Attrition in the Minto Literacy CASP

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Abstract

The scope and nature of attrition encountered in adult literacy programs were explored in context of the Community Academic Services Program, CASP, a community-based program offering academic and intermediate adult upgrading services in the rural setting of Minto, New Brunswick. Studies in ABE programs, attrition statistics, CASP reports, and the Minto CASP program's student termination list were reviewed in an effort to better understand attrition. The program's origin and outcomes are explored in the hope of finding strategies for student retention. It is written from the biassed perspective of the program's pioneer facilitator.

Attrition in the Minto Literacy CASP (Community Academic Services Program)

Defining the Nature of the Study

Literacy programs operate in variable settings and formats, yet confront similar problems, one of which is *attrition,* the non continuance of students and/or staff. Though staff attrition was evident, it's the student non continuance that was ongoing in my ten years as pioneer facilitator in Minto's CASP (Community Academic Services Program) that is this paper's focus. By *non continuing*, I mean students who enrolled and left CASP, one or more times, without meeting a goal or getting a GED.

This topic was chosen for teaching awareness and to aid with future decision-making strategies. My investigation included a review of adult literacy literature and studies/reports with the aim of better understanding attrition in the Minto CASP. The program's termination list from May 1991 to April 2001 served as a base for my study. The data was taken from 135 terminated student files and 34 *no-shows*, covering the ten of eleven Minto contracts that I facilitated, to create four tables in Appendix A, to identify potential patterns for comparison purposes.

If attrition is proof of disagreement between Beder's (1986)program view as a "tangible product"and the learner's "core product" expectations, there is a real need to examine every facet, from origin to outcomes (Burns & Roche, 1988).

The Birth of the CASP Venture

Illiteracy exists as a socially-constructed problem of cultural, political, and economic values and state-provided education came partly into being as its cure (Donald, 1991). Solutions can meet with resistance. A 1987 Southam survey of 2,398 adults showed that five million Canadians cannot meet society's literacy demands and listed *quitting school* as a major cause of illiteracy (Calamai, 1987).

New Brunswick's government believed a highly literate society would grow economically. However, the province had Canada's second highest adult illiteracy rate, at 25% (MacKeracher, 1994). A 1989 survey said, "44% of New Brunswickers between the ages of 18 and 69 had difficulty with everyday reading and writing." (Baseline, 1997, p.3). Defining literacy is hard (Thomas, 1989).

> The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) defined literacy as "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Literacy Coordinators, 1998-1999, p.1).

> Critical literacy work begins with the understanding that definitions reflect the ideological agendas of literacy stakeholders and actors making decisions about what literacy is: who will have access to opportunities to acquire it; who will manage literacy programs; what literacy will be used for; how it will be used; by whom; and in what contexts (Baynham, 1995). (Blunt, 2001, p.93).

Lack of agreement in the perception of literacy and the goals of literacy education may factor in high attrition rates in programs(Malicky &Norman, 1995).   *Fundamental* literacy programs focus on acquiring traditional

reading and writing skills, a view learners often hold. *Functional* literacy

programs deal with competency-based training for human capital development in

contexts in which people live or work. Most North American adult literacy

programs have been fundamental or functional in nature (Malicky et al., 1997).

Both types aid learners to fit into an existing socio-political order of 'taking their

place,' whereas, *emancipatory* cultural literacy in community-based settings is for

individuals to act to bring equality or change in society, for 'making one's place.'

In May 1991, the first CASP opened in Minto, NB, a rural coal-mining

village of about 3,000 people. CASP was Premier McKenna's literacy initiative for

joint community program funding partnerships of government, community, and

private sector groups, delivered as an accessible, adaptable, affordable alternate to

adult upgrading services formerly offered at community colleges (Despres, 2001).

CASP's focus was on work-oriented functional literacy as a skill for

employability (Blunt, 2001). Such programs, however, may simply try to offer

patchwork skills to meet short-term goals which do not help disadvantaged people

from addressing the root causes of their situations (Alexander, 1997).

<center>The Attrition Statistics in Literacy Programs</center>

It seems that most ABE students do not attend programs for long periods of

time (Dirkx & Jha, 1994). Recruitment and retention of learners remain two of the

most significant challenges facing the literacy field (Middleton, 2000).

A decision to enroll in ABE constitutes an investment of time and energy an adult learner is willing to make. Sometimes an aspect of a learner's life will compete with the value they have placed on completing a program goal. Refusal to make a full commitment to programs and the inability to resolve dependency needs are the major barriers affecting a woman's successful transition from homemaker to wage earner (Safman, 1988). Affordable childcare is an ongoing dilemma for low-income women in literacy programs. Minto CASP learners received no financial subsidy, however, select few HRD-NB clients were eligible for minimal childcare and/or transportation expenses while attending classes.

The figures for attrition conflict depending on the nature and source of the study. Beder(1991) stated that many ABE programs suffer rates in excess of 50%, with those needing help the most being the least likely to start/stay. Quigley (1992) identified high rates as the main literacy program issue with rates exceeding 70 percent in some states. The Minto CASP's rate has never been determined.

> Funded programs in adult literacy only attract 8 percent of those eligible for them. Of that paltry 8 percent, recent attrition rates were marked at 74 percent. Those who do participate log in an average of 4.9 hours of instruction per week ... As Quigley puts it, "What other area of education could live with such numbers?" (Demetrion, 1999, p.164).

Almost half of an Alberta study of 94 learners(see Appendix D) dropped out of literacy classes before having their goals met, and as far as could be judged,

did not enroll elsewhere. The dropout was highest in the first few months of programs.

Research on The Reasons for Attrition

"While traditional students in the educational system make an "either/or" decision to remain in school, adult learners... make an "and also" decision to *add* education to their adult commitments and responsibilities" (Middleton, 2000, p.12).

"Personal problems, other than, or related to, their lack of education...can interfere with their attendance, motivation, and concentration" (Herman et al., 1982, p.35).

Because the socio-economic cost to society is too high, much research has dealt with identifying student characteristics or factors that influence dropout and persistence (Dickinson, 1996). Such studies categorized the reasons according to patterns/trends based on: (a) *psycho-social* variables like goal-setting, motivation, personality, resistance, interaction patterns, life change, and commitment; (b) *socio-economic/demographic* variables such as gender, race, employment, age, family members, and income/poverty level; (c) *situational* variables that include factors for dropout or number of hours enrolled such as childcare and transportation needs; (d) *academic* variables like last grade attended, educational status, placement level, ability, and testing scores; and (e) *institutional* variables

such as class time, format, numbers, location, instructor, and recruitment

procedures (Dirkx & Jha, 1994).

Brod (1990) writes of an attrition study by Bean, Partanen, Wright, and

Aaronson in urban programs categorizing *personal* and *program* factors that allay

retention (Brod, 1995). The work of Diekhoff, Fitzgerald, Glustrom, and Reston

indicates that, "In general ... factors outside of literacy programs seem to be more

influential in decisions not to participate or stay in literacy programs than factors

within the programs themselves" (Malicky & Norman, 1994, p.145).

A 1993 survey of women dropouts from a family literacy program showed

them wanting a more personal academic course to address educational needs in a

less gender-biassed way and resenting teaching interventions that devalued their

parenting skills, roles, or home literacy (Cuban & Hayes, 1996).

The NISAL (Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy) report

demonstrated that non continuing students are diverse, maybe too much so, to

make any kind of generalization about, so that "there is probably no one or two

factors that can or will account for the rates of attrition we see in ABE across the

United States." (Dirkx & Jha, 1994, p.30). The Minto CASP was much this way.

Classifying and Interpreting the Minto CASP Data

The Gender Factor

I gathered data using gender as did the Alberta study. Dirkx and Jha (1994) report the predominance of women in a Lincoln, Nebraska ABE program study at Southeast Community College, aimed at improving student retention rates. Also, Richmond's survey of 187 CASP learners indicated that more women than men attend CASPs (Richmond, 1999). In Table A1 of Appendix A, records showed that 60% of the total Minto CASP terminations and no-shows were female and 40% were male (Perry, 2001). Women most often left for personal reasons and men for employment or scheduling factors. Both sexes ranked high on *no-show* activity.

The Age/Educational Attainment Factor

Though it is debatable as to whether age and academic factors conclusively impact student continuation in ABE program studies, I prepared this data in Tables A2 and A4. From Dirks' and Jha's research (1994) that "academic ability as measured by achievement tests holds promise as a variable in persistence," I made Table A3 with entry-level reading comprehension scores (Dickinson, 1996). The average entry-level reading comprehension score was 6.73 in the Minto CASP.

The average age of program learners in NB's CASP programs is 38, with the 39% majority between the ages of 35 and 44, with only 6% of the learners in the 55 and older group (Baseline, 1997). The average Minto learner was aged 34½.

Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) found that the most powerful predictor of program participation in adult education was the amount of formal schooling. With specific reference to dropout, they found that adults who enrolled in ABE and high school programs were four times more likely to drop out than were adults in other programs, and that adults with the least formal schooling were more likely to drop out than others (Malicky & Norman, 1994, p.146).

An Alberta study gathered survey results from literacy-providing institutions to find that less than 1 percent of adults with grades one to nine education were enrolled in literacy programs (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Most CASP learners did not have a high school diploma or GED before enrolling, as 60% had left school between Grades six and nine (Baseline, 1997). The grade level average for Minto learners was 8.75, but the program's differentiation between grade level *completion* and the grade when a student *left school* could lead to invalid comparisons.

Problems With the CASP Data

The variation of facilitators completing forms, incomplete data, and failure to conduct student follow-up made it difficult to compile tables for comparison. Some files had no entry-level reading comprehension scores due to lack of testing. Others lacked age, schooling info, and student reasons for program exit. The *actual* student time spent in CASP was not posted because of a flexible attendance policy requiring start/end dates only instead of actual class hours. It would require

days spent in the classroom files to verify individual attendance.

Before I could fully understand dropout factors, I had to know why

students chose to participate in literacy programs or not (See Appendices B and

C).

Regarding Minto CASP's attrition, all student records must be reviewed for

student entry-level goals in order to verify if a program exit denoted

success/failure. It was impossible to know if entry-level goals had ever existed,

changed, or been achieved. Short-term goals, voiced partway into the program

might never have been documented. '*Personal reasons*' was often recorded as the

cause for exiting, as actual motive possibilities were endless. Goal-completers may

have possessed unique qualities or had access to necessary support services that

others lacked. Was *finding a job* indicative of success or financial hardship for the

learner?

Conclusion and Recommendations for the Minto CASP

In my final analysis, it was obvious that definitive statements could not be

made about the true attrition rate. It was apparent that a large number of students

participated, but exactly how many left with their goals met or not is difficult to

say without further contact. I believe we need more than graphs and charts.If we

cannot determine through statistics why students do *not come*, or do *not stay* when

they come, then let's discover what benefits/impacts they define from the

experience. In follow-up, we should try to discover if there were factors

influencing student goals, asking open-ended questions about what most impacted

or motivated them to continue/discontinue. A response with the initiative to carry

it out is next!

> The Baseline survey asked learners of negative participatory experiences...
> Overall, 11%...reported a negative experience such as non-receipt of
> cheques for subsidies, stress resulting from required attendance, problems
> with teaching staff or problems with other students (Baseline, 1997, p.45).
> Responses from the 19% who indicated that their classes have not helped
> them to achieve their goals indicated that much of the dissatisfaction
> related to a failure to attain a grade 12, failure to see improvements in the
> workplace and many were related to the fact that the respondent did not
> continue with the course because of family responsibilities, workplace
> demands or illness; (Baseline, 1997, p.47)

A Vermont study to determine factors in the persistence of ten ABE goal-

completing participants listed the learner's determination or desire to

learn/improve, realization of progress/ability or improved self-esteem, family/tutor

support, flexible time, convenient location, and existence of future goals

(Dickinson, 1996). Few Minto CASP learners showed lack of

motivation/willingness to learn, but many had poor self-esteem, progressed at a

slow rate, and demonstrated a need to belong, to be accepted, to play a significant

role in their community.

It seems that program participation and persistence is complex in nature

and encompasses the diversity of individuals/communities as is reflected in the reasons for enrolling and leaving (Appendices B to D). It appears that the crucial time for quality improvements lies within the early stages of participation. Things like time, location, and appropriate feedback *are* within our power to change, but internal program changes will not correct external factors that deter many learners from completing their goals in literacy programs.

The program's emphasis was more on traditional educational content than social change in the community, lacking the praxis of *popular education*, which serves the interests of exploited sectors of society, to engage in critical reflection and collective action to change oppressive conditions in their lives (Beder, 1996).

Non-participation reflected through non enrollment ought to concern us just as greatly as attrition. Regular follow-up with *no-shows* and callers needs to occur.   My study has left me with more questions than answers. If low-literacy students aren't flooding our program, is anyone at fault? Do we have the diversity needed to reach the whole community? If not, who are we excluding, and why? Must a decision to leave a program be construed as failure? Can it not reflect the diversity of adult lifestyles that cause us to make individual choices? How long they stay may not be as important as being ready to address their needs while they're with us. Whose program is it anyway?

Appendix A

Tables Created by Joan Perry from Minto CASP Termination Records

Table A1: Male/Female Nos. and %s Per Dropout Reason: May/91 to April/01

Table A1: Reason for Non-Continuance	M. #	M. %	F. #	F. %	Total No.	Total %
Transfer to other training/program	5	31	11	69	**16**	**9.47**
Time scheduling conflicts	10	77	3	23	**13**	**7.69**
Passed GED	6	38	10	62	**16**	**9.47**
No progress/motivation/satisfaction	4	40	6	60	**10**	**5.92**
Personal (self/family/unknown)	8	33⅓	16	66⅔	**24**	**14.20**
Employment	9	56	7	44	**16**	**9.47**
Referral to Laubach tutor	3	60	2	40	**5**	**2.95**
Moving away from area	1	12½	7	87½	**8**	**4.73**
Continue study on own at home	--	--	5	100	**5**	**2.95**

Health/medical reasons	3	43	4	57	**7**	**4.14**
Transportation problems	3	27	8	73	**11**	**6.50**
Childcare problems	--	--	1	100	**1**	**0.59**
Attendance/Attitude poor	1	50	1	50	**2**	**1.18**
Financial reasons	--	--	1	100	**1**	**0.59**
No-shows/ Non starts	13	38	21	62	**34**	**20.12**
TOTAL # OF NON CONTINUING	66	39	103	61	**169**	**99.97**

Table A2: Male/Female Terminations by Last Grade Completed Before Entry

(Note: One male student & all no-shows excluded because of incomplete data)

Table A2: Last Grade Completed	M No.	M %	F No.	F %	Total No.	Total %
Grades 1 to 3	1	50	1	50	2	**1.49**
Grades 4 to 5	4	57	3	43	7	**5.22**
Grades 6 to 7	11	42	15	58	26	**19.40**
Grades 8 to 9	24	49	25	51	49	**36.57**
Grades 10 to 12	13	26	37	74	50	**37.31**
TOTAL by Gr. Completed. Note:(Avg. =Gr. 8.75)	53	39½	81	60½	134	**99.99**

Table A3: Male/Female Terminations by Entry Reading Comprehension Level
(Using Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test Canadian Edition Level E Form 1)

(Note: Two male & female non tested students excluded)

Table A3: Entry Reading Comprehension Level	M #	M %	F #	F %	Total No.	Total %
Levels 0 to 3	11	38	18	62	29	**22.14**
Levels 4 to 5	12	40	18	60	30	**22.90**
Levels 6 to 7	11	65	6	35	17	**12.98**
Levels 8 to 9	14	38	23	62	37	**28.24**
Levels 10 to 12.9++	3	17	15	83	18	**13.74**
TOTAL No. by Reading Comprehension Level Note:(Avg. = 6.73)	51	39	80	61	131	**100.00**

Table A4: Male/Female Terminations by Referral Source & Age on Entry

Table A4: Referral Agencies & Age of Student on Entry		M No.	M %	F No.	F %	Total No.	Total %
HRD-NB	19-34 yrs.	12	15	34	44		
	35-49 yrs.	9	12	18	23		
	50 & over	2	3	3	4	**78**	**57.81**
HRD-C/EIC	19-34 yrs	4	36	–	–		
	35-49 yrs	3	27	3	27		
	50 & over	--	--	1	9	**11**	**8.15**
Health	19-34 yrs	–	–	–	–		
	35-49 yrs	2	67	–	–		
	50 & over	1	33	–	--	**3**	**2.22**
Bus./Industry	19-34 yrs	–	–	–	–		
	35-49 yrs	7	88	–	–		
	50 & over	1	13	--	--	**8**	**5.92**

Community	19-34 yrs	4	12	11	33		
	35-49 yrs	5	15	7	21		
	50 & over	1	3	5	15	**33**	**24.44**
Schools	19-34 yrs	2	100	--	--	**2**	**1.48**
TOTAL by Referral/Age Note: (Avg. age =34½)		53	39	82	61	**135**	100.02

Appendix B

List of Reasons for Enrolling in Literacy Programs

The Baseline Market Research survey for Literacy NB Inc., of 401 learners

in 33 randomly-selected literacy programs (that included 23 of 164 CASPs

operating in 1996-1997), listed multi motivations for joining (accounting for the

percentages below totalling more than 100%). Overall:

- 58% of all learners wanted the literacy classes to lead to a GED or high school diploma;
- 24% had a specific desire to improve their reading and writing;
- 19% wanted to complete an overall academic upgrading;
- 16% joined literacy classes in the hope that the classes would lead

        to employment;
- 15% joined for self-improvement;
- 15% had a specific desire to improve math skills;
- 12% joined for general knowledge;
- 11% hoped to find a better job;
- 8% joined in order to be able to help their children with school work and to provide a role model for their children;
- 7% joined the classes because it was required if their EI benefits were to continue and 2% indicated that attendance was required by TAGS or HRD-NB;
- 4% joined because they recognized that many jobs require at least a high school diploma; and
- 2% joined for "something to do"(Baseline, 1997, p.20).

"Within the total sample ...70 learners(of 401) have gone on to additional...different courses since their involvement with a literacy class"(Baseline, 1997, p.21).

There are various reasons given for program enrollment. "Eighty to eighty-five percent of the learners in the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Virginia say their enrollment is due to word of mouth (personal communication, S. Grant, March 1995)" (Brod, 1995, p.1).

> A federally-funded study of adult ESL learners in Iowa (Valentine, 1990) found seven reasons for their participation in ESL classes including improving oneself and one's personal effectiveness in US society, being better able to help one's children with their schoolwork and to speak to their teachers, improving one's employability by being able to get a better job or to enter job training, functioning better with everyday uses of the language such as shopping and using the telephone, experiencing the success of knowing that one can learn the language, improving reading and writing skills in English, and being able to help people in one's native country (Brod, 1995, p.2).

The most common reason given was *getting the GED*, yet Dirkx and Jha

(1994) found that GED-completing students tend to be one of the younger groups

than the "other" goal-completing groups. Rarely, however do students have only

this goal in mind when registering. Often it is the literacy program that uses the

GED as a definitive success indicator because of social desirability and

commonality in identifiable goals, but a goal can change without the instructor

even being aware.

> They may leave before passing the GED exam but may feel they have ...
> completed their goals, as they have come to redefine them. It is uncertain
> as to the extent to which this redefinition of one's goals occurs with the
> "non continuing students." Interviews with a sample of these students ...
> suggest that this re-orientation to goals is not a frequent event...those
> students identified as noncontinuing are... students who have left ABE
> before completing their program of study (Dirkx & Jha, 1994, p. 29).

Appendix C

List of Reasons for Not Enrolling in Literacy Programs

The literature lists two main reasons for non enrollment: those that deal

with structural forces and those that stress human agency or attitudes (Long, 2001).

In early 1999, fifty-five Canadian literacy groups did the groundwork for a

national follow-up survey by ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, with 338 phone

interviews of potential learners who had contacted one of the groups (Long,

2001).

> After placing the initial call to a literacy group, 47% of callers went on to sign up for a program and 53% did not.... **program-related reasons** were the main factor deterring enrolment for the largest percentage...(43%). Program-related factors include not being called back...long waiting lists, inconvenient class times and locations, wrong type of program content or structure, and having to pay for the program or tutor. Following program-related reasons, **socioeconomic-circumstantial reasons** were...reported by those who did not enroll... (31%) ...The availability of different class times and assistance with childcare could significantly reduce the impact of...deterrents to enrolment. **Cognitive-emotive reasons** were the least likely (15%) to be cited as the main reason for not enrolling, which stands in sharp contrast to a common belief that fear and stigma are the main problems deterring potential learners (Middleton, 2000, p.10-11).

A case study of thirteen blue-collar male workers showed several themes in the narratives on non participatory behaviour that included teacher insensitivity, early work responsibilities related to poverty, labelling sensitivity, race and class discrimination, and the learner's belief in limited career advancement and that schooling interferes with immediate earning power(Davis-Harrison & Martin,2001).

Appendix D

Results of An Alberta Study on Participation and Dropout Rates

Taken from a 3-year Study of a Sampling of 94 Participants in an Urban Program

A sampling of 94 adults enrolled in literacy programs in one urban centre were asked about education level achievements of parents and selves, problems

they had in school, and the reasons for leaving (if they did). Gender and immigrant

status factored in the responses. 44% of immigrant participants stated political

problems in their country as the main reason for not completing school, whereas

55% of Canadian-born students listed family problems such as alcoholism and

abuse (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Canadian-born learners also reported more

personal reasons of social/psychological natures for dropout. "Alberta's study

showed that Canadian-born women were much more concerned with the social

effects of literacy than either men or immigrant women"(Malicky & Norman,

1994, p.151).Becoming more independent, meeting family responsibilities, and

meeting people were listed motivations in program participation. Overall, men

gave more general educational goals than did women.

83% of learners in the Alberta study cited job-related reasons for program

participation (Malicky & Norman, 1994). All also cited personal/psychological

reasons for entering.

> While Canadian-born participants often expressed the dream of a better life
> when they entered literacy programs (Horsman, 1990), they appeared to
> have less belief in the power of education to change their way of
> life(Hunter & Harman, 1979) than did the immigrant sample"(Malicky &
> Norman, 1994, p. 154).

This study showed participants having a variety of reasons for leaving

programs: *program-related factors* (moved too slow, participants not doing what

they wanted to do, conflict with teacher, content frustrations), or *social, family, and personal problems* (custody, legal, pregnancy, childcare, mental). "Reasons for dropping out did not appear to be related to immigrant status or time of drop out." (Malicky & Norman, 1994, p.153).

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