

The practice of Independent Learning in Adult Basic Education

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Introduction

In our workshop we did a simulation of a learning session in our ABE learning center in the way we try to apply independent learning. The workshop participants acted as learners. We introduced each part of the program briefly regarding function and particular goals for the ABE students.

Our students are Dutch adults and immigrants. The language skills of the immigrants are on level 2 on a national scale that ranks from 1-4.

The mathematics we teach is ranked on levels 1-3 on a scale from 1-6 in the Dutch adult education qualification system. There is also a distinction in the program between students regarding vocational and societal purposes.

The class session is spread over 4 parts:

- integrated mathematics activity - 30 minutes
- mental math - 15 minutes
- tutorial - 30 minutes (once in three weeks)
- individual work - 90 -120 minutes

Integrated Mathematics Activity

In the first part of the session the students do a math activity that asks for applying an integrated set of skills: math skills as well as meta-cognitive skills. The students work along the lines of a plan-do-review scheme. Specific goals are the development of problem solving skills (including organization of solving procedures), reasoning skills and, of course, mathematical skills.

Integrated Math Activities do not necessarily result in one good solution. There are mostly more good ways of solving the problem and even different answers are possible. Reviewing and discussing solving procedures are the best way for learning solving strategies and acquiring new math knowledge. The teacher only leads the discussion and does not grade the results.

Mental math

In everyday life adults often encounter situations in which they have to do computations in their head. For that, mental math is an important math skill. Being able to do computations in the head may also give self-confidence. Students are particularly trained

in doing mental math problems in a smart way by practising solving strategies and procedures. The problems that have to be solved are all real life problems.

The participants of the workshop did a few problems and started discussing their own ways of problem solving. They did not come to a decision about what should be good and less good ways of problem solving.

Tutorial

Once in three weeks the students have a tutorial meeting in groups of six. The meeting is guided by a teacher. The teacher is only discussion leader and asks questions that may clarify discussions.

Tutorial talks focus on the process of independent learning and are meant to improve the students' reflection on their own learning skills. By this students become aware of their learning skills and will try to improve these. Students can also discuss problems and stand in the ways they encounter during the course. During the tutorial session they talk about a specific topic and agree about topics they want to work at in the following three weeks.

Each tutorial meeting has the following agenda items:

1. Each student reflects his experiences on the topic he worked at during past three weeks
- 2 There is a discussion on the experiences of all students
- 3 New action points have been made for the forthcoming three weeks.

The workshop participants discovered that it was difficult to formulate a concrete action point at the end of the tutorial meeting to work at. Coming to concrete action points gave much satisfaction. It was also confronting to the participants that the wording of concrete actions that should be applied in coming weeks, prevent diffuse, not-applicable plans. Concrete action points may help students to come forward in their learning process.

Individual programs

Students decide what they want to learn in discussion with their teacher. They decide how to manage their course, in an individual way or in a group with peer students. They also stipulate whether they want to do homework or not, want to do all instruction or just a part of it, decide what instruction they want and when. They work in a learning center where teachers go around and are available for assistance and instruction. They talk with the students about their way of learning and how they proceed. If they want instruction, this can be arranged.

It should always be possible to adjust the program to the needs the students have. If the students want to change, this may happen. This may be inherent to their learning process.

Instruction materials:

Each student receives an organizer to plan his activities and to record his progress. There is also a bulletin board in the classroom on which each student can write what activity he is working at. This enables students to look for classmates to work together.

In the way as described above, we try to actualize our ideas on independent learning.