
Revising the Goal-Setting Portion of the GPLC Student Orientation

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Background

Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC) is a non-profit, adult-based literacy program offering instruction in basic literacy skills, ABE/GED, ESL, workplace literacy, and family literacy. An urban program, it serves the greater Pittsburgh area with one main office and eight neighborhood offices. Most students are served by volunteer tutors. Part of my job is to deliver a mandatory 1 ½-hour information session, which includes goal setting. Our program is goal driven; therefore, it is important for students to understand their goals, set realistic goals, and know the difference between long and short-term goals. To determine if the orientation session was effective and well received by new students, I enlisted the help of AmeriCorps members to call 15 randomly selected students who had attended previously an information session. This survey indicated that, while most students were pleased with the presentation, the majority did not understand how to set realistic goals nor the difference between long-term and short-term goals. The handouts were appreciated but not well utilized. The survey results caused a revamping, rethinking, and rewriting the entire presentation to result in better goal setting for students.

Planning

The purpose of my Pennsylvania Action Research Network (PAARN) project was to revise my presentation to concentrate on goal setting. I knew that I could not add more time to the presentation, so I would have to reorganize the materials and how I presented them. I decided to group some topics together and briefly mention others in order to save enough time to insert a 20-minute presentation on goal setting. I prepared new

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material to include in the weekly information sessions that started in January and used this new presentation until the end of March. My baseline was taken from the responses I got from the telephone interviews. Although 47% of the students felt that the handouts were useful, only 24% of those interviewed used the goal setting handouts. I wanted to increase to 50% the number of students who used these handouts to plan their goal setting choices.

Action and Data Collection

My intervention was to use different materials and to make the presentation as interactive as possible. I started the new section with a handout from the old presentation, where the student starts to think about his/her overall goals while in our program. I then began to talk about long and short-term goals. Using myself as an example, I discussed my long and short-term goals about dieting, then immediately asked the students what their goals were (not giving them much time to think). In the past students did not even speak at these sessions, so I was surprised when every person contributed. Students embraced the idea of sharing their goals with the other participants. I used this sharing session as another opportunity to address the issue of long-term versus short-term goals. As soon as I began the information sessions in January, I kept track of the weekly reactions in my journal and kept field notes after each session so as to remember the initial response to this new presentation. The final data came from a second telephone interview of randomly selected students who attended the revised information session.

Results

After the three-month trial period I again enlisted help of the AmeriCorps members to conduct another telephone interview with 37 information session attendees. They were asked only five questions, all pertaining to goals or goal setting. Of those answering the interview, 47% felt that the handouts were useful; 24% thought the handouts that pertained to goal setting were the most useful; 62% thought the session was not too long and did not think fewer handouts should be used; and 49% agreed that, once I defined a goal as "something that makes you feel good about yourself," it was easier for them to define their personal goal. To my surprise and great pleasure, 91% of those interviewed thought that the handouts were helpful in deciding what their goals actually were.