

Hardwired for Hope

Effective ABE/Literacy Instructors by **Pat Campbell**

**“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tunes without the words—
And never stops—at all...**

-Emily Dickinson

Hardwired for Hope documents how hope sustains instructors through adverse working conditions. We also learn how hope is fading away to a murmur among some instructors in British Columbia, who face the harsh realities of provincial cutbacks to education and student support systems. Despite the external forces that impact instructors' work, hope “captures the essence” of effective instructors.

Using hope as a backdrop, this research shines a spotlight on effective instructors. This illuminating study explores the characteristics, motivations, beliefs, strategies, skills, and styles of effective ABE/Literacy instructors. This review explores *some* of the findings that surfaced in this collaborative study.

Evelyn Battell, Leora Gesser, Judy Rose, Jan Sawyer and Diana Twiss comprised the practitioner/research group while Marina Niks, Betsy Alkenbrack and Bonnie Soroke served as research friends.

Methodology

The research team met six times and participated in 11 teleconferences between October 2002 and June 2004. The team used a collaborative process to explore the following research question: “What makes an effective ABE/Literacy instructor?” While the collaborative process resulted in rich findings, it became one of the project's biggest challenges. The practitioner researchers observed that “research takes time, and collaborative research takes even longer because relationships, as well as meaning, have to be negotiated” (Niks et al. p. 81).

Diana Twiss documents the process of

collaboration and doing the research in a chapter called “Wearing the Silver Shorts.” This phrase came from the world of soccer, where older men sometimes wear silver shorts so their teammates know to go easy with them. In a similar vein, the researchers thought they needed to signal when their capacities were being stretched to the limit. Twiss notes that one of the drawbacks of working collaboratively was that people worked at different speeds in terms of processing ideas and writing.

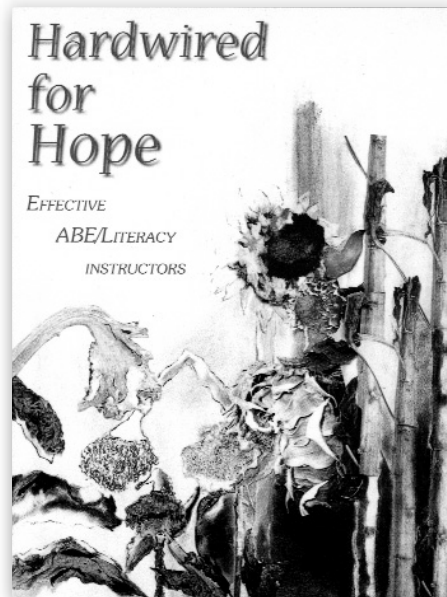
The data came from two primary sources: the practitioner/research group and 17 instructors. The five practitioner researchers documented their life and teaching experiences through autobiographical writing, journaling of their daily practice, guided conversations, and communications with the research team. The writing and guided

conversations were analyzed and coded, resulting in themes.

Then, the research team interviewed 17 effective instructors. The practitioner researchers used the codes to develop the question protocol. The interviews, which ranged from 90 to 120 minutes, were conducted in person or over the telephone. After coding and re-coding all the data, including the interviews, the research team agreed to write about three key categories:

- beliefs that motivate us
- personal qualities and characteristics
- strategies, styles and skills

I was intrigued by the researchers' decision to engage in a literature review, as its value has been questioned by practitioner researchers (Niks et al.). Consequently, in reading *Hardwired for Hope*, I was quite curious to see how the authors incorporated a literature review. It became apparent that the authors incorporated existing literature in two distinctly different ways: (1) using categories from existing literature to frame the findings; and (2) weaving the existing literature with the findings. Perhaps future



discussions about literature reviews can explore the extent to which these two ways honour, support and/or subsume research findings.

Findings

The authors dedicate three chapters to the findings. In this section, I will touch upon findings that challenged assumptions or caused me to pause and reflect. In the opening chapter, Judy Rose writes about the characteristics of effective instructors. In the next chapter, Evelyn Battell focuses on the motivation and beliefs of effective instructors. In the final chapter, Leora Gesser and Jan Sawyer highlight the styles, strategies and skills of effective instructors.

The characteristics of effective instructors

This study challenges the assumption that effective instructors are those who have a firm grasp on content or subject matter. Rather, there were clear indications from the data "of the importance of the influence of emotions in effective instruction" (p. 56). Rose uses the framework of personal and social competence to discuss how emotional intelligence is the cornerstone of effective practice.

There are differences among ABE students and between instructors and students in terms of race, class, gender, age, ability and religion. Effective instructors know the importance of working across differences in the classroom in order to create a learning environment that is safe, supportive and provides a feeling of comfort. Effective instructors also know the importance of examining their social identity in relation to their students. By examining social identities, one can understand how power, privilege and oppression affect the way we process information and see the word and the world. Working across differences is not an easy task and requires both personal and social competence.

Kate Nonesuch, one of the instructors who was interviewed, describes this process:

I often do some stuff around racism and diversity, and get some discussion going around the fact that everybody here has had the experience of not being honoured and respected. We go from that point of seeing what we all have in common, in spite of our differences, to looking at differences and wondering what could be interesting about our differences. (p. 63)

Working across differences is a risky project that many educators choose to ignore. Yet, it is clear that effective instructors are willing to acknowledge

differences among students and between educators and students.

Motivations and beliefs of effective instructors

Would you describe yourself as 'political' or nurturing? Evelyn Battell explores this question as she examines the motivations of effective instructors. The findings indicate that the participants did not fall *entirely* into the category of political or nurturing.

The findings also indicated that all the instructors were aware of their motivations and approached their work with passion. It is their passion, hope and vision for a better world that sustains them. The instructors put up with less than ideal working conditions because they are passionately devoted to what they do.

Battell provides an engaging discussion that focuses on the belief system that drives or motivates the work of effective instructors. This belief system contains five convictions:

- ABE/Literacy students are powerful, self-determined adults with the right to make their own decisions.
- Making a connection with students is a necessity, a joy and a challenge.
- We do not blame students for the effects larger societal forces have made and are still making on them.
- A positive learning experience is essential for student success and usually must be accomplished in the face of residual anger, resentment and fear about schooling.
- Instructors can make a difference in the quality of students' lives and communities.

When these convictions are played out, they challenge some commonly held assumptions. For instance, the assumption that people need safety, food and shelter before they can be motivated to learn and grow is challenged. Lucy Alderson, an instructor who works with women in the sex-trade states, "...We've just thrown out Maslow's hierarchy" (p. 108). Alderson views literacy as a right that needs to be pursued, no matter where people are on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Styles, strategies and skills

Jan Sawyer discusses how effective instructors teach the whole person, and in doing so, respond to their learning needs. Although effective instructors focus on the needs of the individual, they also realize the importance of creating a community in the classroom. Instructors create a physical and emotional environment that promotes learning, trust, sharing, dialogue and growth. It would also be interesting to study whether the acknowledgement of differences is *also* a

contributing factor towards the development of classroom community. Previous research has shown that when social identities and privilege are not examined by students and/or literacy workers, tensions and misunderstandings can arise (Campbell).

As Leora Gesser pored through the data, she discovered that the instructors did not discuss teaching strategies or technique in detail. Rather, the instructors preferred to talk about the underlying reflections that led to specific strategies. Gesser found that effective instructors reflected on their delivery styles, teaching philosophy, classroom interaction, student feedback, and their role as facilitator. Mark McCue reflects on his role as facilitator:

Well, in a sense I confront them around things that they talk about being afraid to do and try and figure out how we can get them to take risks....I believe that they...start to see that you take a risk and the floor doesn't drop out from under you. (p. 152)

In his role as facilitator, Mark McCue models risk-taking and strengthens the instructor-student relationship by exposing his vulnerabilities.

Summary

Hardwired for Hope discusses the ways in which effective instructors are responsive to students, both individually and collectively, and to the forces that impact upon the educational experience. One of the first steps in responding to individual and collective needs is to create a classroom community and a comfortable learning environment where students feel safe to learn, to laugh and to take risks. Being responsive is not an easy task and as effective instructors juggle their responsibilities, they make sure that the balls that stay in the air reflect the students' needs and interests. This commitment to students is reflected in the closing sentence of *Hardwired for Hope*:

Balancing our jobs in ways that keep us emotionally and physically healthy is vital and, as many of us struggle to do this, we still choose to put our students first and foremost. (p. 171) ■

SOURCES:

Battell, Evelyn, Leora Gesser, Judy Rose, Jan Sawyer, and Diana Twiss (2004). *Hardwired for Hope: Effective ABE/Literacy Instructors*. Nanaimo, BC: Malaspina College.

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Niks, Marina, Darcy Allen, Paula Davies, Dee McRae, and Kate Nonesuch (2003). *Dancing in the Dark: How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn? How do Literacy Practitioners do Collaborative Research?* Nanaimo: Malaspina University College.



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