

The Classroom Dynamics Study

Findings from Research

Most classroom instruction in adult basic education focuses on developing basic skills, not on developing higher-level abilities such as critical thinking. Sixteen of the twenty classes in this study focused on teaching discrete skills in reading, writing, math, and GED preparation using commercial materials. Only four classes focused on meaning making. Teachers rarely introduced discussion that asked students about their opinions or beliefs, actions which may support development of important critical literacy skills.

Although teachers rank student needs as their top priority, their teaching doesn't reflect this goal. Teachers talked about meeting student needs, but rarely systematically assessed student needs or evaluated how their instruction was meeting the needs of individual students.

Class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressures shape classroom dynamics. Classes that were relatively homogenous in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity seemed to promote sharing and community. Classes that offered continuous enrollment with students moving in and out placed constraints on effective teaching and learning. Varying funding regulation and eligibility requirements also affected how classes functioned.

About the Classroom Dynamics Study

Researchers Hal Beder and Patsy Medina observed 20 adult literacy classes in eight states and interviewed the teachers of these classes. They sought to investigate and describe classroom behavior in adult literacy education by considering critical questions such as:

- How is instruction delivered?
- What is its content?
- What processes underlie teaching and learning?
- What external forces shape classroom behavior?

Following a grounded-theory approach, they collected data from a limited sample of classroom cases and analyzed it for commonalities, themes, and categories to describe adult literacy classrooms. Although the sample size is limited and findings are not meant to be generalized to an entire population, the study generates new understanding and propositions for future research.

Specific Implications of the Classroom Dynamics Study

Implication: Use managed enrollment to support effective teaching and learning.

What the research says: Continuous, open enrollment made it difficult for classroom teachers to teach as effectively as possible because students were constantly moving in and out of class.

Therefore, you should ...

... consider limiting students' enrollment in classes to particular points in time.

Strategies

If you are concerned about enrollment turbulence in your program, consider whether to ...

- ◆ **Implement managed enrollment.** Offer classes for a predetermined length of time (10 weeks, one semester, etc.). Only let students enter at the beginning of the cycle.
- ◆ **Create waiting lists for classes,** a system for alerting students when a slot has opened for them, and alternatives for students who are waiting; for example, a computer lab. Let legislators know that your program has waiting lists because there is not enough funding to serve all those who want services.

Implication: Provide support for teachers' efforts to be student-centered.

What the research says: Although teachers rank student needs as their top priority, their teaching often doesn't reflect this goal.

Therefore, you should ...

... provide support and encouragement to teachers in their efforts to be student-centered.

Strategy

If you are concerned about being more student-centered in your program ...

- ◆ **Encourage teachers to integrate basic skills with student-identified themes and materials.** (See "The Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study" on page 14 for strategies.)

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.