Changing Organizational Cultures to Promote Learner Persistence

By Sylvia G. Ramirez

Recently, the California Adult Education Research Digest No. 2: Learner Persistence detailed important factors contributing to learner persistence. The digest highlighted three important factors for learner persistence – Intake, Social Support and Goal Setting:

- **Intake**
  A common finding of retention studies is that many adults who leave do so early. The first 3 weeks have been identified as a critical period. Meaningful intake processes help many learners persist.

- **Social Support**
  1) **Engagement** – beliefs about teaching and learning – instructor’s belief in adults’ ability to learn and adults’ belief that education has worthwhile outcomes; mutual respect and acceptance.
  2) **Community building activities** such as peer mentoring, problem-based learning, participatory programming, cooperative learning, peer support groups, phone calls to absent learners, flexible scheduling, a comfortable physical space, and child and elder care assistance.
  3) **Safety** – non-threatening environment for personal disclosures and emotional development
  4) **Access** – improved by strategies such as flexible attendance rules, off-site tutoring, friendly, meaningful intake; and humanistic formative assessment.

- **Goal Setting**
  1) **Address both long term and short term goals** and use as context for instruction.
  2) **Provide services** that help learners make progress as well as procedures for learners to measure their own progress.
  3) **Revisit goals** to assess whether they are relevant and achievable. Sometimes this requires redirection of goals.

Two local studies have results that fit nicely into the larger research study on learner persistence. MiraCosta College’s Noncredit ESL program identified eight ESL faculty who had 80% persistence rates for three of four terms during 2004 - 2005. In fact, two of the instructors maintained 80% for all four terms. The instructors included those with many years of experience, new instructors, instructors who teach in the morning, at night and off site. To learn more about what factors contributed to their success, the noncredit ESL coordinator held meetings with the instructors. There were two meetings – one in the morning, and one in the evening.
The coordinator developed a list of questions to guide the focus groups. The questions were:

1. Were learners in your classes during 2004-2005 different from other classes you have taught? If yes, how were they different? (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, years of school, etc.)

2. Have your instructional and/or classroom management strategies changed over the last few years? If yes, what do you do differently today and why?

3. What are the five most important activities that you did in your classroom during 2004 – 2005 that you feel increased learner persistence? What of the five were most important and why?

4. What do you feel are the five most valuable resources available to you as an instructor? Which of the five is most valuable and why?

5. What has helped you most in becoming an effective instructor?

It soon became apparent that it would be impossible to follow the questions sequentially. The instructors were eager to share with each other what they do and how they do it. Some even ran mini-lessons to demonstrate strategies that worked for them. They seemed to have a more difficult time extrapolating their every day classroom reality to more global questions about what worked.

However, as the coordinator listened to the instructors and reviewed their varied responses several themes arose. They seemed to agree on the following:

1) Create a warm safe environment for learning.
2) Treat learners how you like to be treated.
3) Play with language learning
4) Enjoy what you teach and share that joy
5) Personalize instruction – let learners learn about you as you learn about them
6) Set expectations for term – review what level learners are in and where they may go next. Many talked about using the ESL Program Visual.
7) Set learning goals and have learners put these goals in a concrete form – writing, posters, speeches. Make the goals real to learners and check how learners are meeting their stated goals.
8) Have well thought out lessons and guide learners in following the progress of a lesson using agendas/outlines.
9) Have projects with clear expectations and deadlines.

The coordinator has also observed all of the instructors. She consistently saw them demonstrate preparation, respect for learners, high expectations for learners the incorporation of solid goal setting strategies, a sense of community, and joy in teaching.
San Diego Community College district conducted a similar study. For their study, they looked at persistence rates, representation among sites, levels and schedules and learner interviews. Then they observed the instructors “in action”. From their study, they identified themes and key elements. The report concluded that structure, organization, community and expertise were central themes. Specifically, the report said,

*All of these classes demonstrated structure in the form of schedules, calendars, weekly or daily routines, syllabi, agendas, and/or classroom management through student teams. In terms of organization, students are busy during the entire class period and are actively engaged in meaningful tasks. Third, the teachers develop a sense of community by knowing their students’ names and details about their lives. Students also know and care about other students in their class. Finally the teachers are experts. They know their material well and can provide clear explanations and examples.*

There was agreement across all studies that building community was essential. All studies identified the need for preparation and structure. Goal setting cannot happen in classes where instructors have not thought through how to identify and teach to learner needs. This does not come from the book. The Intake Process is a programmatic issue. It is interesting that both MiraCosta and San Diego have redesigned their intake/orientation procedures.

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Studying learning persistence is a complex process. While there are individual success stories, the research points to creating “organizational cultures” that promote persistence from a learner’s perspective and an environment where instructors and learners maximize the program’s educational opportunities.