Negotiating Relationship and the Spaces Between: Building Attendance in an Adult Education Program

How might increased personal communication between instructor and students affect attendance in an Adult Basic Education program?

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The Problem

I coordinate an individualized, self-directed program for Adult learners with Great Plains College at Nekaneet First Nation. Within our classroom are students pursuing GED certification, students working on high school level classes to obtain Adult 12 certification, students working on an Office Administration course and students working to improve literacy skills. The students work together in one large classroom, and I am the sole instructor for these courses. In addition to the basic course work, we also engage community members and outside agencies in providing training such as First Aid, Safe Food Handling and WHMIS. Intake for these programs is continuous, and students are welcome to join at any point in the school year. I have instructed and coordinated the program since its inception in January of 2009.

From January to June 2009 student attendance was very regular but this has lately become a troubling issue. Over the past few months (October – December 2010) student attendance has dropped sharply. This circumstance is the result of a number of factors that include personal situations, environmental issues and institutional parameters. In examining the attendance issues with the program I am led back to my beginnings in teaching, and the path that led me to this program and this community.

Background and Context

My career in teaching began at the middle years level. I worked for ten years as a classroom teacher in rural Saskatchewan, spending most of that time in grade five to seven classrooms. Three years ago, I moved to the south west corner of Saskatchewan and began working as a Basic Education instructor at Nekaneet First Nation.

Prior to accepting the position, I considered the move to working with adult students very carefully. In my previous teaching experience with elementary aged children I was very conscious of the relationship I worked to build with my students, and I wasn't sure how this relationship building would translate to working with adult students. As an elementary school teacher I was open to seeing my students and their families in out-of-classroom places, feeling that these experiences would help me to build more supportive and encouraging relationships. I felt that seeing my younger students in other environments would broaden my perspective of them as individuals, allowing me the opportunity to see them in many other contexts besides that of students in the classroom.

I wasn't sure how this attitude would look in an adult education classroom, or even if it would be appropriate. I was mindful of my students' privacy and worried that I might appear intrusive. This concern led me to back away from my students, and I felt that respectful distance would be an important part of working as an adult educator.

Given the attendance problems that we've been experiencing, I reconsidered the space between the students and myself. I began to wonder if increasing personal communication with the students might help to increase enrolment in the education programs and improve attendance.

The Research Question

The research question I posed was, "Would an increase in personal communication between myself and my adult students over a period of three months improve daily attendance?" The

action research interventions tested included: 1) phone calls, 2) e-mails, 3) inquiries with community members about absentee students, and 4) positive personal conversations when I saw my adult students in the community.

The Outcomes

During the first six months, attendance had averaged 52%; however, it had fallen to approximately 38% attending on a daily basis. After a period of three months with the action research interventions, the overall student attendance improved from 38% to 51%. I had hoped that student attendance would improve by 5% overall, so an improvement of 13% was a wonderful result.

The Process

Researching the Literature

In order to design interventions that might increase attendance in the Adult Education program I decided to research reasons behind early school leaving, believing that if these issues can be addressed in the Adult Education program I might be able to work with the students to provide a program that better meets the specific needs of this community.

Through conversations with the students I had learned that elementary and high school experiences were not generally positive, and many students felt "pushed out" of school. Hodgson (2007) describes students' impressions of feeling unwanted at school and even feeling encouraged to leave school by teachers and by other students. Students can also feel pulled away from school by opportunities to work or by family responsibilities that seem to directly compete with time needed for academic success (Meyers & de Broucker, 2006).

Clandinin, Steeves, Li, Mickelson, Buck and Pearce (2010) describe early school leaving as a complex, multifaceted process of disengagement individual to each learner. Many factors play into this disengagement including socio economic circumstances, academic performance, peer and teacher relationships, school characteristics and family circumstance.

As the instructor of the Adult Education program I decided to begin thinking about possible interventions from the perspective of school situations and relationships. Many of the reasons given for early school leaving involve schools and school relationships, from feeling pushed out or unwelcome to feeling ignored and neglected. As I read through some of the research the importance of relationship was very clear. Building trusting relationships can help students feel valued and respected in the classroom, and might support students who seem to be on a path away from school completion. Perhaps by focussing on constructing trusting relationships with my students I might be able to better support them as they journey back to education. Increasing personal communication with my students either directly or through conversations with community members might enhance the relationships that we are building and provide greater support to the students, possibly improving attendance rates.

Our program is built around a comfortable and welcoming environment. Community members stop in to visit and ask students about their work, and to ask me about upcoming classes and trainings. Hauer and Taylor (2008) describe effective adult education programs as those with a comfortable, relaxed social atmosphere, flexible schedule and broad but flexible expectations. Wotherspoon and Schissel (1998) suggest that educational programs should be aware of the time constraints placed on the lives of students, and be less punitive with lateness and absences given the reality of life situations.

In keeping with the belief that the road to early school departure is a slow and winding journey, I think that returning to school will be an equally slow and winding road for the students. If the process of disengagement was gradual, I feel the process of re-engagement will also happen gradually.

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Wotherspoon, T., and Schissel, B. (1998). Marginalization, decolonization and voice: Prospects for Aboriginal education in Canada. Retrieved April 2010. http://cscecesc.ca/pceradocs/1999/99Wotherspoon_Schissel_e.pdf

Permission and Informed Consent

Prior to beginning this research project, I submitted an ethics application and a draft student consent form to Great Plains College for approval. Going through the process of ethics application helped me to think through the ethical implications around this research and to plan and conduct the research in ethical and respectful ways. I used the University of Saskatchewan's *Recommendations for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples* and the *Aboriginal Research Guidelines* of the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research to guide my thinking around ethics in this research. The ethics application was based on the one required by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board, University of Saskatchewan.

After securing permission from Great Plains College, I approached the Chief and Council of Nekaneet First Nation and submitted the same ethics application and consent form for community approval. Once both of these groups expressed support for the research, I spoke with my students about the project and secured informed consent from them.

To develop a baseline for this research I turned to the attendance records I've been keeping since the beginning of this school year. I focussed on ten students, selected because the

majority of their course work is being completed in the classroom. Because of the individual nature of the programs we currently offer some students work from home or from workplaces, and it is more difficult for me to record daily attendance in these situations.

From January to June 2009 the attendance rate for students in the program was 52% attending regularly every week. Although this figure shows significant room for improvement, I was satisfied that, together, we were building a base for this new educational program at Nekaneet. In October of 2010 I noticed that the attendance rate had fallen to 38% on an averaged daily basis. I hoped that by undertaking this research project I could raise attendance rates by at least five percent, with the larger goal of returning the attendance rate to the level achieved from January to June 2009.

Throughout my time at Nekaneet First Nation, I have worked to establish and maintain a supportive classroom community with the students. We had coffee together, and up to November 2010 a hot lunch was supplied for the students every day. Sharing meals with each other and with other community members helped to establish an environment of encouragement for the students, and the community has remained very supportive of the work of the College. I feel that learning and growth cannot happen without trust and support, and in my conversations with students I have always tried to build trusting relationships. As described earlier, I had, however, confined these conversations to in-class time with the students. I did this deliberately to show respect for the boundaries between the in-school and out-of-school lives of my adult learners. Given the attendance problems we faced, I wondered if rethinking this decision might encourage the students to attend more regularly.

As mentioned, I decided to contact my students more frequently, either in person or through phone or email contact. My contact would be framed in a positive manner, focusing on concern for the students rather than on a punitive request for explanation of absences. I would ask community members about students I hadn't seen for a few days. In addition to these three interventions, I would approach students when I saw them in the community to ask how things are, and ensure the students know that they are always welcome to return. I asked if any or all of these four strategies would make a difference?

Participants

The students ranged in age from 18 to 60. There was a total of 25 in the class; 25% were male, 75% were female. All lived in the Nekaneet First Nation community. They had decided to continue education for many reasons including finding work, hoping to learn more, being good role models for their children, and looking for something to do during the day.

The students were parents, children, grandchildren and grandparents. Some were employed or self-employed, and others were currently unemployed. The adult students juggled family, work and school commitments. Many of the students in the program left high school prior to graduation and had now chosen to return to upgrade their education.

Findings

I began to implement the interventions in March 2011 and continued until the end of the school year (end of May 2011). As a result of these interventions over a three month period:

- ❖ I began the interventions in March 2010 and noticed an improvement in attendance and enrolment within two weeks of implementation. Students began to arrive on time and come more regularly.
- ❖ Throughout the remainder of the school year, having more conversations with community members led to more students being involved in the programs. and I made a point of talking with my students when I saw them in the community as well. The increase in the number of registered students seemed to provide support and encouragement to all of the students.
- ❖ Reflecting on the four interventions used, electronic communication was extremely successful. The prevalence of cell phones in particular afforded us an easy and inexpensive communication strategy, one with which the students were very comfortable. I could send text messages or email as soon as I noticed a student was absent and I received prompt replies either by text, email or in person. I think that the use of electronic communication is an area that warrants further investigation.
- ❖ Overall, student attendance improved from 38% to 51%. The improved attendance average, though promising, presents a somewhat limited view of the actual events of the

school year and the average of 51% is somewhat deceptive. Individual improvements varied widely, from an improvement of 44% to no real change to a decrease of 40% with some individuals. Situations arose which required students to focus on aspects of life outside of school, affecting attendance. Whenever possible I tried to maintain contact with the students through these situations, and in many cases the students returned to school once circumstances changed. Regardless of improvement in attendance, I did notice greater communication regarding situations outside of school and a more positive classroom climate.

Reflections and Suggestions for Further Research

Life circumstances will always take priority over attendance in educational programs. As an instructor I feel it is important for me to be flexible and supportive toward students experiencing situations that make regular attendance difficult, and I need to ensure that the classroom environment is one that invites students to reconnect once other life situations are resolved. One example that comes to mind involves a student who began a period of incarceration in October 2010. The student phoned me from the correctional institution, wondering if he could resume classroom work once the period of incarceration had ended. I was glad that this student trusted me enough to phone and cared enough about his education to focus on plans while he was in jail. I assured him that he was welcome to return, and when he did resume classes, I spoke with him often to support his transition to school life.

Often the events and situations that pull students out of regular classes are educational in themselves, and I need to be mindful of the need for my students to grow and learn holistically.

Considering students' lives in contexts besides the classroom helps me to situate them and myself in the context of the community. Whether I am teaching in an elementary school classroom or in an Adult Education context, it helps to see other sides of my students and allows them to see other parts of me. In these meetings I feel it is important that I present myself as a positive role model and that I support the healthy lifestyle choices the Chief and

Band Council strive to promote within the community. I remain mindful of the importance of honesty in teaching, and I feel it provides a solid centre to build this Adult Education program around. I feel that increased communication with my students in out-of-classroom places allows us to feel part of a shared community, and enhances our relationships.

This research has led me to think more deeply about the life circumstances surrounding individuals who choose to return to school, and I am reminded that I'm not just working with students, I'm working with people who have complex lives and many priorities. I would like to pursue further research with people who have left school prior to completion and then returned to school. I think that hearing the stories of these people might help to shape programs that meet the needs of the learners in the classroom. I think these stories could be both informational and inspiring, and might lead to an increase in the number of students who return to school and find success.

I wonder about the use of Social Networking as another way to help maintain contact with students in Adult Basic Education programs. Given its widespread usage, I wonder if a Facebook group could provide be an online forum for support and assistance. In some Cyberschool environments, chat rooms and mailing lists provide valuable and timely assistance for students working through academic or life difficulties; perhaps using an online space could help to build community within an Adult Basic Education context.

I'm also curious about the research question as situated within the context of this particular Adult Education classroom. I'd like to pursue further research around the issue of instructor/student communication in other contexts, to investigate correlations and differences that might emerge.

Sharing the Research

This study will appear on the SABEA/SLN websites and the new SARN Website.