



Reflections on Retention and Instruction of Adult Learners: Two Case Studies

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Think of two students who “got away.” Either could be a student who dropped out and disappeared or someone who did not accomplish as much as you had hoped. Please give us a brief description of each student and your teaching experience with him or her.

Megan is a single mother of three who worked almost full time as a waitress. Her mother, who had a mental illness, needed Megan’s attention at times. Megan’s goal was to attend a nursing school. Despite dropping out of school in the ninth grade, her reading skills were at the 9.7 grade level, but math was at the 5.2 grade level. When she joined the class, Megan was just ending an emotionally abusive marriage, which completely destroyed her confidence. It was a big step for her to just enter my class for the first time. She spent a lot of time apologizing for her lack of knowledge. We discussed the fact that when she dwelled on what she didn’t know, it interfered with accessing what she did know. Megan was obviously intelligent so we discussed how it would be my job to refresh her memory as to what she did know and then to build from there. We developed a plan to take each component of the GED® test one at a time. I wanted her to get into the testing process as quickly as possible to get her “hooked” and to see that she did have skills. We decided to start with reading since she loved to read and those skills were fairly high. I gave her questions to get familiar with the method of questioning on the GED® test. After about two months of attending usually one night a week (sometimes two, depending on the demands outside of school), Megan was ready to take her GED® reading test. She was very nervous, but I met with her just before she went into the testing room and gave her a pep talk. She passed with a 520, and I could see her confidence increase. About a month later, she tried an OPT in science and social studies, which determined that she was ready for those GED® tests. She took the GED® science and social studies tests on the same night and passed them. Megan was on a roll. With writing, Megan’s lack of confidence returned. She did not do well on the OPT, so we reviewed lots of grammar and sentence structure while practicing the components of essay writing. She would do assignments at home and bring them in for my review. Finally, after about two months, Megan took another OPT; this time she did well enough (470) to qualify for the GED® Language Arts, Writing Test. To make sure she was consistent and to convince her that she was ready, Megan took another OPT and did just as well. While waiting for the test date, Megan wrote several impromptu essays, and we worked



together on mistakes made. She passed the GED[®] writing test with a 620. Math was Megan's final hurdle, and she was very anxious. Even though she only needed a minimal score of 410 to earn her GED[®] credential, I urged her to study for the highest score possible because she would need extra math skills in nursing school. Megan said that math in school had never been a good experience. We essentially started just above basic operations of whole numbers. Megan's attendance started to become less consistent. When she came to class, she usually had an apology and excuse for the absence. When summer came, we discontinued classes for a month; Megan never returned. I never knew why – was it job demands, family demands, fear of math? I sent her a postcard to tell her that class had started again and that we missed her, then I tried to call her, but the phone was disconnected. Did she move? I never saw or heard from Megan again – AND SHE ONLY HAD ONE TEST LEFT!

The other student I lost was Michael. He started class shortly after his cousin enrolled. According to the TABE, Michael's skills were higher than his cousin's, but there was a major difference between the two students. Both were in their early twenties, both were living with their parents, and both were unemployed. The difference was that Michael's cousin came every night even if he had to walk, and he took work home to do. Michael did neither of those. He would say that he had transportation problems (and I did have to take him home occasionally), but I also suspected that Michael thought that he had better things to do with his friends. Michael was shy with me, and I never felt we had developed a good rapport. Even when he was in class, he would sometimes take extra long breaks. He would sometimes leave early, saying friends were giving him a ride home. He was reprimanded one night by the program director because a school camera caught him going into an unlocked computer room. His break times ended, but his attendance became more and more sporadic. I encouraged Michael to try an OPT and even though his initial skills were better than his cousin's, Michael was afraid to attempt it. After he watched his cousin knock out several tests, Michael did take a social studies OPT, but he would not sign up for the GED[®] test, even with the offer of a scholarship. Then Michael stopped coming completely without attempting a single GED[®] test. I never tried to contact him.

From a perspective focusing on retention methodologies, please discuss techniques that you used to try to keep each student in your class. In hindsight, what other techniques or applications might have had a stronger effect?

Our regional program has a number of GED[®] classes in various locations and in the evening or daytime. Students may attend any classes they wish as long as it meets their learning level needs. My class is considered a "FastTrack" class, though, in actuality, it may not be so fast. I am very tolerant of the times students



come into the classroom. Hours are formally 5:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., Monday and Wednesday evenings. However, students know I get to my room as early as 4:30 and am willing to work on individual problems if they come early. Closer to taking a GED® test, especially in math, I may arrange to meet a student at the public library for extra help beyond class time. Other than missing instruction time, my students are not penalized for absences or tardies. I tell them that I am happy to see them any time they can get there even if they have to come late or they've had numerous absences. Any time is better than no time! Most students respect that and get to class when they can. In my evening program (regional adult ed), my students do not seem to take advantage of this. In my day program at the correctional center, I can't have this policy because inmates would take advantage of a relaxed attendance policy. I do believe students are more motivated to attend and work in class when it is their choice to attend.

In Megan's case, I could not control the demands of her job, children, and mother, but even though my attendance policy was very relaxed, I probably could have done more. I should have realized Megan's anxiety over math and maybe taken her a little slower than the group, giving her a lot more practice on a skill to build her confidence – maybe she felt inadequate in the group. Since she moved quickly and fairly easily through the other content areas, I mistakenly assumed that she could do the same in math. What a lesson I learned, but it didn't help Megan! Maybe group lessons were easier for me as a teacher but uncomfortable for Megan. I should have conferenced with her to see how she felt especially since previous instruction has been individualized. I also realize in hindsight that I should have hooked Megan up with our distance learning program, which accesses online education, to keep her "connected" to our program when she was absent and especially during the summer month when we had no class.

As for Michael, I think at the time his attendance started to become less regular, I should have thought about how he might have felt, seeing his cousin and others surpass him and start taking the tests when he was ahead of them at first. I should have discussed this with Michael. When he started taking longer breaks, a learning contract might have helped him to become more aware of his responsibility in his learning process. I have since developed a list of skills and concepts necessary for the GED® test in the area of math. It might have been more motivating to Michael to actually check off skills as they were mastered.

Since he was unemployed, I should have given Michael assignments to explore the Internet for possible career paths. He could have taken an interest/skills survey to help give him some direction. Then I could have geared his work toward his interests and job entry level requirements. Since Michael didn't have computer access at home, I don't think distance learning would have worked for him, but he could have completed specific learning activities on the computers at school. Computer access time could have been a part of his learning contract.



From a perspective focusing on instructional methodologies, please discuss those techniques that you used with each student and those that you wish you could have used. Can you hypothesize on the effectiveness of either?

I worked with Megan individually at first to help develop her confidence and sense of accomplishment. She excelled with this active learning. Once she only had the math test left, I put her in a small group for different activities after I presented concepts and modeled problem solving. She also had individual practice for homework. The group had the opportunity to write and explain work from the board. Megan would not go to the board, though she would help others if they needed it when they were at the board. I should have tried pairing Megan with just one other student to make her feel more comfortable rather than putting her with a larger group.

I also established an *informal* learning contract in which we outlined the order in which Megan would study and attempt the OPT and GED® tests. When Megan first joined the class, I had her write an informal essay about her family so that I could assess her writing skills. I kept this and subsequent essays in her folder so that when she was feeling frustrated, I could remind her of her progress. We could also compare the types of mistakes to see where she needed a little more practice and attention. Megan found that she learned more quickly from her mistakes and thus stopped “torturing” herself and apologizing.

As stated in the previous question, I should have put Megan in the distance learning program for the month our program was closed. I think since Megan was so self-motivated, she would have used it consistently, though in math, it would have been imperative that she also had contact with a teacher, so if she had questions, she could get help before getting overwhelmed.

With Michael, I tried individual and small group instruction, and for writing, I kept a portfolio. Since his skills were higher than his cousin’s, I thought it would be helpful for him to review his math skills while “tutoring” or reviewing a particular concept with his cousin and some others in the room. It worked at first – I taught Michael, and then he “taught” the others. As Michael’s tardiness and break time increased, I had to stop using this technique because the skills of the others surpassed Michael’s. Michael switched his concentration to writing, and he wanted to shelf his math for awhile. I think this was because he saw the others passing him in skill level. I kept a portfolio of Michael’s writing. His essay content did improve with time, but he seemed to lack a real commitment (interest and self-discipline) to practice grammar lessons or apply them. He would not take work home. I don’t think distance learning would have worked with Michael; however, he might have enjoyed completing learning activities on the computers at school. Computer access time could have been a part of his learning contract.



What common threads have you recognized between instruction and retention as you have reflected on them in your practice? These can include both your delivery and the effects on students' learning/behavior.

I think the threads of instructional methodology and retention methodology are so closely intertwined that I had trouble answering each question separately. I considered just putting the two together and writing the response as one. I think we should consider our instructional methods as leading to retention. If we can help our students to realize they can learn and help them to enjoy learning, retention will be the natural result if barriers outside our control don't interfere. For the most part, we can do very little in the short-term to change institutional barriers likely affect our current students, but if we see policies or practices that need to be adjusted, we should try to encourage that change. As with institutional barriers, we may be able to do very little about situational barriers other than to encourage our students to facilitate change or maybe refer them to other agencies. But with understanding and empathy regarding their various situations, we can make changes at the instructional level. The more we know about our students, the better rapport we develop, the more our students will help us to understand the barriers they may encounter and their internal motivation. What we instruct (to a certain extent) and how we do it is up to us as teachers. We control the mood and situations which lead to learning in our classrooms.

I **try** to keep the following paraphrased quote from Haim Ginott in the back of my mind all times when I deal with my students no matter which group (though sometimes I forget):

I am the decisive element in my classroom. It is my personal approach that creates climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As the teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a student's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a student humanized or dehumanized.

How will your continuing practice be affected by concepts related to retention and instruction?

I have already implemented some changes in my classroom. In both my day and night programs, I try to tie my students' personal experiences and interests into what I teach. I try to use their suggestions. In my day program, one of my students suggested that we read a particular book as our class novel. I read the book to see if it would be appropriate and of interest to everyone, and now they are all enjoying it.



My students have limited access to the Internet in my night program. We have a computer lab, but it is not always available because of scheduled computer classes or the room being used for testing. I plan to look at the times that room is available and plan purposeful lessons and exploration to make the most of the time we have.

My day program has no Internet access, but they need keyboard and computer experience. They can use the Aztec program, but this is limited in motivation. Maybe I can work up a virtual field trip (would be better with the Internet) using the encyclopedia installed on our computers. Follow-up writing assignments could also be incorporated.

I just started a checklist of skills in the area of math at the GED® level. I plan to use this with more students and to also develop a skills checklist at the ABE level. Helping students concretely see progress will hopefully be motivating to them.

Keeping a writing portfolio on all my students will continue so they can see progress. At times when they are discouraged, they need to just sit back and view how far they have progressed. It will help me too!

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