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The Roots and Wings of Adult Education

This article was written by Jay Brooks, Adult Education and Literacy Director of Rend Lake College, and Bevan Gibson, Director of Southern Illinois Professional Development Center.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Hodding Carter, Jr. once wrote, "There are two lasting bequests we can give our children: one is roots, the other is wings" (Health Today Online, n.d.). As important as these two seemingly unrelated concepts are for children, both are equally important for programs in adult education. If you look at the business side of adult education as the "roots" and the relationship side as the "wings," a total picture of a program emerges.

Administrators are often required to become masters of the numbers. Due to their need to manage and provide program data, they are often required to ask the questions that center the discussion on numerical issues. Whether it is the number of students served, the number of credit hours generated, or finding funding for a specific class, the focus of administrators must center on measurable data extracted from STAIRS and other program reports.

Other staff, especially instructors, may have less of a focus on the numbers and more on what they perceive as the individual needs of students. Due in part to the everyday interaction they have with students, instructors can feel that the individual student's needs and concerns get lost in the "numbers." While both administration and instructional or support staff have the best in mind for programs and students, they may evaluate things from vastly different perspectives. Without consideration and evaluation of both perspectives, the program will not fully excel.

Just as children need "roots and wings" to reach their potential, adult education programs need both as well. Placing an emphasis on the roots (business side) of adult education is as important as having a focus on the wings (relationship side) and vice versa. Numbers and data tell a story, but not the whole story, and examining numbers can often be reactive instead of proactive. While relationships are critically important, programs must also show results in the form of test gains and completions. With ever-increasing demands for programs to show continuous improvement, the roots of adult education must constantly be examined and reviewed. It is not enough to feel that a program is effective and helping students, it is also important to look at what the numbers say about the outcomes the program is achieving.

While it is imperative that programs use all available data as a tool to examine what should be emulated and what should be eliminated, to focus only on the roots without consideration of the wings will leave programs stagnant. It is critically important to recognize the symbiotic relationship between the roots and wings for the success of a program. Developing the wings of a program also can allow for a more proactive approach. This has serious implications for, and a significant impact on, the program's outcomes.

The roots of adult education can be examined by looking at the hard, measurable data. How many hours of training is staff receiving? How many students are enrolled in a program or at a specific site? What kinds of gains are students showing after 37 1/2 hours of instruction? What type of instruction does the data show is most effective and in what types of situations? How does instructor and staff training impact programs? The driving aim of these questions is to look at what types of actions can be taken to strengthen the roots of an adult education program. This business approach tries to eliminate the guesswork in order to deal with those aspects of the program that are measurable. The roots of the program are determined by the internal processes and systems

used to collect, report, and respond to data. This is reflected in how well staff and instructors know the goals of their program and how their goals fit into the larger picture of adult education. The roots of a program impact, in part, the instructional methods used and the skill level and work loads of staff and instructors.

In the book *Transfer of Training*, Broad and Newstrom (1992) outline the critical importance of staff development for the improvement of programs and practices. They define staff development as those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes of an employee. Numerous studies have shown that increased training and flexible employees add value to a program. Broad and Newstrom cite several different models of staff development that can play a crucial role in improving a program.

One such model is the individually guided model. This type refers to a process through which teachers and staff plan for and pursue activities that they believe will promote their own learning. This model requires a high level of engagement on the part of the staff. A staff member utilizing this model must be committed to self-assessment and reflection of their individual strengths and weaknesses.

Another model, the observation/assessment model, provides staff with objective data and feedback on their classroom performance. This is used to help tailor a training plan to build competencies and skills.

Many teachers may not receive frequent feedback on their instructional methods and, therefore, may not see the benefit of this model; however, this model gives the staff person “another set of eyes” to help them see how they are performing with students. It benefits not only the staff person being observed, but also the person who serves as the observer. The process can function as a learning experience for both parties by allowing both the observer and the observed to understand how each contributes to the overall success of the program. The connection between what goes on in the wings side of the equation directly impacts the strength of the roots. Without the proper attention and support of the wings, roots cannot grow deep and strong.

While training and staff development play a critical role in a program’s success, the transfer of training to the environment determines the true usefulness to the student, the staff, and the program. It is important to note that training can only elaborate on what already exists; it cannot create new behavior for an environment that will not support it (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). Barriers to the transfer of training, such as lack of reinforcement on the job, a non-supportive organizational culture, or an environment resistant to change, all serve to negate the benefits that can be achieved through staff development. These barriers serve, in effect, as a dam that routes water away from the roots of the program, creating a drought wherein innovation and growth become impossible.

The wings, or relationship side, of adult education refers to those vital qualities of a program, often difficult to measure, but of critical importance for the program’s success. It could be said that the wings of adult education determine how high a program can fly, and in order for the wings to be developed, programs have to look at the relationships within a program. What is the relationship between students and instructors? Is the classroom safe, both in a psychological and physical sense? What type of environment does the student enter when they come to class for the first time? What are the specific needs and issues that a student brings to the classroom? Do the staff members understand cultural differences and take those into account when working with a student? What are the professional, working relationships among coworkers within the environment? Relationships also tell a story, but again, only part of the story. The development of a program’s wings looks at several factors. Zohar (1990) asserts that adult learning is best achieved through dialogue. This approach looks at the importance of assessing the needs of the student and connecting what is to be taught with what the student wishes to learn. By doing this, one of the most important factors for developing the wings is addressed . . . respect.

Anecdotal reports as well as research have shown the importance of the student/teacher relationship. By assessing the needs of the student with the student, an immediate signal is sent that serves to open up dialogue between the student and the teacher. Freire and Horton (1990) note that the act of listening serves to increase motivation. It is the sense of being “heard” that helps the student become a partner to the process rather than a bystander.

Zohar (1990) notes that beyond assessing needs and showing respect for students as decision makers, there are other practices that increase the dialogue needed for learning to take place. He also points to the need for clear roles and immediacy in the classroom. Zohar states that it is important for instructors to constantly reinforce the notion of human equity between teacher and student

and among other students .

Often, the first hurdle for reaching students is overcoming preconceived notions they may have about the classroom, teachers, or their own ability to learn. When the wings of an adult education program are developed, the student can enter a classroom environment where they are able to begin to shed some of the negative ideas they may have held about education and themselves. Affirming is one of the basic tasks of every teacher (Zohar, 1990). Without this, students are likely to retreat when moving beyond their comfort zone. In addition to this, when students can see the immediate usefulness of new learning, they become more invested in what is being taught.

Various studies have looked at students labeled “at-risk” who go on to be successful in society. The power of teachers and the teaching relationship is evident when looking at the findings of those studies and anecdotal reports. These usually cite a teacher or other individual who refused to give up on them. Without specifically using the term coined by Carl Rogers, they often describe what he referred to as unconditional positive regard. This acceptance of the individual as a person without being judgmental is something students may have never experienced; however, it serves as a powerful tool to open and maintain dialogue by establishing mutual respect.

It is also crucial to examine how the atmosphere or relationships among team members aid in developing the wings of an adult education program. How well do staff members work through the inevitable disagreements that arise? How do staff members manage the stress associated with work? The professional relationships and environment at work can either promote creativity and productivity or hinder them. In order to build the wings of a program, it is important to create an environment where discussion and debate can occur.

If a program is to thrive, not just survive, both roots and wings must be developed. Neither can be ignored or undervalued. Administrators must realize the importance of the wings and their part in the equation of determining how the roots develop. Instructors must realize the significance of focusing on the roots for ongoing program development. In order for programs to soar, the roots and wings must form a symbiotic relationship that should not be underestimated but, instead, should be understood, appreciated, and nurtured with the common goals of student success and continuous program improvement.

References

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Did you know?

ESL programs are the fastest growing component of the state-administered adult education programs. In 1997-98, 48% of enrollments were in ESL programs, compared to 33% in 1993-94. Of these 48% enrollees, 32% were in beginning ESL classes, 12% in intermediate, and 4% in advanced. ([Adult Education: Human Investment Impact 1994-98](#), 1999; [State-Administered Adult Education Program: 1998 Adult Education Personnel](#), 1999).

ONLINE Opportunities from Professional Studies/World Education

For more information contact Jamy Preul

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In addition to the Online Opportunities listed on the PDC website (www.maelpdc.org), a teacher may earn PD hours for four online sessions on another website: These can be completed at any time up until June 15.

The four that PD credit will be awarded for are:

- **ACTIVITY-BASED INSTRUCTION: WHY & HOW**
- **GOING BEYOND THE GED**
- **TEACHING LEARNERS WHAT READING IS ABOUT**
- **READING DIFFICULTIES**

Each workshop is worth 3 hours of PD Credit and there are three steps for each one:

1. Read the related research
2. Reflect on this research and your practice
3. Focus on an aspect of your practice

Motivating Students

For more information contact Jamy Preul

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- Act like the class is **important/show enthusiasm**
- **Relate** the material to life and work
- **Vary** teaching methods
- Give them a **roadmap to success** in your class
- Do exercises and activities **with them**
- Recognize their **accomplishments**/catch them doing **"right"**
- Give **frequent feedback**
- Talk with students about what **they want** and capitalize on their **existing needs**/work from their **strengths**
- Emphasize **mastery** of concepts
- **Show good work** done by peers
- Push them to find **internal motivation** even from external forces
- **Listen** to them and show **gratitude**

Note to self: Join the best professional organization in Missouri in 2010

“Professional Organizations/Conferences”

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If you don't already belong to one or two professional organizations in adult education, join one. The one that comes to mind is the Missouri Association of Adult, Continuing and Community Education (MAACCE).

There are many advantages of belonging to a professional organization that helps both career and professional development. Usually, along the path of enjoying membership, leadership skills are also built.

Although some organizations can cost several hundred dollars to attend their conferences, they're worth every penny because they can offer great career assistance and inside information.

Professional organizations offer you another important job tool: The opportunity to attend their meetings, conferences, and seminars. If you're looking for a job, these events offer many opportunities to get your name out there. Showing up at these events is an investment that pays off because you'll get the inside track on job openings in your field.

Even if you don't need or don't find a job at one of these conferences, they are a great place to network with people in your field and stay abreast of changes in your field. Professional networking has a way of becoming a great tool when you least expect it. The relationships you sow today may yield success in the future.

From the networking angle, a person will find intelligent, like-minded professionals immersed in the inner workings of the adult education industry. While attending the conference, there's a big possibility that you will link up with others in your field.

A brief list of advantages of belonging to a professional organization are:

- Personal and professional development resources
- Networking opportunities
- Professional certification that can help your career
- Service and support from the national organization
- Opportunities to develop one's leadership skills
- Regular organization conferences
- Member publications

The MAACCE annual conference will be held at Tan-Tar-A in the Lake of the Ozarks, from June 23-25, 2010. Pre-conference activities will begin on June 22, such as the Leadership Development Institute (LDI). More information can be found on the MAACCE website at <http://www.maacce.org/index.php>.

ESL Workshops



***ESL Manipulatives: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

Description: We'll look at some research support for the use of manipulatives in the language classroom, and then explore a variety of activities that include manipulatives. Teachers will focus on how they can incorporate more manipulatives into their curriculum, as well as how they might adapt the activities presented to their unique classrooms.

***Yikes! It's the ESL Plague! PD Credit-4 HOURS**

Discuss and strategize with your colleagues concerning the issues which somewhat perennially plague adult education ESL classrooms—multi-level classes, fluctuating attendance, learning difficulties, differences and challenges. Presenter will provide some basic research and activity suggestions, but participants will do much of the work, strategizing with fellow-teachers about techniques that work or don't work; those that haven't worked in the past but might work given different circumstances; conditions that support or undermine useful classroom techniques; and personally identifying a few reasonable goals that each might work on throughout the coming year. While none of these issues have the quick and easy fix that we all wish for, we can make a dent in the frustrations they represent to us and our students if we share what we know and do in our classrooms already, and brainstorm together for further potential fixes.

***ESL Reading & Writing: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

We'll look at the 2002 National Reading Panel's findings on the key components necessary for fluent reading and discuss the application of those findings to ESL Adults. Participants will experience activities designed to foster the development of the key components, and think critically about creating activities that will fit their classrooms and levels. In addition, we'll engage in writing activities appropriate for all levels of ESL Adults, and teachers will spend time evaluating and developing writing activities that they might use in their own classrooms.

***Language Subskills: Integrating Grammar, Pronunciation, and Vocabulary: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

It's fairly easy to design listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities for the ESL classroom, but how do grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary fit in? We'll discuss techniques for integrating these sub skills into ESL instruction and after taking part in various grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary activities as ESL students, participants will work on developing activities that will work in their classrooms. Finally, in a structured discussion format, participants will have the opportunity to work with other teachers in processing the activities, as well as sharing ideas and classroom experience.

***Culture in the ESL Classroom: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

Adult Education ESL teachers struggle with teaching U.S. culture as well as integrating students' cultures into the classroom. In this in-service we will discuss cultural issues and their impact on the classroom, managing the multi-cultural classroom, and taking advantage of the rich cultural diversity that makes up our classrooms. Participants will network with other teachers regarding culture in the classroom, and we'll start a list of cultural No-No's (behaviors or gestures that one culture or another find offensive) to be posted on the MAEL PDC website for teachers to access at will.

***Speaking and Listening: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

The presenter will provide a variety of activity types at multiple levels for teaching speaking and listening, with an emphasis on expanding the activities beyond the classroom. Participants will experience the activities themselves and network with other teachers regarding their issues and successes with teaching speaking and listening.

***CASAS Testing: PD Credit-6 HOURS**

ESL Instructors learn and become certified in the use of the CASAS. The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems test is the tool used in Missouri to assess ELL students' levels. After attending the six hour workshop, instructors earn certification needed to use the CASAS and to order materials from the CASAS company.

***Strategies for Teaching in a Multi-Level ESL classroom: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

This in-service will help teachers who teach in an AEL classroom, but have a few ESL students. It is designed to show different activities that can be used in a Multi- Level ESL classroom.

***CASAS and Content Standards Follow Up: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

ESL Instructors will receive information for using the Content Standards and CASAS at the Pre-Certification Workshop. This workshop is a follow up and gives the instructor additional training and hours necessary for CASAS certification to be able to order CASAS testing materials.

***Citizenship Test: PD Credit-2 HOURS**

The one-hundred questions used on the Naturalization Test will be discussed and it will be explained the October 1, 2008 start date for the new Naturalization Test. Instructors will Compare and Contrast the old Naturalization Test to the New Naturalization Test, along with explaining the application process of the Naturalization Test.

***Reaching out to Immigrant Populations: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

This workshop is taken from the Gates Foundation Spanish Language Outreach Program and will identify eight steps in finding community leaders, compare and contrast different cultures, describe the Iceberg Model of cultural diversity, learn to market to immigrant populations and look at the peaks and waves of immigration to the United States.

***EL Civics: PD Credit-4 HOURS**

Everybody Loves Civics provides the curriculum needed to develop content knowledge, process skills, and understanding that adults need in order to become active and informed citizens.

