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Participatory Action Research: Adult Literacy Tutors

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### Abstract

Numerous literacy organizations have long been committed to reducing adult illiteracy worldwide, but it remains virtually unchanged. A possible reason could be that educational researchers rarely focus on the tutors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify a set of adult learning principles, practices, or professional development strategies for literacy tutors. The research framework was formed with participatory action research and adult learning education through small focus groups with specific questions centered on teacher, student, resources, and best practices. The research verified that tutors voices are hidden and silent. The study also indicates that: 1) Educators need a developed set of best instructional practices or professional development strategies for the adult learner; 2) More active listening and probing questions need to be used by all parties involved; 3) Both small and large focus group interviews with focus group questions are effective; 4) Pre-assessment strategies are essential; 5) Tutors need to be exposed to current research in their own current frame of reference using a host of processes such as role modeling, case studies, simulations, games, rapport building, and self-directed learning to encourage transference and adoption.

## Participatory Action Research: Adult Literacy Tutors

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify a set of instructional practices or professional development strategies for volunteer adult literacy tutors in a series of in-service tutor workshops within a library system in south Florida using participatory research techniques. The study was undertaken to determine and to develop a more effective literacy program to reduce and eliminate adult illiteracy for the public good.

Even though numerous organizations have long been committed to reducing adult illiteracy, it remains virtually unchanged; indeed, some reports indicate that adult literacy is actually rising. One of the reasons for this may be that the adult literacy tutors' voices that serve this population are not being heard. This study sought to address the beliefs, attitudes, qualifications, and perceived adult learning needs espoused by the adult literacy tutors that work directly with the low literate adult population.

### Perspective/Theoretical Framework

This study of tutors and adult learning principles and practices for literacy improvement is seen through an action research framework. Adult learning principles and practices consists of some of the following: knowledge of andragogy, learning styles, listening and reading comprehension, multiple intelligence, self-directed learning, and program planning. The research is viewed through the lens of multiple literacy proponent perspectives via the partnership with the researchers as participant in a spiral of looking, thinking, and acting. The researchers collaborated with a chapter of Friends of Literacy through Libraries' Board of Directors' members at the Broward County Library in Broward County, Florida. Approximately 50 adult literacy tutors attended three in-service tutoring workshops at three different demographic area library branches from January 29 through May 21, 2005, in which the main goal was eliciting information about tutors through focus groups, direct questioning, questionnaires, and interactive training techniques.

### Methodology, Instrumentation, Procedures

First an extensive literature review of adult literacy tutors' voices was made limited to tutors only, choosing not to search or define the terms "volunteer" nor "voluntarism." Next, government statistics on illiteracy, literacy programming, needs and interest assessments were searched. Focus group questions were formed, applied, and revised. Group discussions were read and annotated, after which they were examined and analyzed through observation and reflection. Moreover, focus group questions and interviews and evaluations during the training workshops extracted comments from the tutors. Furthermore, each training workshop was programmed to create an atmosphere of openness with respect and trust and passion in order to better capture the essence of the tutor's ideas, beliefs, and attitudes toward tutoring.

### Results/Conclusions/Recommendations

The literature review shows research focusing upon characteristics of a good tutor (Devins, 1991); motivation for entering service (Rumsey, 1996); changes in literacy and role of tutors (Freer, 1993); encouraging tutors to be positive rather than focus on success/fail (Hansen, 1993); tutors who may not provide quality learning experience for students (Ontario Department of Education, 1991); how tutors understand literacy and why they leave (Hambly, 1991); and research studying multiple areas of tutors and literacy except on tutors' needs (Ander & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Clearly, more focus must be on learning more about tutors.

During tutor training program planning and focus group questioning listening, the researcher came to several conclusions. First of all, "tutor rap" sessions are largely ineffective. Group and individual tutor questioning must be focused with a few well selected questions. Then answers to these questions need further reflection and action.

Next, when an outside participant listens to tutors, it is immediately apparent that some tutors and students are "mismatches." Interviewing these individuals could be invaluable in understanding the skills, behaviors, and attitudes of the parties. Moreover, a better job needs to be done in connecting tutors and students.

Also, a system should be organized whereby adult literacy tutors receive up-to-date research and practical best practices from community universities and colleges about how to teach reading and writing and mathematical abilities to adults.

Additionally, educational researchers must know more about tutors. The researcher noted on more than one occasion some tutors held animosity to some students, which included comments such as “he smells,” and “she’s kind of retarded.” It is clear that adult literacy educational researchers must know more about tutors. Questions must be asked such as; “What is their background?” “Can they do more harm than good?” “Why do they want to teach?” “Do they have an agenda that goes against the goals of the students?”

Many reasons exist for why we know so little about the background of literacy tutors. These reasons should be investigated. Since so little is known by educational leaders about the background of literacy tutors especially in teaching according the needs of the adult learner this is a problem for the public. Through the research, it is clear adult literacy tutors are hidden and their voices silenced. Fortunately, most tutors do want and need to have a voice. As researchers we need to listen in order to reform literacy efforts for the public good.

From the focus group questions and responses, the researcher determined that adult literacy tutors have questions which are not being answered efficiently and effectively. Basic and advanced tutoring is covered in approximately 16 hours. In-service tutor workshops are sporadic. By questioning tutors in the focus groups, this research indicated that tutors consistently wanted: 1) information centered on teaching, 2) information on how to help students, 3) information on how to communicate with one another to gain information, 4) information on how to learn to teach writing and mathematics beyond reading, and 5) information on sharing and networking. The most telling of the list of adult literacy tutor needs is more practical application of adult learning principles such as how to help students read with phonics, how to help students by going beyond specific reading programs such as Laubach resources, helping students determine their own learning styles, as well as helping to find sources for problems personally encountered.

Educational researchers do not know individual teaching methods used or even the achievement or failure rates. But mostly, the number one problem for educators is that we cannot identify a set of best instructional practices or professional development strategies for them. Simply put, we do not know enough about tutors.

This research has shown conclusively small focus groups with a small number of directed questions is best with a group depending on size in the 6-9 range for no more than 30-45 minutes. Additional research is needed into the techniques required for both a moderator and a recorder to keep each both small and large groups focused on the task at hand: discovering tutor interests.

The environment, rapport building, and trust are necessary elements in which to encapsulate tutors with an agenda to which they share an active part of contributing ideas, needs, and interests. Data collection and constantly revising instruments for gauging success and failure of instruments must also be an on-going activity with reflection. A variety of assessments would be extremely beneficial in obtaining information about tutors.

Program planning by adult learning educators is a key to unlocking the door to tutor information. It should however begin not with the researcher's vision, but by finding out the needs of the target population, especially one as important as adult literacy tutors. For illiteracy is an important and extremely urgent social issue.

Through this research working with numerous stakeholders, the researchers have time to look, act, and reflect on the status of illiteracy and understand how to better improve outcomes. Participatory action research is the perfect framework in which to have a spiral of dynamic action. Through the methodology, the researchers have confirmed tutors' voices are silent. Reflecting on data, programming, and instructional design brings the researcher to the following set of recommendations: 1) Educators respond to adult literacy tutors' voices by identifying a set of best instructional practices or professional development strategies for the adult learner; 2) Continued cooperation with the trainer, the tutor, and the adult literacy tutor learner is needed that employs more active listening and probing questions; 3) Both small and large focus group

interviews with focus group questions centered on both tutor as teacher and student are needed to elicit the most creative techniques; 4) Using surveys and questionnaires before, during, and after in-service training workshops should become a normal operating procedure. The results of these collections should be recorded, acted upon, reflected upon, and kept in a safe place for future reference; 5) Tutors should be exposed to new educational ideas and theories in the context of what fits their current frame of reference, so the new information regarding adult learning is accepted readily and not rejected. Practical activities such as role modeling, case studies, simulations, games, rapport building, and self-directed learning can assist the adult educators/trainers into engaging the tutors into the new way of doing things that will assist the tutors into applying and later transferring their new knowledge.

In additional to the small and large group focused discussions, recommendations for further focus group discussions, pilot studies, and field projects in Adult and Community Education studies must look at better adult literacy tutor screening and testing to ask questions such as: Are tutors qualified to teach? Utilizing tools of assessment (e.g., interest assessments, learning style instruments, personality assessments, and self-directed learning readiness scales), adult educators and literacy trainers can help individuals find their strengths and weaknesses to better place them in balance with their learners.

Universities and colleges need to take a more proactive role with adult literacy tutor volunteers to help them to formulate their own professional development. Adult and community educational leaders can help tutors build associations to self-direct themselves to a professional and ongoing level of continuing education. Tutor volunteers, once taught, can set up their own level of ethics by building a Code of Ethics appropriate for the very real care that they must be cognizant: they have a responsibility to an adult learner that more than encompasses sharing a love of reading. As UNESCO says, literacy is more than reading today. Literacy is reading, writing, and communicating. We too must communicate our own learning about adult education.

And finally, program planning in-service trainings and workshops by post-secondary educational leader students and researchers can help disperse adult learning principles and

practices to adult literacy tutors. Topics must include reading and listening comprehension, self-directed learning, new research in the areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes and beliefs, facilitating learning in a comfortable environment, and learning how to find resources. Through thinking, action, reflection, and action illiteracy could become a problem for the public from the past.

#### Educational Importance of the Study

The public and adult literacy tutors are largely unaware of adult learning principles and practices for teaching and improving literacy. In spite of the research in the field of adult education in the past three decades, most of the research is not being dispersed to the tutors who need it the most. Communication from researchers to administrators, from researchers to tutors, and from tutors to students, remains fragmented and should be of serious concern to the public. The public must be made aware of the significance of the volunteer tutors' actions in literacy programs as to their desires, needs, and abilities to tutor students.

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