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THE ABE / GED CLASSROOM: THE CRUCIAL FIRST NIGHT

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It is a commonplace to observe that adult students who have made the decision--however waveringly--to return to the classroom to learn basic literacy skills or pursue the GED do so with a network of fears, frustrations, anxieties, expectations, and motivations that can both enhance and frustrate the educational process. The teacher, aware of this complex intermingling of frequently conflicting motives and feelings, should attempt to build on those motives which might enhance success, and mitigate those fears which tend to retard or even destroy it. This is especially true on the crucial first night.

Although the student has already made a major decision by showing up on the first night, it is, in many cases, a highly tentative one, subject to immediate reversal. This was graphically portrayed by Jesse in the TV movie The Pride of Jesse Hallem. Jesse takes little time in reversing his decision to attend an ABE night class, when he sees, immediately and with emotion, that he is being treated as an over-sized child. It is not wide of the mark to assert that the teacher whose students return for the second night has already achieved a noteworthy level of success. The teacher's first night objectives for the class should be primarily affective rather than cognitive--establishing some degree of rapport in a positive, adult-oriented ambience. Considering the potency of the barriers (institutional, situational, and especially dispositional, in Cross's terminology), the first night's challenge is a considerable one.

So the practitioner asks: "OK, if the first night is that important, what can I do to insure that there will be a second and a third?" The following suggestions will not insure the student's return, but they should encourage it. Here, then, is a sampling of first-night ideas:

1. Where possible, meet them at the door, shake hands, and try to learn their names. This initial contact on the first night could set the tone for the whole learning experience. It will also be, almost certainly, a radical

departure from their last school experience--one that will probably be welcomed. To a limited extent it individualizes the relationship and helps convey the notion that both instructor and student are adults.

2. If not at the door, memorize their names when they have taken their seats. This may sound difficult but it really is not; it is mostly a matter of registering the name and mentally repeating it as they tell you (or raise a hand as you call it). Our failure to register and repeat is the real reason we "forget" names; in reality, we did not learn them to begin with. The initial learning of names reinforces the personal, individualized approach and can reduce the anxiety about or even hostility toward the seemingly cold and impersonal institution which the teacher represents. Learning names the first night also facilitates matters for you--you do not have to fumble over names or call on someone by pointing. Of course, be sure to learn the name the student wants to be called; often a preferred nickname does not appear on an enrollment form, while other students may prefer to be called Mr., Miss, Mrs., or Ms. Finally, make the effort to call them by name frequently.

3. A particularly good icebreaker and probable anxiety-reducer is to allow the class some structured socializing time. Structure it by dividing them into groups of two or three and providing them with the objective of learning some things about each other, especially name, residence, occupation, and reason for coming. This last may be particularly helpful to the student who sees that his motivations--and fears--are not unique. A variation here, if the instructor feels it is appropriate, is to have students interact and then introduce each other. However, this could prove embarrassing to some students and potentially confusing. Some students, on the other hand, who might be somewhat embarrassed about introducing themselves may enjoy the "game" of introducing someone else. But whether you have them introduce themselves, each other, or you simply call their names, the structured socializing time helps alleviate the immediate anxiety of the first night, and it reinforces the distinctions between this adult learning environment and their previous schooling.

Be certain, of course, to introduce yourself, even if you don't have student introductions. Mention

some of your own interests and activities, and in general "humanize" yourself--i.e., indicate that you are not just a teacher. Smiles, cordiality, and a sense of genuineness are important here and throughout the course; but don't fake it. It is an axiom of ABF teachers that though their students might not be able to read well, they can read the attitudes of others toward them as well as anyone. Atmosphere is fundamentally important, and the instructor, more than any other single factor, determines that atmosphere.

4. Either during the introductions, or during a separate segment of time, you might wish to inquire of them what they hope to get out of their learning experience. Many ABE students will say they want their GED. Many GED-preparatory students will, of course, mention broader job opportunities or growth in their current job. Here the teacher's job is to be encouraging without being unrealistic. One might emphasize that on average, the high school graduate makes a substantially larger income than the non-high school graduate, but completion of a GED does not guarantee a higher income. Individual characteristics--such as motivation--as well as economic factors play critical roles in the job outlook.

5. A frequent dilemma for teachers as well as administrators is the need to assess student abilities on the one hand and the initial turn-off such testing produces on the other. The dilemma is real, but in general early testing should not be extensive, and ideally it should be avoided altogether on the first night (although it rarely is). The time invested the first night in laying the foundation for a good working relationship with your class is well spent, especially when one considers the high rate of attrition likely to result from an entire night or even two nights of testing. Such extensive testing reinforces the fears and negative attitudes so frequently associated with past schooling--precisely those fears and attitudes which the first night should attempt to mitigate.

6. If it is a GED class, an alternative to first night testing is to distribute a sheet of paper or some 4"X 6" cards, and ask them for their name, address job, or one or two other bits of basic information not requiring a sentence or narrative response. Then emphasize that if they wish to, they can tell you something about their interests or hobbies, family, reasons for

enrolling in the class, favorite TV shows, or other such information that should have high interest for them. Making the second part optional precludes forcing the weakest writers into an immediate and overt display of that weakness, while providing the instructor useful personal data (especially useful where individualized teaching and materials are possible) and, of course, giving the instructor a ballpark look at the student's capabilities in writing and reading. If more accurate placement testing is required, it should be reserved for a later night when anxieties have had a chance to diminish.

7. To the extent possible, avoid all the other vestiges of the adolescent school experience. If the classes must be held in a public school classroom, make whatever modifications are possible, such as seating, for instance. Malcolm Knowles discusses at some length the possible desk or table configurations which contribute to a warmer learning climate (but be sure to leave the room as you found it, thus maintaining good relations with the day teacher). Circular or semi-circular arrangements are good for full group activities, while small groups might utilize three or four desks grouped together and facing each other. Try not to be too insistent on such things as raising hands before speaking (especially if the class is small), addressing you formally (invite them to call you by your first name), or classroom "rules" in general.

8. Remembering that success is the best motivator, try to insure that they learn something useful the first night. This is not always easy with all of the atmosphere-setting, testing, and introducing which are also part of the first night. But if they can learn something useful--an upcoming event, a local news item, how to do some minor task, or some service available to them, perhaps even a word or interesting historical fact they did not previously know ("on this day in 1787..."), the likelihood of their returning is enhanced.

9. Be prepared for any logistical or informational questions which might arise--registration, questions about the GED test, where the bathrooms are, when the breaks will be, any changes of class or teacher, etc. Additionally, make it clear that you encourage ques-

tions at any time and be certain to ask for questions at the end of the class.

Of course there are no magic formulas, and tips such as these will not transform a poor teacher into a good one. But they could help a teacher at any level by making students more comfortable in what to them is a relatively alien environment. To the extent that the teacher does make students more comfortable on that crucial first night, a significant investment in the teacher's--and ultimately the student's--success has been made.

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