

The Learning Side of the Equation

ABE/Literacy Students Explore Effective Teaching

Judy Rose

ABE Instructor/Coordinator

Capilano University

Report of Paid Educational Leave 2007-2010

July 2010

Acknowledgements

I have come to understand, during my time of completing this project, that stories are a powerful means to promote change. I was initially attracted to the plan of interviews. However, I have come to realize that this plan was more challenging than I had originally thought. I became more self-conscious as I proceeded, read and reflected and I have learned to listen actively and deeply to the voices of the people so I could begin to really hear what they were saying. To all the students and former students who were so thoughtful and willing to share their stories, you have given me new insights and knowledge. I couldn't have done it without you.

My thanks to Capilano College (now Capilano University) for funding provided through the Paid Education Leave process. I particularly appreciate that the funding granted me adequate release time to research, reflect and write. It was a wonderful opportunity and I am grateful.

My advisory committee has supported me throughout. They have always been willing to give their feedback and input and most importantly their encouragement to keep me from feeling "bogged down" by the process. Thanks to Evelyn Battell, Marina Niks, Diana Twiss, Betsy Alkenbrack and Lorraine Argatoff.

Finally, I want to thank Kate Nonesuch, who edited the final version so carefully while the rest of the world was off on summer holidays.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Importance of This Research to the Field of ABE/Literacy	1
Methodology	2
The Participants	2
Summarizing the Interviews	3
Framing the Data.....	4
What the Students Said	4
How did you end up in ABE?.....	4
Can you describe yourself as a learner?.....	5
The Successes	5
The Challenges.....	6
Do you remember good teachers in your past?.....	8
Patience.....	8
Beyond Patience.....	9
A Passion for the Learning, a Passion for Students	10
Learners in Charge of Learning	11
Role of Family of Origin.....	13
Role of Schools and Community	14
If You Were Designing an ABE Program... ..	15
Observations of Interviewees from Other Cultures	16
What is it about math?	17
Conclusion	17
Recommendations for ABE Programs	18
References.....	19
Bibliography	19
Appendix A Excerpt from Application for Paid Educational Leave	21
Background	21
Appendix B Interview Questions.....	23
Appendix C Consent Form	25
Appendix C Consent Form	25
Appendix D Advisory Committee	28

Introduction

This document is the report of the activities of a paid education leave which began in 2007, proposed originally to be carried out half time for a period of two years. The leave was interrupted by an illness and recovery time in 2008 and 2009 and so the project has spanned three years instead of the originally planned two years.

As outlined in the excerpt from the application to the Paid Educational Leave Committee in 2006 (Appendix A), I proposed to do a project which emerged from a collaborative research project I had participated in between 2001 and 2004. In that research, five ABE/Literacy practitioners and three research friends undertook a participatory research project to explore in detail effective practices of experienced ABE/Literacy instructors. The description of that project is written in a document entitled *Hardwired for Hope* (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer & Twiss, 2004). Our initial plan in that project had been to include interviews with students and former students, but we were unable to do so. I wanted to return to that plan, so my proposal for education leave was to interview Capilano students to ask some of the same questions and try to gain insight into what makes an effective instructor from the students' point of view. Although this is a separate project, it is close enough in its method to complement the original work in *Hard Wired for Hope*.

Importance of This Research to the Field of ABE/Literacy

The field of ABE/Literacy has grown and changed but the complexity of the situation remains. As researchers learn more about new learning strategies and isolate issues that hamper achievement, they are looking for more ways to engage in the dialogue that brings students learning success. ABE/Literacy programs, already established in post secondary institutions, provide a natural conduit to move students to post secondary participation. Effective instructors are one of the main keys to improving access to further education. We are all challenged to work together for better outcomes for students who have the courage to attempt to return to learning.

As I write this, the ABE Department at Capilano University is undergoing major changes. (When I began this project Capilano was a college and now it is a university, having changed its status in 2009.) As a department they are looking for affirmations of their work and exploring ways to create a positive learning environment for students. The Department is feeling a lot of pressure to find support for what they already do well and looking for ways to improve their practice. The community programs are involved in constant evaluation of both their students and programs to ensure continued funding. These practitioners are always looking for the input from students to support the work they do and the changes they propose to funders.

This study brings the voices of the adult ABE/literacy students to the table as policies are being examined and teaching practices are being evaluated.

Methodology

I designed interview questions (Appendix B) fashioned on the series of questions we used when interviewing ABE/Literacy instructors for the *Hardwired for Hope* project (Battell *et al*, 2004). Participants signed a release form (Appendix C) which outlined the project and asked for their participation and consent. Their names have been kept confidential. I applied and gained permission from the Capilano Ethics Committee to conduct the interviews.

My advisory committee (Appendix D) was made up of five members, four of whom participated in *Hardwired for Hope*. Of the five, two are faculty in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Community Development and Outreach (CDO) Departments at Capilano University. I communicated with them by e-mail and phone since they were in different locations and it was not practical for us to meet in person. They have been most helpful to respond to my questions about process and about small changes to the original plan for the project, although they were not directly involved in the interviewing and the summary creation.

The Participants

I talked to many Capilano College employees and students in ABE and community programs about my work and invited participants to talk about their ABE/Literacy experience. Some instructors helped by talking to students about my project and asking if they were willing to participate in the interviews. Squamish instructors in particular arranged for me to interview several students in both ABE and community programs. I was able to print a list of past students from the ABE database but it proved personally too challenging to phone them and attempt to make contact that way.

I decided I could work successfully with those who were curious about the research and with whom I had some acquaintance previously through my teaching or coordination or who were introduced through their instructors. I talked to potential interviewees about our research so far and how I was hoping to add to the knowledge base by asking students about their experiences. I stressed that I wanted people who felt they had something to say about the topic. Instructors want to improve their practice and it is valuable to have input from students in a detailed way.

I gave out the consent form which had a synopsis of the research so far, we talked on the phone to set up a time and place to interview and I gave them the questions to think about beforehand. I invited people to talk to me after some reflection about the topic of effective instruction. The cross section of students provided a range of responses since some had been highly successful in their educational pursuits after their early time in ABE/Literacy classes and others were still struggling with both learning issues and life problems.

I proceeded with the interviews as outlined in the proposal. Each interview took about an hour in my office at Capilano University in North Vancouver, or in the community, or in the student's workplace, or in a park, or anywhere we could arrange to meet that would work for uninterrupted interview time. I had some trouble with background noise in the outdoor locations but generally the recorder picked up the conversation adequately.

When I had interviewed 12 people I could begin to observe patterns in their responses. As well, the interviews and summary process were taking much more time than I had anticipated. My advisory committee approved cutting the number of interviews to a more manageable size and I continued to set up interviews. In the end I used quotes from a total of 20 people, eight of whom came from community literacy programs and twelve from ABE programs and beyond. Some were highly successful learners and others were making very slow progress for a variety of reasons. Generally, the literacy level learners are more likely to experience multiple barriers to learning while the people who are achieving success at the higher levels of ABE are able to cope with more formal demands of the traditional institutional setting. Wherever the interviewees appeared on that continuum of educational achievement, it was their interest in my project and their ability to reflect on their own observations of their learning that was what was so valuable.

Summarizing the Interviews

I tried to make the summaries of our conversations promptly because that helped me remember details more accurately. I tried to maintain the students' tone by using their words and turns of phrase as much as possible in their descriptions in the summary. I was frustrated sometimes when I had not asked to have some point clarified and had let the conversation just continue past a really interesting comment. Effective interviewing is something I have yet to master and I found I had to pay careful attention to listen actively enough. I e-mailed the draft summaries to interviewees and asked for changes, made the changes and sent them a final version, which was the one I used to establish the themes.

In the consent form I outlined that students would be anonymous in the report. Being able to speak without being identified appeared to relax people more and helped them think more freely and candidly. In writing this report I have identified the quotes I took from the summaries which are the exact words or paraphrase of the interviewees by giving a pseudonym for the student and the date of the interview, to comply with the permission agreements which they signed before we started.

In the summer of 2008, I had an accident and was not able to fully return to work until May of 2009. In the fall term of 2009, I decided to take the interviews in a slightly different direction to support the instructors of the two main departments where I was working. The Advisory Committee agreed with this proposed change. I interviewed three individual students from community-based English language programs with the focus on questions two, three and four from the interview questions. These involved describing individual ways of learning and effective teachers in the past and present. I also talked to a family literacy group in the community of Squamish using the same three main questions to stimulate conversation. I polled two groups of 15 to 18 ABE English students who were participating in a paced class as they neared the end of their first semester. The two groups commented on their response to working in a paced environment and how that matched their learning. They also made some thoughtful suggestions about improving ABE programs since a number of the students were also involved in taking other ABE classes. The results from the two larger groups of ABE English students made me realize how much easier it is for people to talk openly in an individual interview. They wrote comments and we talked informally as they did the written questions, but the results of the individual interviews provided much richer data.

The two stages of the sets of interviews yielded some different results. The greatest difference was between native English speakers and immigrants who have an ESL background. I have summarized the themes from their interviews separately. Some themes emerged that are valuable to traditional ABE/Literacy programs because of the differences in responses to the same interview questions and the insights gained, as we begin to see more second language students entering ABE/Literacy programs.

Framing the Data

The interview questions provided an organizational framework for the data. Some people responded in greater detail to one question or another. However, through the sequence of questions their particular stories emerged. Again, the questions provided the themes by suggesting topics mentioned by students. I highlighted these in the interview summaries and then grouped them under headings and categories.

I read relevant research as I worked through this project and it was exciting to keep abreast of the latest information on good teaching practices for learners. A bibliography is provided at the end of this report, in which I have listed the sources that support some of the findings of the interviews. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list but may be helpful to those who are interested in reading further.

What the Students Said

There were a total of six main questions originally, with sub-points under each one to possibly develop in the interview. It became clear that four of the six questions were the key ones and I ended up not using the two questions about adult learning and situational learning. I have used the four main questions, with expanded themes for each one, as a framework for my discussion of the findings: How did you end up in ABE? Can you describe yourself as a learner? Do you remember good teachers in your past? If you were designing an ABE program what would you do to make it work for adult students?

How did you end up in ABE?

ABE isn't known by the public... particularly by those who haven't finished school as a means to graduate. Also, most people don't realize that the cost to take ABE classes is so minimal that anyone can afford to complete school (Nancy, May 2008).

Most students ended up in ABE while they were planning to be somewhere else. It seemed to be a means to an end. Sometimes people didn't even know the ABE program option existed while they were out in the larger world of work or dependence on social assistance or unemployment benefits. "My son was born in 1986 and I was living on welfare. There were things I wanted to buy him and I couldn't. I didn't want to live like this anymore and I needed an education to get a good job" (Lynn, May 2008). For some it was after an injury which left them unable to do the work that they had been doing and not qualified enough to get another course/job etc. One student described his secure job at

the post office where “employees were not treated well and after a back injury, I became fed up with the work and the thought of still being there when I was forty” (Dick, April 2008). For others, life took a turn and they decided to make a change. “Last August I came to the college to ask about a GED test date and I ended up coming back to school instead” (Nancy, May 2008). One student came to ABE English after a serious mental illness because, “it was good to have the chance to get my brain working in a different way and to stop obsessing over my illness” (Sam, June 2008).

Sometimes settling in this country took some time and when someone felt more settled and secure, it was time to think about doing the upgrading. For others it was about having children old enough to be responsible for themselves and freeing up the main caregiver enough for time to study. “When Emma was 8, I went to school fulltime to get the sciences I needed” (Carol, May 2008). Some wanted to help their families by studying. “I think my sons passed grade 11 math because of the help I was able to give them after taking ABE math” (Pam, May 2008).

In a number of cases students ended up in ABE having stumbled upon it. Students consider ABE a “well kept secret.” They talked about their plans and then described how they chose or were directed to take ABE first to get the skills and confidence they needed to carry on with those plans. However, sometimes they failed first and then discovered the “second chance” of an ABE environment through friends or family members or counselors or advisors.

Can you describe yourself as a learner?

“My learning style is like many Aboriginal people; I like to observe first” (Dick, April 2008).

Everyone interviewed was able to talk about their learning in a clear, articulate way. They had insights into what made them successful and what hampered their learning.

The Successes

Some people were very confident about their ability to learn, particularly when it was coupled with motivation and opportunity. “I knew that I knew how to learn so I knew I would be successful at school.... I have always been self taught. I can do lots of practical things” (Dick, April. 2008).

Some had developed learning strategies to survive as adult students with a variety of responsibilities and commitments.

I worked out the system...I just charged through and even though things in the textbook are interesting and there is a temptation to delve into details, I learned to just figure out what I had to do and get on with it and not go beyond the level of detail required. I had to learn to manage my learning so that I made progress. I must not dally. I am going to streamline it (Carol, May 2008).

For others it was about facing fears. One student spoke of his post secondary English class:

I was scared to death, but I kept passing and I knew by the end of the first month I was going to be okay. It was about overcoming fear because this is what I loved to do. I would have had a hard time had I not been in ABE before” (Eric, April 2008).

For a number of people, reading was important for their quality of life. They reported reading for information and pleasure and were able to be self taught or learn informally in the years when they had stayed away from schools. Math, on the other hand, did not generate the same level of confident response. Few said they liked math or felt confident about their mathematical ability. Most of the responses were like the one summed up by one student: “I love to read but I hate math” (Eric, April 2008).

Several people described the importance of their relationship with the teacher as a critical element of their ability to learn effectively. “I have been through school and I hated it...teachers had one way of doing things and that was it” (Terri, November 2009). Another person outlined what a difference it makes for her to have a teacher who is relaxed in class:

I learn better when someone is friendly, someone you don't think of as a teacher...the more comfortable you are the more you want to learn and to come to school every day... If you are not comfortable you are not going to learn and you are not going to go (Laura, November 2009).

One student described how her learning improved as she became a teenager and learned to negotiate the system:

I knew I needed extra help, but I didn't know how to get it until I got high school and had a voice. When I hit thirteen or fourteen, I became very verbal and that was important. When people become adults they know these things (Jane, November 2009).

The Challenges

Some people referred to themselves as not having flourished in their early schooling because of undiagnosed learning issues. This is how they are able to explain the mysteries and frustrations of their memories of low early school achievement. Learning disabilities have become more widely recognized and diagnosed in recent years. However, when the interviewees were first in school their learning differences may well have been misunderstood or overlooked by teachers. One student described her early years at school:

I think I had learning issues that weren't picked up at a young age. I need things mapped out for me and straightforward instructions. I am easily confused if I get too much information at one time. I remember being in geography class and not understanding how the kids all knew what colours to use on their maps when I didn't (Marie, November 2007).

Diagnosing learning disabilities in the adult population is usually more difficult than in children. However, it seems really important to acknowledge the way people's attitudes toward learning is altered by their level of success in early schooling. Research into

brain-based learning may, in the future, help teachers improve their practice with early intervention with ways to reach students who learn differently (Mitchell, 2010).

Learning as an older adult requires self awareness and some patience. Some people described that transition:

- My memory is not what it used to be and I have to do a lot of reviewing for each math test and exam (Lynn, May 2008).
- I do a lot of things to help develop my brain and try to improve my memory (Pam, May 2008).
- Now that I am older I find that I don't retain things as easily (Paul, June 2008).
- I need to take notes, answer questions while I read...I need to be more active in my learning (Harry, June 2008).

There was also reference to balancing learning with life and some of the choices people made:

I took some time off because I was getting to the point that some of my personal life was getting in the way of my studies. Whatever I was learning I was studying but nothing was staying in my head and nothing was coming out. I started to know how it feels to be a computer that's frozen...no matter how hard you try it won't work. In order to make that room to learn you lose some of your long-term memories (Paul, June 2009).

Illness and medication can make a huge difference to how people process learning challenges. "At first I took only one English class so I could get to sit through the class to try to get my mind off what I obsess over and it was really good to get my brain working in a different way" (Sam, June 2008). Sam went on to say:

I take medication to be able to sleep and it knocks me out for 10 to 12 hours every night and I can't get along with less. I am working the doctor to take less medication but he says if I take less the balance may be thrown off and the symptoms may come back. I still deal with the symptoms but they are not as severe (Sam, June 2008).

For students who deal with mental or physical health issues, their path to recovery may involve trying to get back to learning a number of times in a number of different ways. The opportunity to have a flexible, welcoming learning situation is very important to their being the best they can be and working toward goals, even if it is slow going.

Some people talked about the ways that their early life had presented roadblocks to learning. They could now see, looking back on their youth, that social and emotional issues played a large part in their ability to succeed at school. "When I was leaving school at 17 I thought only about survival, but by the time I reached 29 I was much more interested in learning and valued the experience" (Dick, April 2008).

On the other hand, sometimes people gave up an education path and changed their course because it was just too much work. That choice is also a way that students learn to alter their priorities and to put their lives into perspective and establish achievable goals.

Do you remember good teachers in your past?

From the interviews there seems to be a strong positive relationship between an effective teacher and building of confidence in learning. The attachment to that memory is long lasting and the emotional aspects stay with people. “I still remember details of that classroom because my teacher was amazing” (Terri, November 2009). The damaging effects of negative experiences are also lasting. Interviewees reported strong negative feelings about being embarrassed, angered or frustrated or being shamed or left out during their early years at school. “My grade 8 teacher made me feel stupid and I hated him for that” (Eric , April 2008). Another student commented on his early years in school: “I was told at a very young age that I wouldn’t make much of myself so I said ‘screw you’ and have succeeded at everything I did” (Dick, April 2008). While students gave their attention to the details of effective teachers of their past they often had to remind themselves of the unhappy memories at the same time. It is as if the positive memories conjured up the negative simultaneously.

Patience

“I had some bad memories of teachers who had no patience” (Jane, Nov.2009).

Almost everyone named patience as the overriding characteristic they valued in a good teacher. According to a compilation of dictionary definitions, patience is a quality that allows a person to stay calm and maintain interest, not get annoyed or upset, be persistent, be tolerant, stay with the learner when things are not going as well as expected and to persevere when faced with difficulties. Clearly people praised the ABE experience. “We are lucky to have such patient teachers because it takes a lot of courage to come back to school” (Pam, May 2008).

More than one student mentioned the powerful memory of the instructor sitting beside him and talking him gently through the learning situation while they worked side by side. “She just sat down beside me and we went through the math and for me everything she explained to me I learned” (Eric, April 2008). The side-by-side aspect of teaching was remembered by students as an effective strategy that promoted concentration and retention.

One student talked about how she has honed her skills of patience since she started helping people during her childhood. After working with two fetal alcohol students in a kindergarten, she described how her positive attitude, tone of voice and really careful listening means she is “making headway” (Lynn, May 2009) with them. The staff compliments her on how well things are going.

Patience appears to be an almost spiritual quality balanced against our modern education world of quick fixes, condensed courses, just-in-time learning, budget cuts, accelerated programs, etc. Is it a reaction to this fast pacing that made all of these students talk about how they valued patience in their teachers? Do they want patience in all areas of education, or mostly for the initial return to learning? Judging from interviews with students who started in ABE but have been successful in post secondary, it would seem that ABE is like an incubation time for some students. They come back to school remembering negative past experiences when teachers didn’t take time with them, or

weren't thoughtful and careful enough. If instructors welcome students into ABE classes and don't show what they describe as patience, those students who are so vulnerable will be more apt to disappear once again, voting with their feet and registering another failure. As one student said, "People who had trouble in high school, quit for a reason" (Harry, June 2008).

Beyond Patience

She explains the math over and over again and she never complains. She talks me through a question and starts at the place where I start to go wrong. I appreciate her going right to the place where my problems start (Don, May 2008).

On the other hand if ABE instructors make students feel as if there is enough time available for them to establish themselves and grow with their learning, those students are more likely to move beyond thinking they need simply patience in their instructors in order to succeed. They may rename that quality in their teachers and come to understand that the umbrella term of patience hides a number of complex intentional teaching skills. Below the calm accepting exterior the students see at first, effective ABE/Literacy instructors are continually strategizing ways to move students along, evaluating understanding, challenging thought patterns and procedures, checking for indications of learning difficulties, planning the next steps and a host of other minute observations many students fail to notice. The beginning of noticing these details of teaching is an indication that the student is relaxing into the learning and developing more confidence, the key to student success.

In the interviews some students were able to articulate skills they saw in their ABE/Literacy instructors. They had enough insight to detect the intentional nature of the informal, low key classroom environment. "The ABE instructors are really outstanding because they need to have the skills to go around the room and switch thought patterns and use different skills with each individual student and they can do it so fast" (Don, May 2008).

The same student referred to his ABE instructor in science who responds to a question with a countering question. "She is doing that to challenge me to think and to get me to explore my own possible answers. She asks just as if she doesn't know the answer immediately herself" (Don, May 2008).

Gentle humour is another way that ABE/Literacy instructors help students move along. One student described an instructor joking with her. "She will say she will be back in a minute to answer my question and then I figure it out myself and that is what she wanted all along" (Pam, May 2008).

Another former ABE student described how the instructors gave easy assignments first to encourage students:

Then after the baby steps it got gradually more difficult. It was important to have teachers who gave me goals, encouraged me to move on to greater opportunities and not stop short of my potential. I ended up getting the academic achievement award that year. If I had gone straight to university, I don't think I would have done as well (Dick, April 2008).

When students feel welcome they will be more likely to develop a strong positive emotional tie to their instructors and to the learning. The whole purpose is to build confidence in learning. The first encounters with returning to learning are very important so the early literacy instructors and support staff at an institution need to be very skilled and flexible to keep those vulnerable learners attached to the learning situation. In *After Her Brain Broke* (2010), Susan Inman gives an account of her daughter returning to learning as she recovered from years battling a mental disorder. The drop-in learning centre and self-paced GED course at Vancouver Community College was where she spent four years “with a lot of support from patient teachers recovering her ability to learn” (p.153). Such miraculous changes often take time, skill, and support to have a positive outcome.

A Passion for the Learning, a Passion for Students

I remember details from my grade two class because my teacher was amazing. He was the first one who read a novel to us, *Witches* by Roal Dahl. He was the one who was responsible for my love of reading because he transformed that classroom into the place it was. Now I have just read that book to my son in grade one and he just loved it too (Laura, November 2009).

When former ABE/Literacy students described ideal instructors they wanted people who “care about the students” and who “were not just there for the paycheque.” One student described her ABE instructor as someone who “obviously enjoys her job” (Pam, May2008). They had no time for indifferent, “burned out” teachers who lacked interest in the students. Their teachers played a very important role in their memories of learning. Students talked about teachers who were content experts with a certain respect and deference. However, it wasn't that teachers needed to be subject experts; it was more important that they be able to read the needs of their students and to adjust the teaching so that everyone felt they had an equal chance at learning. Good teachers cared enough about their students to make the learning environment work for everyone, not just the mainstream students. Teachers who can inspire with their ability to communicate with students created clear cherished memories.

Many students spoke of the emotional climate in a classroom and of the effect that had on learning for them. Some talked of the happy memories associated with relaxing fun and humour in the past. “He was so funny and every day we laughed. It made learning so easy” (Terri, November 2009).

An effective teacher makes a huge difference. I see it with my kids. They remember and talk about their good teachers for a long time afterwards. When

they have a poor or mediocre teacher though, it really gets them down. Boredom sets in, especially for boys, and it is harder for them to enjoy school (Pam, May 2008).

Teachers in the past who were strict or who had high expectations were mostly admired and supported even if their demands meant that people had to work harder than usual or sometimes failed a course. There was a kind of respect for knowledgeable, skilled teachers that ran as an undercurrent in the interviews. One student commented that he understood the position of harsh teachers because he tended to be “a lazy student and put things off to the end and ask for extensions. I know that if you give students an inch they will try to take a mile, always trying to push for more” (Harry, June 2008). For many students, a strict teacher seemed to represent a caring structured learning environment where high quality learning could take place. One person observed that a disorganized teacher was a real problem for some students because they get frustrated when they can’t learn in an orderly way and that “travels through the class” (Harry, June 2008). One student remembered the science instructors who were “harsh but compassionate. They were clear that you had to do this work and I thought they were really good at what they did” (Carol, May 2008). When students referred to good teachers, they wanted them to be “fair” and “consistent” and “respectful,” not to “single people out” and never “betray their trust.”

One student spoke of her experience of teachers losing their passion as they near retirement so that “it wrecks it for everybody” (Laura, November 2009). Some people burn out in teaching. Another commented that when teachers have no interest in what they are doing they should not be in the job any longer.

Learners in Charge of Learning

All the teachers in ABE were good because my motivation was up and I was rekindled with my interest in learning (Paul, June 2008).

A number of the students interviewed held beliefs about their own learning and about the environment in which they did their best work. The instructors were part of that environment, but the students also were clear that the more they understood about their own learning the more they could negotiate their success. They commented on changes in themselves that brought them success in learning. One student talked about her feelings of vulnerability:

I always feel confident when I am speaking if I feel that I am in a place where I am comfortable and feel I am being treated fairly. I would never be able to say any of this if I felt uncomfortable. It is okay to not get something if I feel comfortable (Jane, November 2009).

Another interviewee talked about two earlier unsuccessful attempts to go back to school when she wasn’t ready. She still had all the “embarrassed feelings” about having failed. “It left a nasty negative mark. It was better to quit than to fail” (Marie, November 2007).

One student said she had learned to read the system in doing ABE science. “I had to learn to manage my learning so that I made progress” (Carol, May 2008). For many students it was about adjusting standards down from highly competitive to a realistic level which took some coaching from instructors. “I finally decided that passing was 60% and everything above that is just fine. I still like to get 90% though” (Nancy, May 2008).

As people reflected on their ABE experience, they commented on the importance of laying the foundation for higher learning and of gaining confidence in themselves as learners during their time in ABE. At first, the role of the instructor is critical. As learners become increasingly confident they are more willing to negotiate their learning environment and make decisions that work for them. The instructor becomes more of a content expert and a facilitator. Students come to understand that success in post secondary is not so much about the individual instructor, but about negotiation, hard work and motivation to succeed.

They also made some more informed decisions about their future plans. As one student commented, “I was going to take more sciences and math, but I decided not to continue because it was like starting all over again and it was going to be a lot more work” (Harry, June 2008). Others reflected that they would not likely have been successful if they had gone straight to post secondary without ABE. They appreciated both the specific skills and confidence building provided by the ABE environment.

For some, returning to learning was all about overcoming fear. One student described coming to ABE with a burning question, “Would these teachers look down on me, would they make me feel stupid because I am 40 and I still don’t know this stuff?” (Eric, April 2008). Nobody did and he persisted, but he was very vigilant at the beginning. The same student carried on to do post secondary English and was struck by his classmates’ lack of research skills:

I saw how many of those students didn’t know how to write an introduction and thesis. I told the other students that they jammed that down my throat on the other side of the college (ABE) and I had no idea how important that was at the time but I learned it, thank God! These students were grade 12 graduates and I thought, “What school did you go to?” (Eric, April 2008).

Some of the people interviewed talked of overcoming their personal motivation issues. “I got discouraged, burned out doing math and had to take a term off. Then, I said I **really** wanted this and I came back” (Eric, April 2008). One of the opportunities ABE/Literacy programs offer is to give students a chance to return to learning. This allows people to pace themselves in ways that overcome many different kinds of learning styles and barriers.

Another student described his experience with the deadlines in the Aboriginal Tourism Program:

They gave us extensions so we were able to finish but we had to ask for it. The older half of the class had kids and responsibilities and we didn’t have the kind of time to use time management skills. If I go back to the college, I will do it at a slower pace to give me the results I want (Paul, May 2008).

One single mother described the focus of her late night studying in her early ABE and post secondary courses:

I had no experience with the content but ...I would get into “the zone” and then you develop techniques that work for you like making notes and then making notes from the notes and making glossaries. Science has so much material and you just have to master it (Carol, May 2008).

Readiness to learn also means appreciating the amount of work involved and the commitment to take it seriously even though it will take time and effort. One student recalled that he came to ABE just wanting to get his grade 12, but now as he looks back on that experience he marvels that he now has so many skills he didn't know he needed. Some young adult students in ABE programs are supported by parents who tolerate and reward a lazy attitude to learning and educational accomplishments. As one student reported, “Those parents are keeping their kids from growing up and the teachers can't do a thing about it” (Eric, April 2008).

Some students talked in a very mature way about their reasons for choosing to set their pace in learning. They understood their particular needs and were grateful to be able to negotiate a pace that worked for them. Sometimes it was the balancing act of families, jobs, cultural commitments, or physical or mental limitations. The ABE journey for them was one of growing stronger while taking the time they needed with patient, caring instructors. It was not about speed. They were clearly in charge of their learning and setting their own goals.

One student thought of himself as the consumer of ABE learning, saying that he shopped around for the best instructor match. “That is what I love about this ABE program. You can move around and find the best teacher for yourself” (Eric, April 2008). This is exactly what students do in post secondary courses.

Effective ABE instructors pay close attention to the needs of confident learners and they should. These learners can't afford to be ignored or bored or discouraged as a result of poor teaching when they are beginning a learning journey. Although it is sometimes difficult for students to be assertive, they should be encouraged to ask for the quality teaching they need to ensure they are able to learn effectively.

Role of Family of Origin

“Stupid” is a word I never use in my vocabulary and I never let my children use. If there were kids visiting I would stop them if they used it and tell them that we didn't use that word in our household. For me, growing up I spent many years feeling stupid so I just took that word out of my vocabulary permanently. It is so disrespectful (Lily, November 2009).

Most people made some reference to their families when they talked about early school experiences. It was hard to separate those early school years from family ties, but students generally skimmed over their difficult past, reluctant to expose their history. In a

few cases they requested changes to the draft interview summaries to neutralize negative references to their families that they had been prepared to say but not to see written in the draft summaries. Some people described the limited educational opportunities of their parents to explain that they had done the best they could when they encountered the school system on behalf of their children. Some students reported the stigma of shame they operated under in families whose expectations were different from the way things had turned out. For some it was the culture of the family as students remember it from their early years. There was no culture of valuing and promoting education within families where “work was encouraged and money was encouraged but not school” (Marie, November 2007). One student described his family having “all quit school as early as they could” (Eric, April 2008). Other comments were about the family role in building confidence in children:

- I was never encouraged to carry on or given direction in that way. Even though I love biology that door was closed to me at about the second year of high school. (Carol, May 2008).
- I hadn’t been nurtured to believe I could learn.(Marie, November 2007).

Mostly students interviewed were committed to raising their own children differently to avoid the mistakes they perceived in the past and make sure their own children had a better chance for success.

Role of Schools and Community

When students talked about their early school time, they were more critical of a system that neglected to support their learning needs, to identify social issues as they arose, and to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of learning needs, all from professionals who were paid to teach effectively and to support children and their families.

Students talked about the lack of options in the earlier school years. School systems that were unable to provide the supports needed in a time of need created lasting negative memories:

- I was put into the special class supposedly for more assistance when I was in grade 6. I didn’t know why I was moved but because it was called the dummy class it wasn’t the place where I wanted to be for my learning. I had been learning fine and nobody asked what was going on at home. If the school didn’t ask they didn’t have to deal with it (Dick, April 2008).
- It was either you got it or you didn’t and there was no area in between. You were either in the regular class or in special education. And nobody wanted to be in special ed. It was the dummy class (Marie, November 2007).
- The teachers had one way of doing things and that was it. Everybody learns differently. It is hard for a lot of people but they just push it through (Lynn, May 2008).
- Sometimes in the school system, the principal will support the teachers and not the students, so if a student complains about teacher behavior, nothing happens. They stand up for each other. It is hard for a parent to complain too. At the

secondary school PAC meetings parents are intimidated and don't easily come to attend (Lily, November 2009).

Another student criticized the school system for "the complete waste" of counseling him into work experience program at a gas station in grades 11 and 12. "I honestly believe that putting someone into a work experience program you take away from the academic work you should be doing" (Sam, June 2008).

Some people ponder the role of the larger community in not providing support when troubled youth have left the formal school system prematurely:

There were huge areas where interventions could have really made a difference for me. I got in trouble with the law and ended up in family court and foster homes and spent some time in juvenile detention. I don't remember any therapies or help or anyone taking an interest in my learning as a way to get my life back on track (Marie, November 2007).

In the workforce, the same lack of support sometimes dogged students who needed more skills to carry on with their work. In another interview a student described her work situation and her feelings of inadequacy. "Sometimes I find that people who have been to university frown on people who have not...but they weren't applying themselves even though they had had opportunities that were not available to me" (Nancy, May 2008).

If You Were Designing an ABE Program...

When asked to suggest changes that would improve ABE programs, students gave a range of responses. Everyone thought ABE was a good option for adults returning to learning, the instructors were great and some thought there was really nothing to change about it. They like the atmosphere of ABE in a college setting instead of a school because of the negative associations with the past. Tuition free status was a positive feature to give people a second chance to upgrade for post secondary. There were other very thoughtful observations.

Many had comments on teacher-paced classes as opposed to self-paced programs. Some were clear that a paced ABE program gives students a better preparation for post secondary courses, provides the structure that students need, especially for those who cannot impose their own structure and goals. As well, a paced environment motivates people because of the power of the deadlines and the group dynamic. People described the deadlines imposed by normal post secondary courses that leave no option but to get through it and they liked that format because of the surge of motivation it gave them and the feeling of accomplishment at the end of term. They thought the same pacing would help ABE students make the transition to post secondary.

On the other hand there were a number of comments regarding readiness for learning that suggested the need for a self-paced environment at least for some. One person said she had twice tried unsuccessfully to get back into school. On one occasion, even though she had funding in place and daycare provided, when she arrived ten minutes late on the first day, she couldn't go into the class because she was too embarrassed. Fragile learners need a great deal of support at first.

The interviews also brought to light the importance of effective orientation and supported placement. At first students are very vulnerable. As one student put it, “people without much voice, vote with their feet. It is a passive vote of displeasure” (Jane, November 2009). Suggestions included a few tasks for instructors: talking to students about their learning styles to match them with teachers, looking for the passion in students’ determination to return to school, and doing orientation tours around the campus. All of these activities would help the instructors to get to know students at the beginning of the term.

Students also suggested motivational speakers to encourage students to stay in school or do the best they can. One student thought signing up for something you really want to learn about would help you tolerate the other subjects. Students also liked the idea of instructors facilitating ways to help the new students get to know each other a bit so they have a feeling of “cooperation and friendliness among themselves” (Don, May 2008).

All of these suggestions would help with student retention and success, but the end goal of course is to have students complete and move on to reach their goals. As one student said in her interview, “ABE culture is a lovely place to hang out but they have to move on” (Carol, May 2008).

Observations of Interviewees from Other Cultures

I interviewed four ESL students who participated in either community literacy programs or the Career Access Centre which is an English language and life skills program at the North Vancouver campus of Capilano University. As well, I conducted a group interview with the family literacy program, where approximately half of the students were new immigrants to Canada. When asked if they remembered effective teachers in their past, they all thought their past teachers were fine. They had no recollection of any teacher who left them with negative memories. Some told me they didn’t remember any of their early teachers. Others talked about being in classes of forty kids, where “either you did it yourself or you go to a private institute or you get a tutor after school” (Jan, October 2009). She went on to say that the teachers were there to teach their subject and they “didn’t pay attention to individual students” (Jan, October 2009).

Another student said:

Some of the teachers I liked better than others but either way if the teacher said something we did it without questioning it. If the teacher phones up the parents and says the kids are not obedient then the parents are upset with the kids” (Fern, November 2009).

When I asked this group of students what makes a good teacher, they responded by saying that a good teacher was someone who could be strict and would lecture the class and would correct mistakes and not let things go in order to be kind to the students. As well they were critical of a teacher who could not control the class. “If students ignore the teacher there is not enough respect for teachers” (Fern, November 2009). One student thought that a good teacher would be always fair and watch out for the shy ones who don’t raise their hands but need some way to share in the class (Erica, October 2009). Another student thought a good teacher needed “to have a mission to change the students” (Erica, October 2009).

When asked about the kind of programs they would choose, they were generally interested in courses that led directly to employment or skill development to help them participate in Canadian culture. It was important to have courses subsidized or free. One student explained this well:

When new immigrants pay a lot of money to get to Canada and they have poor jobs or no jobs they don't want to pay to only learn English. More English may or may not improve their chances of getting a better job. On the other hand if they take some course that can get them a good job and the course is affordable for them I think they would be glad to take it. Their kids learn faster and the parents put up with their lives so their children can learn English and have a better life (Jan, October 2009).

This group of students seemed to see the role of teachers through quite a different lens. They were willing to make suggestions about the choice of texts, or the style of instruction but they were reluctant to criticize their previous teachers in the same way that Canadian-born students interviewed were willing and able to do with ease.

What is it about math?

Through the interviews there were many references to math and almost all of them were negative. A few people said they were good at math and they liked it. However the vast majority of students singled out math as the thing they didn't enjoy, didn't do well, didn't like the teacher, didn't think it was useful, didn't care about it, didn't know why it was so important, etc. This overwhelming response might suggest a larger systemic problem with the way math is taught in the schools to create such a strong emotional response from the people interviewed. Since math is required for many post secondary programs, this represents an additional barrier for ABE/Literacy students trying to move into mainstream programs. Students come to ABE programs caught in the bind of needing a certain level of math to get to their career goals and convinced that they can't do math. Recently, the work of Kate Nonesuch (2006) in developing math teaching strategies for Literacy/ABE students is beginning to change the approach to the teaching of math for adults.

One student explained that he had a natural aptitude for English but not for math. He needed a skilled and patient instructor for math because he "had no pieces of the learning puzzle to start with." With English he didn't need as much help because he could "go home and figure it out" (Eric, April 2008).

Conclusion

When I started this project three years ago I spoke at a conference about my intended interviews and I was surprised and affirmed to have a room full of people who were very interested in this work. I wish I could talk to them again because I have learned so much.

What stands out for me is the way the interviewees all talked of their ongoing vulnerability around learning. Effective instructors need to continue to support and encourage even when students appear to have gained confidence. With every transition, their fragile origins come back. One highly successful student told me that after he went

to the graduation ceremony to receive his Dogwood diploma, he finally permanently silenced that voice in the back of his head that had been telling him for years he was stupid.

These interviews confirmed the generous nature of learners. They wanted to be heard and acknowledged so that conditions might change for others and that instructors would learn from them. They seem to know that some instructors are better than others but the best way to talk about it for them was to talk about their personal learning successes.

In *Hard Wired for Hope* (Battell *et al*, 2004) the emerging themes were detailed, based on teaching philosophies and experience. These ABE student interviews represented the other side of the coin. They were more holistic, full of anecdotes, and raw with emotions. Surprisingly, the two fit together. Teaching in ABE/Literacy creates great opportunities to apply the best practices for effective results.

Recommendations for ABE Programs

1. Much of the teaching in ABE/Literacy programs is done by skilled, caring, trusted instructors. ABE/Literacy instructors are in the best position to design ABE programs; in order to do this, they require support from administration, including release time for course development, professional development, input into decisions about scheduling, etc.
2. Promoting effective practice requires instructors to commit to ongoing maintenance and upgrading of the learning environment. ABE/Literacy programs cannot rely on forceful student input and evaluation to drive change, because, unlike students in post secondary programs, ABE students do not make strong critical statements in the usual evaluation processes.
3. ABE /Literacy programs need to present learning options for students. Paced classes provide an effective way for many students to have the second chance at learning. However, those not yet ready for paced classes need to receive the support and one-on-one instruction they require to begin their learning journey.
4. ABE/Literacy programs need to look for more ways to give recognition to students in some public way. People interviewed always mentioned an award they had received during their time in ABE; it was a very affirming experience.
5. ABE/Literacy programs in post secondary institutions need to orient students at the beginning of their classes to services offered to students, and then encourage the use of those services. To ensure students are welcomed in all parts of the institution, ABE instructors may need to participate in helping frontline staff understand some of their particular student issues.
6. ABE/Literacy instructors need the support of their department in maintaining a team building environment to support their working pace. They are responding to a huge variety of non-traditional students, a large proportion of whom have learning difficulties, a history of school failure, and financial, social, psychological and other barriers to success.
7. Math needs the attention of instructors to explore ways to make it work better.

8. ABE/Literacy needs a marketing plan to promote programs and referrals within the institution. It could be a great choice for a great number of students who want to come to post secondary.

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Appendix A Excerpt from Application for Paid Educational Leave

Background

I have participated for four years, beginning in 2001, with a group of five practitioners and three research friends in a collaborative research project. We explored the concept of effective practice in ABE/Literacy teaching. We received funding to study and reflect on our own 100+ years of collective teaching experience and to compare this data with the research literature on teaching, learning and student success. We then selected from the field of ABE/Literacy in BC, 17 other long-time practitioners to interview in order to explore their views on what makes instructors successful with this particular group of ABE learners. Our purpose was to go beyond the superficial question and pursue the deeper question of success, to ask for verification, and to have interviews full of stories and details that illuminated their confirmation of how they know when things are working in their classrooms. The product of our research is entitled *Hardwired for Hope: Effective ABE/Literacy Instructors*. I have included a copy for the committee to examine.

Our original plan was to interview ABE/Literacy students as part of collecting another source of data to explore effectiveness in instruction. Since we were not fully funded, we decided to drop that part of the research at that time.

I want to continue with the same theme of exploring effective instruction in ABE/Literacy by interviewing learners.

Within the last year, my interest in pursuing this research has increased. While our original work has been well received, there is a renewed interest in the students who participate in ABE/Literacy programs. Last year Premier Gordon Campbell announced his desire to make BC the most literate jurisdiction in North America, the Literacy Now initiative is examining a multitude of literacy programs in all parts of the province, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Advanced Education are both interested in programming to serve the needs of the ABE/Literacy population and the crux of this current dialogue is focussed on the student population. ABE/Literacy learners have traditionally been “the poor cousins” of the adult student population. They have been labelled as the least likely to succeed because of their barriers to participation. This year though, they are the focus of attention and there is more interest in what it takes to make them successful. The job market and the post secondary system are both examining what it will take to improve participation rates of undereducated people who have been overlooked in the past.

My plan is to conduct interviews with students who have participated in ABE/Literacy programs to explore with them what they regard as effective instruction. I will transcribe the interviews and look for themes that will inform our practice in order to answer the questions of how we can create successful learning environments for ABE/Literacy students. I will focus my study on Capilano College ABE students and ex-students since I no longer have easy access to the original research group and the wider provincial pool of ABE learners. I have worked at Capilano since 1978, so I have a long history of working with students who attended and then went on to do other things. Through my association with the Faculty of Developmental Studies I hope to access student interviews in all of the locations where the

college runs ABE programs: Mount Currie, Skatin, Baptiste, Douglas/Tipella, Squamish, Sechelt, WISH, Carnegie, Hastings School, Strathcona Learning Centre, The Backstretch Program, and the North Vancouver campus. Sometimes students have returned to the ABE programs a number of times. I would try to interview those students to find out about their reasons for leaving and returning and to find out how the college served their needs over the years. It will be very valuable for us to examine our role as a college in promoting the education of community members and to examine what services need to be in place to support learners, so they can make the best use of the college programs. The product of the paid educational leave is to have a research paper to submit to the college community with the summary of the themes, which emerge from the interviews. I would plan to share the research with the ABE Dept and the Faculty of Developmental Studies, as well as the larger college community during Faculty PD days.

Appendix B Interview Questions

Introduction:

The interview would begin with a brief description of the project in general terms and some of the background. Then I would briefly describe the purpose of the research to help the interviewee start to think about the approach to this research and how their ideas will support the research.

The questions are like a guide to generate the story that may be unique to each person. The main numerically numbered questions are the ones I would want to have answered and the others are possible questions depending on what people decide to talk about and how much they reveal voluntarily. My experience with this from years of interviewing students is that they are usually most interested and capable of explaining their own educational history without a lot of prompting. It is their story and they know it well.

1. How did you end up in ABE?

- a. Can you describe your early years at school? What was your favourite part of school when you were a kid?
- b. Did you finish school?
- c. Why not?
- d. Did you make some subject choices that meant you needed to do different prerequisites?
- e. Were your grades too low for entry into a program you wanted?
- f. How did you decide to go back to school and then ABE?
- g. What were some of the influences that led you to quit school?

2. Can you describe yourself as a learner.

- a. How do you usually learn new things? Is learning easy for you or does it require a lot of effort?
- b. When you went to school originally as a kid, did you like going to school? What do you remember?
- c. Do you have a strength in learning?
- d. Are you a math or an English focused person?
- e. Is there something you are really good at? (school or otherwise)
- f. How do you know you are good at this thing?
- g. How did you learn to be good?
- h. Who taught you?
- i. Do you remember a technique they used to teach you?

3. Is it different to learn now that you are an adult? (Describe the generally accepted traits of adult learners: they learn for a purpose, they want to apply their learning to solve a problem in their lives, and they are busy so they have a number of commitments and demands on their time.)

- a. How is it different for you?
- b. What do you learn that is interesting and exciting?

- c. How do you learn it?
- d. What discourages you when you think about learning something new?
- e. How do you act/think when you are discouraged about learning something?

4. Do you remember good teachers in your past?

- a. When?
- b. Where?
- c. How did you know they were effective?
- d. Describe the characteristics of an effective instructor for your learning style?

5. Sometimes you learn better in some situations than others.

- a. Can you think of a situation that was a good learning place for you and one that didn't work as well?
- b. How did a teacher help you or make it worse?
- c. When was it really helpful to have a teacher?
- d. What did s/he do to make things work better?

6. If you were designing an ABE program what would you do to make it work for adult students?

- a. Think about the classroom situation.
- b. Think about the instructor.
- c. Think about the content of what you need to learn.

Appendix C Consent Form

Effective Learning in ABE:

What Do Former Students Think?

Background:

My name is Judy Rose. I have worked as an instructor in Adult Basic Education for 30 years. My current research has grown out of a collaborative research project which explored effective practice in ABE teaching. In that research, five long time instructors interviewed a number of other experienced instructors and worked to produce a large report in 2005, *Hardwired for Hope*. Since the funding was limited at that time, we dropped our original plan to interview students as a source of data.

Purpose of the Research Project:

In this part of the research I will continue with the original plan of the group research project. I will ask learners what they consider good teaching and how they know when things are working for them to learn successfully. Using in-depth hour-long interviews I will ask people to reflect on their past schooling, to think about their upgrading time and to talk about how effective instruction played a part in their success as an adult learner.

How the Research Will Be Conducted:

The Interviews:

I hope to do as many face to face interviews as possible, but some will be conducted on the telephone to accommodate people's schedules. I will record the interviews and take notes. I will summarize the interviews to share with the interviewees and ask for clarification and elaboration. Interviewees will add or delete from the summary and in the end the document produced will be used as data. The interviews and the summary data will be confidential.

Phase 2:

I will look in the data for what students say about their observations on their own learning and how they describe effective ways of teaching and enhancing their learning. I plan to pull together the themes that emerge from the interviews and highlight those in a paper that will fit in with the research in *Hard Wired for Hope* or will stand on its own as a document. We will not use your name in any of the material produced from the interviews.

Benefits of Being Involved

By participating in this research you will be contributing to a better understanding of the state of the ABE field. You will provide useful information that will help us design better programs and help us advocate for better conditions for learning in our colleges. Adults who are returning to learning need the best we can offer them in order for them to be successful.

Changing Your Mind and Withdrawing

Yes – you can withdraw without consequence and your information will not be used in the research project. To withdraw you must inform me and I will withdraw your interview information from the data. Contact: jrose@capcollege.bc.ca or phone (604)983-7573.

Keeping the Information Private

Your name and information will not be identified in the summary report. The only information shared will be in a general description of the group interviewed to document gender, age range and a sample of the nature of the work people are doing now.

If you sign this form, this is what you are consenting to

By signing this form, you are acknowledging the following things:

1. You have been informed of the purpose of the research.
2. You are aware of how the information will be used.
3. You are aware of the risks and the benefits of the research.
4. You are aware of who to contact for further information.
5. You are aware of your right to withdraw from the research and how to do so.

CONSENT FORM

Please complete the form below to give your permission to use the information from the project you will participate in:

I grant permission for the researcher to use the information from my interview **without using my name** to complete the purpose of the research.

Name (please print)

Signature

Date



My name is Judy Rose and I have worked at Capilano University for more than 30 years. I started teaching English, math and science at an upgrading program in Mount Currie in the Pemberton Valley, 150 km. north of Vancouver.

After I moved to North Vancouver I spent many years working with students who were coming back to school. As well, I have helped people in the community get started in the programs at Capilano. I have had many opportunities to learn from adults who are determined to be successful. Many of them have had complicated and difficult lives and so learning was no easy task. I have a huge amount of respect for students who risk so much to start learning journeys after they become adults.

I live in North Vancouver and I have two adult sons. One son is a student at Capilano in the Outdoor Recreation Management Program. He loves being outdoors and learning about how to have fun in the BC wilderness teaching other people to do the things that bring him joy.

My research is about teaching and learning with adults. I want to ask learners what they think about how they learn best. I have done research where we have asked instructors about how to be good teachers. Now I am interested in hearing and recording what students have to say. I hope you can help by talking about what is important for you when you are learning.

Judy

Appendix D Advisory Committee

Lorraine Argatoff, ABE Department English Instructor, Capilano University

Diana Twiss, Senior Director of Literacy Development, Literacy BC

Evelyn Battell, Literacy Instructor, retired

Betsy Alkenbrack, Community Development and Outreach Instructor, WISH and
Carnegie Learning Centre

Marina Niks