goals achieved as in the past. And, there has been a price to pay: power generates opposition.

Former allies, both individuals and institutions, have grown distant and, in some cases, inimical, as they perceive that their interests and their access to resources may be threatened by an active adult education constituency competing for those same resources. The risk is real that in questing for power we might lose some, or, in the worst case, all of our ability to even offer educational programs. We might lose our jobs, too. We also clearly recognize another risk: that we as teachers, i.e., the literate, might exploit students. That possibility requires constant vigilance and introspection. The buildings we have won, for example, cannot just end up being nicer places to work for adult educators; they must serve and strengthen the adult learner community. We must be vigilant also that PCAE itself is not similarly exploited by the IAF or PCIC for their own purposes.

We will not understand the full impact of our work for many years to come. We have shown ourselves that linking literacy education with the notion of power transforms the perspectives and motivations of educators and students alike. We have seen people's lives and the lives of their families change. When GED student Lina Prieto, who questioned city and county officials, speaks powerfully to a room of 2,000 people, she knows she has the ability to influence the direction of her community: she has power. Her seven-year-old son sitting in the audience sees it, too. When teachers see students involved in the civic process, they recognize that they themselves are engaged in meaningful work: they have power. When government officials see that the community they serve has a voice, they see that power belongs rightfully to the people. For the people at PCAE involved in this process, adult literacy education, and power will never rightfully be separate from one another again.

About the Author

Greg Hart is the director of Pima County Adult Education in Tucson, Arizona.

Getting into Groups

by Michael Pritza

Focus on Basics, Vol. 2, Issue A, pp.20-22, March 1998

In Gilmer County, Georgia, a shift from individualized instruction to classes and group discussion increased student retention and participation

I am an instructor at the Gilmer County Adult Learning Center in Ellijay, Georgia. Gilmer County lies at the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains in the extreme north and central part of the state. Like many rural counties, Gilmer, once relatively isolated, is rapidly becoming a satellite community of a major urban area, in this case, Atlanta. Our students are a diverse group in terms of age and academic development; the youngest is 16, the oldest is 92. They range from non-readers to those who have completed the tests of General Educational Development (GED) and are studying for entrance to technical school or community college. With the exception of a dozen or so currently enrolled Hispanic students, all are Caucasians in the middle- to low-income brackets. Women outnumber men by about five to one.

Like many others in the field of adult basic education, my colleague, Art LaChance, and I were concerned with student retention. Our drop out rate was consistently about 34 percent. About ten percent of these would enthusiastically enroll, but never return. A larger number began well but their attendance gradually tapered off until they finally disappeared without notice or explanation. A surprising number, perhaps another ten to 15 percent, were within easy reach of their goals when they suddenly and inexplicably left the program. Follow-up calls to these students did not yield results. We both felt personally and professionally frustrated by our apparent inability to keep these students engaged for the full course of the program. We knew that they were falling short of their goals, and we felt a lack of effectiveness as an organization. We wondered if we could do anything to change this pattern, or whether it was an unalterable fact of adult education. We had never looked at the problem critically, however, until we participated in a practitioner inquiry project sponsored by the University of Georgia's Department of Adult and Continuing Education in Athens. It was with this project that we really began to consider the possible causes for such high numbers of dropouts.

We began by brainstorming ideas about what we could do to increase retention. Would different methods of intake or the creation of a weekly student orientation affect retention rates? Would awards and certificates of level completion have an impact? What about asking our students about the kinds of study and activity they preferred? We wondered about creating regularly scheduled classes in reading, writing, or math, which we didn't have at the time, or starting discussion groups based on current events. We had success with some team building and discussion-prompting activities in the past, so this idea seemed to have merit.

We then considered our students. All of them were influenced by variables over which we had no control: problems with family, money, illness, transportation, child care, and the like. Many of them told us that they had never seen education as a necessity. Even in the face of recent industry lay offs or the inability to find work, many still saw education as irrelevant. "Why," they asked, "do we have to know this stuff?"

As I mentioned, we had been offering individualized, self-paced study with instructor assistance and self-directed computer-based programs. We began to wonder whether these methods were contributing to our high attrition rate. Students had liked the few group activities we had led. Perhaps a more successful method would include greater participation from both students and instructors alike. This hunch began to take precedence over other ideas. We eliminated most of our other questions and focused on the issue of participation. Our research question became: Will group participation in structured classes and discussion groups increase student motivation and retention?

The first step in our investigation was straightforward. We asked our students to respond to a simple questionnaire about the possible instructional approaches we could use at the Center. Choices included individual study with either text materials or interactive computer programs such as PLATO (which we were already doing), study in pairs, or group study in a classroom environment. The groups would focus on language, math, and writing skills. More than 85 percent of about 50 students answered that they would prefer studying together as a group.

Student Input

We then interviewed students in more depth to determine at what point and in which subjects they felt they most needed help. We began to hold loosely organized classes two or three times a week based on the needs of the greatest number of students. We included students at all levels and left attendance to their discretion, rather than making it mandatory. Since we have two instructors, one of us was always available to those students who preferred to work individually. Classes were at first informal and unscheduled. We would simply move around the Center and ask "Who wants to do class?" and get together for an hour or so, creating a lesson from whatever students were working on at the time. As we progressed, the classes became more structured and scheduled, though during the span of the project we were careful not to make these sessions seem unnecessarily academic or authoritarian. We did not want to re-stimulate negative past experiences, and we considered student feedback and participation to be two of the most important elements. We also began discussion groups based on topics selected by the students and on exercises from "Beyond Basic Skills," a newsletter of classroom ideas published by the University of Georgia. These groups provided a place in which the students could talk about issues they felt were relevant to their lives, like work and personal finance. In these forums, they questioned the relevance of education, asking "How is education going to improve the quality of my life?" and "How can my life improve by learning percents and geometry?"

Hard Questions

Sometimes answering these questions was hard. During our project, I kept a log of my observations and reflections. The log entries seem to be most useful in shedding light on recurrent themes about student needs and observations. In reviewing the log entries, I discovered the importance of making material relevant to students' lives. "Today," I wrote in my log, "Linda and Troy [names have been changed] asked why they have to learn this stuff. Can we make more money?' If I say No, but your quality of life will improve,' they ask really hard questions: How would my life improve without more money?' There seem to be very few students who will buy the academic reasoning."

As part of our inquiry project, we turned to attendance records for data, extracting the cumulative monthly hours of all students who were not mandated to attend and comparing them to hours of

attendance in the months before the project began. We were struck by the fact that the average number of attendance hours for non-mandated students had increased about 50 percent during the project. At first we were skeptical about such a large increase, but a review of attendance records showed the data to be correct.

Art and I interpret this data to be an indication of the success of our project, and because of this we have incorporated group classes and discussion into our present methods of instruction and curriculum presentation with some real success. Classes are full and students actually make time to include them in their daily schedules. Both the classes and the discussion groups generate energy and enthusiasm in the students, which leads to greater participation and time spent in the program. Participation, especially in the discussion groups, is open to all students, making the classes multi-level. This exposes many of the learners to ideas and subject matter that they would not otherwise encounter and fosters student interaction. It seems to spark in some of our beginning ABE students a desire to participate further: they say they feel good about "going to class." We have noticed that class participation seems to foster study groups, with more advanced students often helping those who are less far along. Because of this, students actually seem to be spending more time involved in their studies.

Of course, this study also created some new problems and challenges. We need to recognize that many factors which influence motivation and retention are probably beyond our influence, and so concentrate on those that we feel we can help to change. As instructors, we realize that we should constantly remain open to change and to restructuring our methods of approach according to the needs of the students, both as a group and as individuals. What works one time, with one group, may not necessarily work the next. Certain constants, such as the need for relevant content, may be extrapolated from our daily work, but the solutions to the problems we encounter may vary from time to time and group to group. This has led us to believe that there is no single solution to the problems of retention and motivation, but many solutions must be applied according to the demands of the time and the needs of the students.

References

Valentine, T. and Sandlin, J. (eds.) (1997), *Beyond Basic Skills*, Vol. 1, No. 3.

About the Author

Michael Pritza began work in adult literacy as a volunteer with the Gilmer County Reading Program in 1992. In 1993, he accepted a position with the program, where he now serves as an ABE/GED instructor. Pritza has been involved in practitioner inquiry research since 1995, and is currently working on a degree in Alternatives in Education from Skidmore College in New York.