

Learning from Practice: PAARN

Partnering for Success

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Background

Issues in education such as student participation and interaction in the classroom and their subsequent effect on learning have long interested adult educators. However, how can educators foster these goals among adult learners who function at varying levels and possess vastly different life experiences? In an effort to find one possible solution to this problem, an action research project was conducted to address the needs of students enrolled in GED classes in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, a rural county with no mass public transportation. The Somerset County Adult Literacy Council has designed the ABE/GED/ESL program to be operated at multiple sites to increase accessibility. I was concerned that the students who were isolated from one another outside of class and who had limited or negative prior school experiences were not interacting effectively, thereby restricting the learning atmosphere and amount of content being mastered. I wanted to increase interaction to improve learning.

Plan

One class of GED students was selected to participate in the Pennsylvania Action Research Network (PAARN) project. The class met one evening per week for three hours per session in a public high school. The concept of pairing and collaborative learning was discussed with the students. Students physically located their desks adjacent to each other in pairs of their choosing. Initially, the teacher grouped students in pairs in an effort to match students with differing strengths. This pairing by the teacher did not prove effective since students were reluctant to admit

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their weaknesses in an academic area to a partner who was adept in that area. When students were encouraged to choose their own partners, they increased their comfort levels by choosing individuals whose strengths and weaknesses were similar to their own.

Action and Data Collection

After the pairs were established, activities and assignments conducive to the collaborative learning process were assigned to the students. Students were encouraged to work together to solve problems. Beginning with the first class meeting, students maintained a portfolio containing their completed work. The teacher compared the volume and accuracy of work completed before the intervention against the profile materials obtained after the intervention. The teacher kept detailed notes from observations to determine the degree to which classroom participation increased, maintained a journal, and kept field notes and anecdotal records. Data regarding attendance, classroom participation, degree of interaction between students and between students and teacher, and completion and accuracy of academic assignments were documented. Students were questioned by the teacher about their impressions of the pairing and collaborative learning, and their responses were documented.

Results

It was projected that the classroom participation and volume and accuracy of student work would increase by at least 20% after the intervention. Six students (three partner groups) were involved initially in the action research project. As time progressed the students recruited a number of friends and relatives to join the class. By the end of the project, there were twelve students (six pairs). After careful review of the data collection records, it was estimated conservatively that interaction among and participation by students increased at least 50%. Students who had rarely spoken during class began asking questions freely and began enjoying the social aspects of learning. Reviewing student portfolios revealed that the amount of work completed per class increased by an average of 30%; accuracy of work increased by 25%. When difficulties were encountered, students would consult their partners, then other students, and then the teacher in an effort to comprehend. Students requested a significant amount of material to study at home, and three of the pairs began meeting outside of class to study.