

Title: **Improving Retention Rates During the First Three Weeks of an Adult Basic Education Program at Onion Lake**

Name of Researcher: Jacqueline Bruce

Name of Delivery Organization: Onion Lake Education

Contact Information: jbruce0116@hotmail.com

Question Posed: **If I improve the social environment of the classroom, will the number of students who complete the first three weeks increase?**

The Problem: I teach a self-paced, individualized Level Three and Level Four Adult Basic Education Program at Onion Lake Cree Nation. The program runs in a single classroom and I am the only instructor. I started teaching at Onion Lake in 2004, and student attendance has always been a major hurdle for the Adult Basic Education program. Prior to this project, because of the high dropout rate and the self-paced nature of the course, we have had continuous intake which means students can start on any given day during the school year. During the Fall 2008 semester, 47 different students registered for ABE. Only seven of them (15%) maintained at least 50% attendance through their first three weeks of class.

The Outcome: Student attendance increased by 20% in the Winter 2009 semester and by 30% for the Fall 2009 semester. This met and exceeded my hoped for criterion for success. I consider the project to have been a huge success.

Abstract: In order to increase attendance in my class, I sought to improve the social environment of the Onion Lake Adult Basic Education classroom through activities such as storytelling, an orientation bingo grid, Wii Wednesday, and coffee in order to increase the number of students with at least 50% attendance through the first three weeks of the semester by 10%.

Participants The students are generally at least eighteen years of age or out of school for at least one year. However, in certain cases where the student is unable to attend the local high school, students as young as thirteen have attended.

The class is a mix of students who are parents and those who are not. There is no funding provided for living support so students must either have a job, be on Social Assistance, or be supported by a parent or spouse. Onion Lake is a large reserve, so transportation is often an issue.

Research:

There has been a great deal of research done into retention and attrition of Adult Basic Education students. Causes of attrition can be categorized under three headings: personal factors, family background factors, and school factors. Quigley (1997) believed that a sub-division of personal factors called dispositional barriers can lead to attrition, especially in the first three weeks of a program. Personal factors that affect students can either be what Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) called situational, relating “to an individual’s life context at a particular time” (p. 137), or psychosocial, relating to the “individually held beliefs, values, attitudes, or perceptions” (p. 137). Situational factors include employment, child care, transportation, health, addictions, legal issues, and financial difficulties. Psychosocial factors, also known as dispositional factors, include previous experiences with educational institutions, beliefs about education, and self-esteem. According to Darkenwald (1980) personal factors tend to have a more negative impact on students with low socio-economic status who have fewer resources at their disposal. According to Quigley (1997), “the vast majority of low-literate dropouts leave in the first two or three weeks of the program” (p. 171). He believed that since it was so early in the program that situational barriers were not a major factor yet and it was dispositional barriers that had the biggest impact. He found that ABE dropouts who apparently quit due to dispositional barriers were basically repeating the situations they faced in their prior schooling experiences: they had little interaction with teachers, felt ignored by teachers, had few friends, and had little support from family or friends back in school.

Students who are not interacting with teachers or friends and who have little support will feel isolated. Building a learning community is one way to deal with this. According to Merriam and Clark (2006), “Adult educators and trainers have long recognized the advantages of building community among a group of learners” (p. 43). “[S]uch communities have been found to promote and sustain learning, participation, and development” (p. 43). Connecting with others in a learning community can have a major impact on development and learning.

There have been action research projects that dealt with students' sense of belonging. Nash and Kallenbach (2009) reported the findings from the New England Adult Learner Persistence Project. Eighteen adult education programs implemented a variety of strategies to increase student persistence. Eleven of the action researchers made observations about a greater sense of community. It was important to build trust and camaraderie between the students and staff. A sense of belonging was key to student persistence.

Darkenwald, G. G. (1980). Continuing education and the hard to reach adult. *New Directions for Continuing Education*, 8, 1-10, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Darkenwald, G. G., & Merriam, S. B. (1982). *Adult education: Foundations of practice*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers

Merriam, S. B., & Clark, M. C. (2006). Learning and development: The connection in adulthood. In C. Hoare (Ed.), *Handbook of adult development and learning* (pp. 27-51). New York: Oxford University Press.

Nash, A., & Kallenbach, S. (2009). *Making it worth the stay: Findings from the New England Adult Learner Persistence Project*. Boston, MA: New England Literacy Resource Center/ World Education. Retrieved March 25, 2009, from <http://nelrc.org/persist/report09.pdf>

Quigley, B. A. (1997). *Rethinking literacy education: The critical need for practice-based change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Process Involved:

Before I started this project I asked my supervisor if I needed permission from the Education Board or the Band Council. He indicated that he approved the project and since the changes I proposed were minor and just involved my classroom that further approval wasn't needed.

In order to build a better social environment to increase student attendance, I proposed the formation of an advisory council to help me plan activities and build community support. During the first three weeks of the semester I planned to implement several activities to build a sense of community. I created an Orientation

Bingo that included squares the students could cross off, such as : “played freerice.com for 15 minutes,” “brought a snack for the class,” “made coffee for the class,” “took a learning style survey,” “asked Jacqueline a question,” and others. Prizes were given for getting a line or a blackout. I also planned some speaking games for the first week that would introduce the students to each other. I planned to invite elders to speak in class. I also wanted to buy a coffee pot, a kettle, and a toaster. Coffee, tea, bread and jam would be provided for the students.

In order to implement these plans I needed resources: prizes, kitchen appliances and a shelf to store them on, a Wii, coffee supplies, and guest speakers. My supervisor authorized the money to buy the appliances, the start-up prizes, and the coffee supplies. I brought my Wii from home. The advisory committee was to help me find speakers.

In order to carry this research out in an ethical manner, I informed my students of my plan at the beginning of the semester. They could approach me with any concerns.

Data was collected via anecdotal records, attendance numbers, and semi-structured interviews with the students. The students interviewed had to sign a consent form before any data they provided was used in this report.

My baseline for this research was the 15% of my students who had 50% attendance in their first three weeks of Fall 2008 semester. In order for this research to be deemed successful at least 25% of my students must have over 50% attendance in the first three weeks of the Winter 2009 semester. Initially, I planned to count the attendance of any students who enrolled in the Winter 2009 semester. Prior to the completion of the semester, I decided to just include the students who started at the beginning of the semester. I also decided to run the project for both the Winter and Fall 2009 semesters in order to obtain more data.

Continuous intake of students was a barrier to this project, so students were only accepted for the first week of the Winter semester and not again until the third week. In the Fall 2009 semester, the class was over enrolled at the beginning of the year, so no new students were accepted until October. It is difficult to build a community when the members are constantly changing.

Findings:

My advisory committee never got off the ground. I hoped to invite the elder who works in our building, as well as one of my students

and our Superintendent of Education. All three never seemed to be available at the same time. In the end, I just discussed my plans with the Superintendent. She suggested speakers should include role models such as the chief and people who work with Wellness or ICFS. She also suggested elders could talk about the medicine wheel and residential school. She thought the students might enjoy if I read to them. She thought we could fundraise for jackets or a field trip and give a prize for the most money raised or maybe give a discount for attending. She also suggested I look into accessing the perfect attendance reward money the high school students receive as well as the graduation bonus. We only met the one time.

Winter 2009, I did incorporate the reading and the perfect attendance bonus. I lacked the time and knowledge of the community to find the elders to invite to class. I ran Wii Wednesday for the first three weeks and then low attendance led to my discontinuing it. I did buy coffee and toast supplies as well as the appliances. Orientation bingo went quite well and led to Successful Student bingo for month two. I needed to follow through consistently. After a student suggestion, I started a brain teaser of the day. We also held a potluck.

Of the 26 students who started within the first week of the Winter 2009 semester, 9 had attendance over 50% after three weeks. This is 35%, an increase of 20% over the previous semester. Originally I had intended to track students no matter when they started, but people who started later in the semester had worse attendance than those that started at the beginning. I was waiting for the end of the semester to do my student interviews, and by that time only one of my beginning of the semester students was available to interview. She was very serious about her studies and didn't take part in many of the social activities. She did recommend the inclusion of more elders. She thought there was nothing I could do to improve attendance and that the activities didn't help her to get to know the other students. I decided to run my project through one more cycle for one more semester and interview after the first three weeks.

Fall 2009, I tried most of the same activities. I also had an elder come in and smudge and pray with the students on Mondays for the first month. Of the 31 students who registered at the beginning of the semester, 14 had over 50% attendance after the first three weeks. This was 45% of the class, a 30% increase for the Fall 2008 numbers. I did find that some students were staying for the fun parts of the week and then leaving. Also, I had an overflowing classroom in September which might have impacted attendance.

Six of the seven students I interviewed were in the 18-25 age group, while only one was in the 26-35 group. The students were generally positive about the community building activities. They liked the introductory speaking games. They thought it helped to get to know each other and made it less awkward to be in class with strangers.

When asked if it should have been done again, a couple of students suggested that when new students started it should be repeated. Our potluck had low participation but all the students thought it was a good idea and that we should try it again. The students were positive about the elder smudging. Even if they personally didn't believe in it, they said it was valuable and should continue. Wii Wednesday was popular and often was a day when students who had been absent for several days would reappear. Two of the students thought that non-attenders and those who were not working should withdraw. One commented that this "isn't high school."

Overall, based on the numbers this project was a huge success.

**Reflections/
My Suggestions on
Future Research:**

Student attendance increased by 20% in the Winter 2009 semester and by 30% for the Fall 2009 semester. This bears out the importance of building a community of learners as stated in the research. Although some students seem to be attending for the community activities rather than for the learning, at least they are attending and hopefully they will eventually find success in their courses. The next step is to try and improve attendance after the first three weeks. Attrition remains very high overall. Once the dispositional barriers are dealt with, it is time to deal with the situational barriers.

**Sharing the
Research:**

This study will appear on the SABEA/SLN websites and be discussed on a panel at the SLN Conference.