Benchmarking Best Practices in Adult Learning Centres

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There is very little research that describes the measures of quality in teaching practice in adult basic education programs extant in the literature today. Some research around quality programming in workplace literacy, community-based literacy, and generic adult education does exist. However, what it means for individual teachers to deliver quality in teaching practice is rarely reported. The research on how people actually teach adult learners in basic education programs and whether their teaching is consonant with the principles of adult education is very thin on the ground. In addition, rarely are the adult students themselves consulted about their definitions and experiences of quality in teaching.

Benchmarking best practices has emerged in the workplace as a way of ensuring quality in processes and practices. The process has only recently been applied to training in the workplace and occasionally has been used as a strategy to identify quality practices in education (Flint, et. Al, 1999; Mancuso, 2001; Alstete, 1995). The methodology of a benchmarking best practices study assesses quality of practice against current principles of a discipline (in this case, the principles of adult education). A benchmarking study can validate some of those principles and highlight the importance of others. A benchmarking study provides authentic models against which practitioners may self-assess. It can demonstrate quality to those outside the field of adult secondary education through the provision of examples and can provide information on the needs of new or pre-service teachers for the purposes of designing professional development programs.

Context

The primary work of this study revolved around Adult Learning Centres (ALC’s) in Manitoba. These centres provide adult learners with the opportunity to complete their Grade 12 studies through the Mature Students Diploma. Since most of the teachers in ALC’s come from secondary school teaching backgrounds where they have taught adolescents, it cannot be assumed that they are aware of adult learning issues and principles or of current best practices in the field of teaching adults. Nor can it be assumed that adult learning principles are incorporated into their own teaching practice. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to benchmark and provide examples of some best practices of teachers currently working in Adult Learning Centres and basic education in the workplace sites who are recognized as outstanding teachers of adult learners, so that a professional development program directed toward working with adult learners could be developed for the specific needs and contexts of ALC’s.
Research Design

This research was a qualitative research study to identify best practices amongst teachers identified as being quality practitioners. The study included participant observations, interviews, coding and analysis of responses. The study was designed to observe current practices in three ALC’s and two different workplace education programs with six different teachers, to conduct interviews with both students and teachers, and to provide a qualitative analysis of the results. Additional interviews were held with the training manager of a large manufacturing company and with the coordinator of a provincial workplace education program. All interviews were taped recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Drafts of the emerging analysis were shared with practitioners, students, and other professionals.

Each teacher was visited in her/his classroom setting on three separate occasions from October 2001 to August 2002. Each session was three hours and included the observation of a range of teaching strategies including lecture, group work, labs, teacher/learner interactions, and lesson design. Students were observed listening, taking notes, asking questions, interacting with one another, and doing individual work. All the identified teachers were highly recommended by their supervisors and their students as being excellent teachers. They are all committed to adult learning and continue to seek professional development and experiences to enrich their teaching. All teachers expressed commitment to their students. Two out of three of the teachers I interviewed had returned to university as adults themselves. They have a strong commitment to facilitating learning and understood the nature of being an adult student.

Best Practice Principles

This study used participant observations and teacher and student interviews to compare with specific principles, which are commonly accepted as principles of good practice in adult learning. In particular, this study used the principles applied in previous studies by Millar (1999) and Tessier (2001). These principles are commonly used as reference points in the adult education literature (MacKeracher, 1996). All of the teachers in this study exhibited most, if not all, of the principles of good adult education practice. They understood and believed in the underpinning principles used as benchmarks. Evidence from their own teaching practice demonstrates that good teachers follow these principles either consciously or unconsciously.

The study provides a sound beginning for other teachers to compare their own practice and to engage all teachers in an improved quality of delivery of adult basic education wherever the setting. This study compared participant observations and teacher and student interviews with the following commonly accepted as principles of good practice in adult learning (MacKeracher, 1996). Interview questions were developed using the principles detailed below. Observational data was also collected keeping these principles in mind.
Respect for the learner as an adult

Teachers demonstrate respectful interactions with students. Adult learners often experienced shame and blame in school and are anxious that these kind of interactions are not replicated in adult education. Teachers demonstrate active listening and positive responses to questions. They encourage students and regularly show care, concern and personal attention. Quality teachers work with students to create a collaborative and cooperative learning atmosphere. When things are safe and comfortable, students feel they can take risks. They feel others in the program are friendly and that if they are absent, they are missed.

Give clear instructions and expectations

Good teachers come to class well prepared. They explain new knowledge in plain language and provide time to learn new information, concepts, and terminology. They maintain consistent deadlines and make good use of time. They speak clearly and make things interested. Finally, they provide an opportunity for students to practice new information.

Demonstrate specific personal qualities

Good teachers have a sense of humour and are patient. They possess a variety of strategies and techniques for explaining new information. Most importantly, they are “warm demanders.” They have expectations and set boundaries so that students have a sense that someone cares about their progress.

Provide time for students to interact with one another

Ensure that class structure is flexible

Quality in teaching demands that assignments and exams are flexibly scheduled. Flexibility also includes an awareness and acknowledgement by the teacher that students have other obligations.

Negotiate curriculum

Good teachers notice individual needs and individual differences. Learning skills are taught and given practice

New Principles Emerging from the Data

A number of new principles of good adult education practice have emerged from this study. Both teachers and students alike identified the following new principles as being important. All teachers in this study in the Adult Learning Centres, as well as the workplace educators, demonstrated these principles.

Good teachers like teaching

All the teachers in this study liked teaching. They said it was more fun, more challenging, and provided them with a connection with their own learning and their profession. Students wanted their teachers to like their jobs and to be enthusiastic about their work.
Good teachers share themselves personally with adult learners

All the teachers in this study shared information about their lives, their families, and their histories with students. The purpose of the sharing was not only to demonstrate equality as an adult, but also to show human frailties and differences. Good teachers use stories of themselves, their families, their experiences to provide examples and analogies for learners. They shared their failures as well as their successes.

Good teachers are reflective

The teachers in this study regularly reflected on their practice, their students, their courses. They never felt the lesson was perfect as it was, or that it didn’t need re-examining. Teachers felt responsible for the quality and connection their teaching was making to the learning of their students.

Good teachers self-evaluate and regularly change how they teach

Good teachers change what isn’t working. For good teachers, it isn’t enough that a lesson as been taught, that they’ve provided information, given assignments, corrected tests. Good teachers are interested in learning outcomes for their students. Good teachers will put in the extra time and energy to improve the quality of teaching practice. They believe in the value of their students and in their own role as a facilitator of that learning.

Good teachers amend the curriculum: they respond to learners’ needs

Since good teachers have the needs of their students as a foremost concern, they are willing to be flexible with the curriculum to respond to the needs of their learners. They don’t expect to teach the same course the same way year after year. They expect they will need to amend, to re-design, to re-emphasize depending on the students and the particular group. Good teachers adapt curriculum: curriculum does not drive them or their students. They understand the importance of curriculum. But they do not work to the curriculum to the detriment of their students.

Good teachers admit they can make mistakes

Good teachers do not expect to be experts in everything and are not afraid to make mistakes. Good teachers notice and “read” the class. They can tell when students do not comprehend the material. In those cases, they check it out with students. If confusion exists, they review the material in a different way. These teachers view mistakes as a way to analyze learning patterns and to assess the effectiveness of learning. They do not view mistakes as “bad” or evidence of the incompetence of the learner. Rather, mistakes are part of the learning process.

Good teachers are learners themselves

Since good teachers do not expect themselves to be experts in everything, they are also eager learners. All of the teachers who participated in this study were adult learners themselves. They completed their university degrees as adults and understand personally what it is to be an adult learner. Good teachers are always learning, not only about their subject matter or the content of what they are teaching, but they are open to learning with and from their
students. Teachers demonstrate their eagerness to learn by validating new knowledge, sharing what others have taught them, and valuing the experience of learning from each other.

**Learning From Each Other**

*Evaluation and Assessment*

Workplace educators can provide new language for assessment and evaluation. Workers are used to being assessed on the job. When they make mistakes, they know it costs the company. How well people translate learning to practical applications is always being assessed in the workplace.

Classroom teachers do not always know how to translate experiences in practical assessment in the workplace to developing critiquing and feedback skills. Workplace educators constantly work to help learners assess learning and evaluate its effect in the workplace. In this way, they don’t wait to assess learning until a formal “test” or piece of work needs to be marked. They monitor it constantly.

*Curriculum negotiation*

In Adult Learning Centres, much of the work in classroom settings is teacher-directed. A generally accepted tenet in adult education is that the adult learner wants and needs to be involved in the direction of learning. Some of the approaches and materials used by workplace educators could be incorporated into how adult educators in Adult Learning Centres develop a more individualized and self-directed approach to learning.

Good educators contextualize the learning. Sometimes the resources in Adult Learning Centres are adolescent based. Textbooks, reading resources, problem-solving examples are often targeted at the teenager. Workplace educators identify learning goals and develop curricula with multiple considerations. They identify workplace goals and needs (including performance outcomes). They identify personal learning needs for the students. Finally, they integrate these into a learning plan that accesses both formal learning materials and materials and resources from the workplace.

*Flexible teaching and learning*

All adult educators are concerned about attendance and drop-outs. In some cases, it may be that the learning schedule is too tight for the demands of the learner. Workplace educators accept that the pace and tempo of learning are driven by the learner’s agenda. So, it is not the curriculum that drives the learning, but rather the learner’s capacity for absorbing new material and the learner’s ability to apply new learning in the workplace context. This kind of approach to learning provides the learner with a practical relationship to the learning…something all adult learners want and expect from a learning situation. It is more difficult to link traditional academic outcomes with the context that adults can respond to.

*Learner direction and control*

Teachers in Adult Learning Centres often control more of the learning than they need to. Although they treat their students as adults and are not “controlling” in the conventional sense, they often do not allow students to design and lead the learning. Adult learners can direct more of their learning. Workplace educators expect students to drive the learning. In a sense, the workplace educator follows the lead of the student. This does not
mean that the teacher is not prepared. Rather the teacher needs to be more prepared, so that a range of directions could be followed. In addition, the teacher must take a risk and let the learners control both the process and the outcomes.

Adult learners want to see the relevance of the learning to their work and home lives. If they can’t see this relationship, students will fall behind, drop out, or ignore what they feel is irrelevant. Teachers in Adult Learning Centres may also be aware of these needs but either because of time or feeling the curriculum is driving them, they do not make those connections as frequently as they might. Nor do they ask students to make those links on their own.

Priority/essential skills

Teachers in Adult Learning Centres know that students come with Essential Skill needs. They try to accommodate these but are often frustrated because more supports are needed. Workplace educators accept that students will need supports in the acquisition of new learning habits, skills, and approaches. First, they help students identify those skill needs. Without this attention to specific learning strategies or skill development, workplace educators realize that unconscious barriers towards all learning will be raised. Students will feel they cannot make progress in anything until these skills are attended to.

Workplace educators provide regular review and assessment of the newly learned skills or strategies. They demonstrate the strategy in the context of the curriculum and don’t assume learners will be able to make transfers to other contexts. So, they ask and track with the student how to make that transfer to their own working and/or learning situation. The integration of these priority skills into the curriculum, no matter what the subject, must be part of the teaching expectations of all adult learning and, most particularly, of adults returning to learning.

References


