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Divergent Perspectives on Learner Engagement in Adult Literacy Classrooms

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Abstract: This roundtable will focus on two types of quantitative data that measures the engagement of learners in adult literacy classrooms and the ways in which educational roles dramatically affect perceptions of classroom behaviors.

Student engagement is recognized as an essential component in the learning process, yet there has been little research about this element in adult literacy classrooms. During a study of learner engagement in adult literacy education, two types of data were collected to capture perceptions of students’ learning engagement.

For the first data set, a questionnaire designed to measure self-assessed engagement was administered to 40 students enrolled in adult literacy and adult secondary education classrooms. The questionnaire yielded three distinct scores for each student, each representing a key dimension of learner engagement as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Three Dimensions of Self-Reported Cognitive Engagement*

Dimension	Item	Mean	SD
I. Program Involvement	I find the learning materials in the class very interesting	2.72	0.51
	I get excited about the things I am learning in class	2.70	0.56
	I use the things I learn in class when I am outside of school	2.45	0.64
	I think about my school work when I am not in school	2.38	0.70
	I get bored in class	1.60	0.63
II. Learning Focus	I pay attention to what I am supposed to be doing in class	2.90	0.38
	I stay focused on my work in class	2.55	0.64
	I get very involved in the work I do in class	2.57	0.59
	I guess the answer instead of figuring it out*	1.70	0.72
	I talk with other students in class instead of doing my work	1.55	0.64
	I have trouble staying awake in class*	1.30	0.61
III. Independent Effort	I work hard to get the right answers	2.68	0.57
	If I do not understand something, I try to find another way to learn it	2.38	0.67
	When I make a mistake, I try to find the right answer by myself	2.28	0.60

*Reverse items

The first dimension, *Program Involvement*, represents a student’s interest and commitment to the learning program; a high score suggests that students “buy in” to the learning enterprise and see its relevance to their out-of-school lives. The second dimension, *Learning Focus*, represents the sustained and intentional application of one’s mental energy to the task-at-hand; students who score highly on this dimension indicate that they successfully filter out the

many distractions that characterize adult literacy classrooms. The third dimension, *Independent Effort*, is indicative of a students' willingness to take proactive responsibility for the act of learning; it is characterized by self-directed problem-solving.

The second type of data consisted of holistically scored videotaped episodes of classroom behaviors of the same 40 students. Over a three week period, multiple video clips of student behavior were obtained. Each clip was scored by five expert raters (experienced adult literacy teachers who were unfamiliar with the students involved) and assigned a rating between 1 (not engaged) and 4 (highly engaged). Individual ratings were summed to produce a single estimate of student's learning engagement. Table 2 lists the steps involved in the data collection and analysis.

Table 2: *Steps in Expert Ratings of Observations*

Step	Implementation
1. Filming	Each student was videotaped for 3 minutes at 2 randomly selected times on 3 different days for a total of 18 minutes.
2. Editing	Each 3-minute video clip was edited into separate 1-minute clips for a total of 720 clips. These clips were randomly assorted into groups of 20 clips each.
3. Independent rating of observations	After training, 5 adult literacy teachers worked independently to rate each clip with one holistic score. A total of 10 teachers rated the 720 clips.

These four measures (three based on self-assessment and one on expert ratings) all proved to be highly reliable and demonstrated pronounced variance. However, despite our expectations to the contrary, no measure of self-assessed engagement was significantly correlated with the expert ratings based on observation, as shown in Table 3. In plainer terms, the fact that a student reports high (or low) levels of engagement is unrelated to the judgments that teachers make about that student

Table 3: *Correlation of Self-Report and Observation Measures*

Measure	r	sig.
Program involvement with observation	.20	.21
Learning focus with observation	.05	.75
Independent effort with observation	-.14	.39

During the roundtable, we will discuss the methodological and practical implications of this finding. With respect to the former, the findings provide empirical support for two major propositions: (a) even when studying closely aligned phenomena, a person's position in an adult education enterprise dramatically affects the judgments that are made and (b) the notion that multiple indicators will allow quantitative researchers to arrive at "essential truth" is, in the end, a chimera. With respect to the latter, the need for authentic dialogue between teachers and students about the *process* (as well as content) of education is underscored.