

## **Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills**

**LSAL's data indicate that self-study is prevalent among high school dropouts. How can ABE programs take those efforts into account?**

**by Stephen Reder & Clare Strawn**

*An analysis of baseline data collected by the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) offers a glimpse of the formal and informal learning activities underlying adults' literacy development. Few adult educators will be surprised to hear that many in the LSAL population participate in adult basic or secondary education programs to improve their reading, writing, and math skills. After all, that's why these programs exist. More surprising is the finding that substantial numbers of adults in the LSAL population engage in self-directed learning activities to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED tests. This is true both for individuals who have previously participated in adult education programs and for those who never have. A better understanding of the relationship between program participation and self-directed study for basic skill improvement could offer some interesting new ways to think about program design and outreach, student retention, and lifelong learning.*

### **The Design of LSAL**

The design of NCSALL's Longitudinal Study helps us to investigate these and a range of other important issues in adult literacy and education. Two features of the LSAL design are particularly relevant here. First, the LSAL is a *panel study*: it closely follows the same group of individuals over time. They are periodically interviewed, their literacy assessed, and information is collected about their program participation, informal learning activities, uses of written materials, employment, social networks, personal goals, social and economic status, among other information. The LSAL panel consists of approximately 1,000 individuals randomly sampled from its target population: individuals who, at the time the study began, lived in the Portland, OR, area; were aged 18-44 years; did not have a high school diploma or GED; were not still in high school; and spoke English proficiently. A second major feature is its *comparison group* methodology: approximately equal numbers of the target population were sampled who had or had not recently enrolled in local adult education programs. The design allows us to make important comparisons between those in the target population who participate in programs with those who do not. These comparisons provide new and important views of the distinctive characteristics of participants and of the contributions that program participation makes to adults' literacy and life development.

### **Self-Study and Program Participation**

Most American research on adults' self-directed learning has focused on professionals and others with relatively high levels of formal education, who are presumed to have "learned how to learn" through their years of formal schooling (e.g., Aslanian, 1980). Few studies have investigated the self-directed learning activities of adults who dropped out of high school. We know little about their self-directed learning, especially among those who never participate in adult education programs. Can they improve their skills on their own? Do they need to participate in formal programs to develop their literacy abilities?

We explored some of these issues a number of ways in the first (or baseline) interviews. For example, individuals were asked about many aspects of their preceding life histories, including whether they had, after leaving school, ever studied by themselves to improve their reading, writing, or math skills or to

prepare for the GED. We were careful to differentiate such self-study from homework activities associated with any adult education classes they might have taken. When individuals responded affirmatively, we asked further questions for details about when and how intensively they had studied by themselves to improve their skills.

Although we need several years of data to observe literacy development directly, the LSAL baseline data already indicate that informal, self-directed learning may be an important part of adult literacy development. This component has largely been overlooked by both researchers and programs. One in three (34%) of those who have never participated in adult education programs have studied by themselves to improve their skills. Nearly half (46%) of those who have previously participated in programs have also self-studied to improve their skills or prepare for the GED.

Adult educators are often challenged and sometimes frustrated by the high turnover in classes. Data from the LSAL may help us to reconceptualize such sporadic participation in ABE programs as part of a broader process of cumulative skill development over time. Most program administrative data use 12 hours of seat time as the standard for minimum participation (and funding). LSAL quantifies participation in finer detail, recognizing a minimum of one class session as a period of participation. By "period of participation" we mean one or more sessions with the same teacher that ends because the student leaves or the class ends. Periods of participation may or may not conform to the standard number of weeks per term. This focus helps us see more varied and complex patterns of participation. Among those in the LSAL population who have ever participated in classes, more than half (58%) have done so in more than one period of participation. Individuals attending programs in multiple periods of participation often go to different programs, with varying intensities, duration, and reasons for starting and stopping during each period of participation.

*Table 1. Two ways of counting participation*

<b>Class 1</b>	<b>Program count</b>	<b>LSAL count</b>
Hours	—	4 hours per week
Weeks	—	2 weeks
Total time in class 1	—	8 hours
<b>Class 2</b>		
Hours	4 hrs per week	4 hrs per week
Weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks
Total time in class 2	32 hours	32 hours
<b>Total participation time counted</b>		
	1 class, 32 hours	2 classes, 40 hours

This complex, sometimes fragmented process of participation is best captured and understood from the learner's perspective rather than through the lens of administrative data in which students' participation is studied only in relation to the outreach, recruitment, and retention of students in the current program. When analyzing the same LSAL data from two different perspectives, that of cumulative participation hours and that of hours accumulated in individual program attempts, we get two different representations of participation. Framed as individual program attempts, stopping in and out of different classes might be interpreted as a series of failures. Students, however, experience moving in and out of programs as a process of accumulating participation and development over time. In the LSAL survey, students were asked how many classes they had participated in, how many hours per week the class met, and how many weeks they stayed in the class. Table 1 illustrates how the math works out differently if you only start counting class hours after 12 hours of seat time.

We used the initial LSAL data to compare these data and learner perspectives, illuminating somewhat different patterns of participation. If we look at periods of participation prior to the baseline (first)

interview,1 on average, learners experience 54 hours (median) of instruction per period of participation. Using the 12-hour threshold common in administrative data, however, we would report only 27 hours. When we look at cumulative hours over periods of participation, on average, 10% of learners stop participating before completing 12 hours of instruction. However, that increases to 22% of students who leave when the 12 hours of participation are limited to one attempt. Instruction appears to have longer duration in the learners' perspective than from the program's frame of measurement. In future reports, we will be able to compare the actual administrative data collected by the state to the self reports of students. When periods of focused study outside of program participation are added to this picture, programmatic perspectives on skill development may shift significantly to reflect learners' experiences more closely.

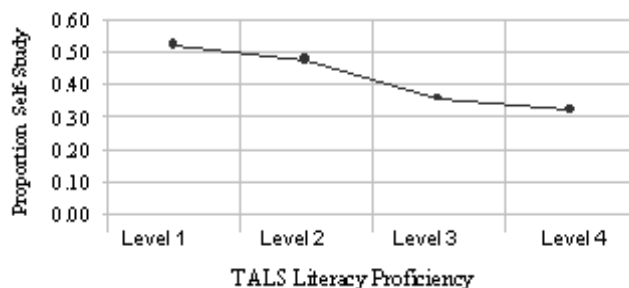
## Learning without Program Participation

Although it is perhaps not surprising that so many individuals who participate in programs also engage in self-directed efforts to improve their basic skills and prepare for the GED, it is somewhat unexpected that such a large proportion of those who never go to programs also engage in such self-study. This suggests that a substantial reservoir of individuals may be actively trying to improve their skills, and that programs are not reaching or are unable to serve them through their current offerings. Perhaps new conceptions of how to support and enhance such independent learning (through the use of distance technologies and new media, for example) will better connect these learners with adult education programs.

## Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency

The ability to study on one's own may depend on having certain levels of basic skills. The surprisingly high rate of self-study found in the LSAL population may be related to the study populations' relatively high levels of literacy proficiency. The LSAL population, by definition, is comprised entirely of high school dropouts who have not passed the GED. They do, however, have relatively high levels of literacy proficiency as measured by the Test of Adult Literacy Skills (TALS), which are the scales used in many familiar state, national, and international adult literacy assessments (Kirsch et al. 1993; OECD, 1995). Figure 1 plots the percentage of individuals reporting previous self-study as a function of their assessed TALS literacy proficiency. Instead of the expected finding that individuals with higher skills are more likely to engage in self-study, the figure shows the opposite. Individuals with higher skill levels are less likely to have engaged in self-study efforts to improve their skills or prepare for the GED. Individuals at the lowest levels of skill are the most likely to engage in such self-study efforts; about half of the LSAL population functioning at the lowest proficiency level (level 1) has previously engaged in such self-study activities.

Figure 1. **Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency**



## Program Participation and Literacy Proficiency

Literacy proficiency may affect not only self-directed learning of basic skills but also participation and learning within basic skills programs. LSAL data show a clear negative association between students' assessed literacy proficiency and their evaluations of program effectiveness. Table 2 shows that those who are most satisfied with their adult education have lower literacy proficiency scores than those reporting that programs did not help to improve their skills.

Our interpretation of such data will be more definitive after we have directly measured changes in individuals' skills over time. Until then, a tentative interpretation of these baseline data is that local adult education programs appear to assist students within a relatively narrow range of literacy proficiency. Students coming in with skills above this range may not be well served.

Table 2. **Program satisfaction and literacy proficiency**

<b>Extent to which programs helped improve skills</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Literacy Proficiency*</b>
Not at all	25	290
Somewhat	44	281
A great deal	31	267

\* TALS scores. <sup>2</sup>

Is there a relationship between the lower satisfaction with programs and the lower rates of self-study we observed among people with higher literacy proficiency? We might reasonably surmise that dissatisfaction with programs leads people to build on their established skills by studying on their own as an alternative to formal education. However, the data show that those who said that programs helped "not at all" were significantly less likely to engage in self-study than students who answered that programs helped improve their skills "a great deal." Even after we take literacy proficiency into account, there is a positive relationship between self-study and program satisfaction: those students who have also self-studied report that formal programs assisted them more in improving their skills. To understand what this relationship is about, we need to examine data from subsequent years, in which we will have additional information about changing patterns of self-study, program participation, and assessed literacy proficiencies.

## Implications

Data from the LSAL may encourage new ideas about adult education students and new models of programs to serve them. Increasing our knowledge about the extent to which individuals who never attend formal programs undertake self-study to improve basic skills and prepare for the GED is part of what we have to learn. These results bring to mind learners who are already engaged and might be served by programs through distance technologies and new media, even though they may not be able or interested in attending programs. As the LSAL continues to document changes in individuals' literacy proficiency and practices over time, the contributions of program participation and self-study to literacy development should become clearer. By measuring development over time, it will be possible to determine whether individuals with higher literacy proficiency choose different methods of skill development than those with lower scores and which strategies for development are more effective than others. Feedback from *Focus*

on *Basics* readers about your interpretation of these findings is welcome, as we continue to design and analyze future waves of data.

This particular analysis excludes periods of participation current at the time of the first interview, since such periods by definition would not yet be complete.

The TALS Document Literacy proficiency is plotted in the proficiency ranges typically reported, with level 1 the lowest and level 5 the highest. On a 500 point scale, level 1 is 0-225, level 2 is 226-276, level 3 is 276 to 325, level 4 is 326 to 375 and level 5 is 376 to 500. See Kirsh et al., 1993, for a description of these proficiency levels.

Statistical models were used to examine the three-way relationship among literacy proficiency, self-study, and program participation.

## References

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## About the Authors

*Stephen Reder* is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University, Portland, OR. Reder is principal investigator for two of NCSALL's research projects, the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning and the National Labsite for Adult ESOL.

*Clare Strawn* is the Project Manager for the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning and a doctoral candidate in Urban Studies at Portland State University, Portland, OR. She holds a Masters Degree in Education and Community Development from the University of California, Davis. Her research interest is in the intersection of adult learning and community.

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## Questions for Individual Reflection or Group Discussion

The authors state that 34% of those who have never participated in adult education programs have studied by themselves to improve their skills, and 46% of those who previously participated in programs have also self-studied to improve their skills or prepare for the GED (page 2, paragraph 2). (This does not include enrolled students doing homework or ESL students.) Do these percentages surprise you? Do you think these percentages are about the same for your population?

Amongst those in the LSAL population who ever participated in classes, 58% have done so in more than one period of participation. Does this percentage seem about the same for your population? Do you agree with the authors that these percentages suggest that programs are not reaching these individuals through current offerings? What ideas come to mind to connect with this population?

The authors state that by measuring development over time it will be possible to determine whether individuals with higher literacy proficiency choose different methods of skill development than those with lower scores and which strategies for development are more effective than others. What ideas do you have about this?