

# Assuring Success with Small Group Instruction in ABE

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Most ABE practitioners have worked with those enigmatic learners who appear to be able, but have great difficulty with reading comprehension and writing. These learners may be able to express themselves well verbally and have had some success in the workplace. They occasionally do well in math and have a real desire to learn, but are continually frustrated by struggles with reading and writing. Other characteristics of these learners are:

- They have difficulty remembering what they have read.
- They find basic words difficult to read.
- They do not do well when assigned independent practice in reading, and may drop out because of their aversion to it.
- They do not fare well in a larger group, and often report that the class moves too fast.

Identifying learners who fit this profile is not difficult; however, serving them appropriately and efficiently can be a challenge. These learners often make extraordinary gains in small groups where instruction is direct, multi-sensory and systematic, and where the instructor uses a wide range of reading material.

Research in reading instruction and special education has verified the value of instruction that is direct, multi-sensory, systematic and interactive. The Special Needs team at the Hubbs Center has developed a small group instructional course that utilizes these strategies with learners. Key factors for success with the group include the interactive process and careful, systematic recording of goals and gains. The overall goal for these groups is to provide direct instruction in word analysis, reading techniques, writing strategies and technology in order to raise the reading and writing level of the learner in an efficient, timely and verifiable manner.

This practice has been developed over the last ten years and excellent gains in reading and writing (even for learners who are learning disabled) have been documented. Staff members have become skilled in direct, multi-sensory and systematic instruction. Materials have been accumulated that are flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of reading interests. Finally, it has been noted that as learners participate in specialized instruction, they develop increased self-esteem as well as a support network of others with similar needs and struggles. These learners become more able to learn independently and to manage in large, mainstream groups.

The following steps demonstrate how the classes are established and conducted:

- 1) Learners identified by other instructors, outside agencies or themselves are given a Special Needs intake interview even if they are already enrolled in the ABE program.
- 2) During this interview, a staff member asks questions about the learner's reading and writing skills, often using interview prompts designed by the University of Kansas for this purpose. The answers identify the learner's skills in word analysis, comprehension and spelling, and the learner's perception of techniques that work best.
- 3) The Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement passage comprehension and word analysis tests are used because many aspects of the learner's reading skills can be observed from them. Any oral reading could be used to determine the learner's oral reading pace and the effect of misread words on comprehension, etc. A criterion-referenced spelling test is also used.
- 4) Based on information obtained, learners are placed in either Beginning Reading/Writing/Spelling, Intermediate Reading/Writing/Spelling or Advanced Reading/Writing/Spelling.
- 5) Results of the test are maintained in a separate Special Needs program folder that includes a checklist of skills needed and met.
- 6) Learners are scheduled to meet in groups of four to seven. Workable schedules are arranged to assure attendance! Learners are provided with folders for individualized review work and accomplished work; for example, if the class has worked on prefixes or endings rules, or commas or use of transitional words, review pages would be in the learner folders. The folders also contain a number of different instructor-made or program-made materials appropriate to learners' needs. These materials are maintained in the classroom so that the instructor can review them or add materials. Ideally, learners meet for an hour at least three times a week.

### Class Format

The class hour is divided into three segments that overlap and compliment each other.

#### **Segment One**

- Time is spent analyzing English spelling and syllabication. Learners see presentations of concepts they need to learn. Then they practice reading and writing words with these concepts as well as reviewing previously learned concepts. Example: In Intermediate Reading/Writing/Spelling, they may learn through direct instruction how to divide words into syllables, practice dividing and reading words and then write multi-syllabic words.

#### **Segment Two**

- This part of the class is devoted to writing. After instruction related to the learners' specific needs, sentences are dictated or learner-generated. Example: After learning how to place commas after introductory clauses, learners may edit written sentences, write dictated sentences and compose their own sentence that use the new concept.

For some learners, this portion of the class is centered on writing an essay or business letter. Again, each step is modeled and learned before proceeding to the next step. The instructor may model correct format for an inside address and have the class write one or edit one. The instructor may help learners work together to identify key words an essay question and have the learners work together to identify key words in several essay questions. Learners are encouraged to use the computer for their writing and are taught necessary skills such as keyboarding and spelling and grammar check, or are directed to program classes that will enable them to use the computer.

### **Segment Three**

- Direct instruction and practice are provided in pre-reading and reading comprehension strategies. Instructors model such pre-reading skills as accessing prior knowledge about a topic, designing questions related to the topic or scanning the first and last sentences in order to predict content.

Instructors use SQ3R, the 5 W questions and other appropriate techniques to help learners comprehend materials. Learners read aloud and discuss selections related to their interests. These selections come from a wide variety of materials including brochures from the doctor's office, job training materials, nonfiction books at various levels, GED prep or adult diploma materials, short stories, news articles, Internet pages, etc. If necessary, instructors revise printed materials to make them easier to read by enlarging print or downsizing specific vocabulary.

Throughout the class period, instructors insert reviews of previously learned material, engage in questioning and modeling, and build vocabulary and prior knowledge. Learners are encouraged to use the library and computer to locate interesting materials and are taught basic techniques for using each.

Finally, learners review their goals and progress periodically. Written samples are gathered and reviewed, and a post-test in reading and spelling is given. Classes are adjusted as new needs arise or gains are shown. While some may not consider grade levels for adult learners valid, grade-level gains on standardized tests for the past 13 years have averaged 1.5 to 2.5 years of gain within approximately a six-month period. Many learners have made dramatic gains of several grade levels that are also verified through TABE or CASAS equivalent scores.

While establishing this type of small class requires some effort and intense preparation by the instructor, the increased skills that are possible in reading, writing and spelling make the effort worthwhile. Learners come to ABE with goals and needs. Experience has shown the Special Needs program that these small groups that use direct, multi-sensory and systematic instruction help learners.