
Was It Worth It?

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I have been asked to write an article about my experiences, good and bad, attending adult education workshops and mini-courses and how I have felt being in workshops with teachers of varying degrees of experience and exposure to the subject.

When a staff member at the A.L.R.I./SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center referred to me as an “experienced” teacher, I thought to myself, “What is she talking about? I haven’t been doing this that long.” Five years have gone by fast. In that time, in various teaching positions I have taught reading and math classes from the basic literacy level through the GED level. In order to do so effectively, I know that I have a lot to learn.

My background upon entering the adult literacy field was in business, not education, and the first program at which I worked had only one other teacher, who also had no experience, so the workshops were my sole connection to experienced teachers. During the first year, I think I went to every workshop in sight, regardless of the subject matter. I wanted to digest as much information as possible and try out whatever seemed relevant to my work. I also wanted to absorb the knowledge of the other more experienced teachers and hear their anecdotes about class. Naturally, I was one of the least experienced teachers at these workshops. At the time, I didn’t feel inferior, but at the bigger workshops like Network ’93, I did not say much; I know that sometimes the best way to learn is to listen carefully.

After a few months, I noticed that the most “experienced” teachers at the workshops had, at most, about three to four years of teaching experience. Rarely, did I meet anyone with more experience than that. Sometimes attendance at workshops was sparse, which surprised me, since the presenters were very helpful. In

fact, in my first year I remember attending a series of workshops about GED preparation that was only attended by me and the director of the A.L.R.I. I couldn’t understand why more teachers didn’t attend. I wanted to learn from them too. However, I did gain some new teaching strategies from the experienced presenters.

After the first year and a half, I decided not to go to everything in sight. I started to analyze my strengths and weaknesses in teaching and focused more on the workshops that addressed my weaknesses. I attended several workshops and mini-courses on reading and learning disabilities, which I can still never learn enough about. I noticed that many of the other teachers at these workshops had about the same level of experience as I did. I felt more comfortable sharing classroom experiences, since I now had several to choose from.

Last year, I attended a mini-course, “Introduction to the Internet,” which made me feel like a novice again. Luckily, everyone else in attendance had the same level of experience with the Internet—that is, none—so I felt comfortable even though I knew nothing at the beginning of the course. The presenters seemed to understand our apprehension. They made us feel comfortable by encouraging us to chat with each other as we worked on the activities they prepared. Every once in a while, I run into someone from the workshop, and we share what we have been doing on the Internet since.

This past year, I have been reflecting on the teaching knowledge I have gained over the past several years. Sometimes, I wonder if I was a better teacher in that first year when I knew absolutely nothing about “teaching.” Some of the methods I used back then didn’t correspond to what is viewed as “good” teaching, but they worked. For example, I used reading materials that are considered much too easy for a GED

class, I made people write the same essay over and over again, and I did not know what the word “manipulative” meant, at least not as it pertains to mathematics. However, even though at that time I worked with a difficult, transient population, a high percentage of students reached their goals. The results were about the same as, if not better than now, even with all this methodology in my head.

Does that mean that my attendance at all of these workshops was a waste of time? I don’t feel that way. I don’t know if I am necessarily a better teacher, a worse teacher, or the same teacher as I was back then. But I feel that I would be a much worse, if not stale teacher, if I didn’t attend. I do not use every piece of information I obtain at the workshops, at least not right away. Sometimes the handouts sit in a box for a few months and then I discover them and try them. Sometimes I leave a workshop thinking I will not use anything, but later come across a situation in which the information becomes relevant. I have also learned from the experiences of the other teachers at the workshops, even if they hadn’t been teaching as long as I have; they undoubtedly have something to offer to the group. Since I have to teach several different types of classes each week, including basic literacy, not just GED, I find I need to draw from the knowledge I gained from at least some of those workshops.

Lately, in order to keep from getting stale, I have attended workshops that address some of my self-described strengths: math and writing. In one math workshop in particular, I did have more teaching experience than almost everyone else. That really surprised me. However, being in a workshop with less experienced teachers did not bother me, because I do remember what it was like that first year. I also shared more than I usually do. Actually, the presenter had a lot more experience than I did, and even though I know the contents of the GED Math Test inside out, I picked up several new strategies from her workshop which I tried out right away with success.

I would like to attend the following A.L.R.I. staff development course that require a:

The Reading/Writing Connection Mini-Course
 Creative Writing in ABE and ESOL Mini-Course
 Doing Collaborative Workshops/Conferences

Name _____ Position _____
Title/Program/Department _____
Address _____
Telephone (Home Number) _____

Please tear off and return this form to: Steve Wingo, A.L.R.I., 289 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02116

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I feel that no matter how much experience a teacher has, he or she can always learn new and effective teaching methods, whether it be from the presenter, the others in a workshop, or both. How much a person can learn depends on their mindset walking into the room, just as much as students’ initial mindsets affect their openness to learning.

Whether exposure to alternative teaching methods will necessarily produce better success rates is hard to say. As I examine what I mentioned earlier about whether I am a better or worse teacher, I recognize that other factors besides teaching methods can positively or negatively influence success rates, such as teachers’ working conditions and students’ life conditions. I can’t control these factors, but I can try to influence students’ rates of success in goal achievement by trying to make myself a better teacher. This cannot be done in isolation. Just as students learn from each other, teachers need to do the same. •