

# Learner-Centered Health Education

Learner-centered education is grounded in the respect the teacher and the program gives to the knowledge and experience of the learner. Learner-centered education also embraces learner-teacher partnership throughout the learning process, connection to the students' real life, and ongoing questioning and reflection on learning goals, processes and outcomes by both teacher and learner.

Health is an excellent vehicle through which to bring the learner-centered process alive in programs and classrooms. Health is a critical life issue not only for adult students but for their families and their communities as well. It affects all levels of learning in all types of classrooms. It is also a topic that energizes students and can be "jet fuel" to begin discussions about how contextualized curriculum and instruction is approached and how curriculum can be reshaped.

The Massachusetts adult basic education system has been engaging in this empowerment approach to health education for over a decade. This experience, supported by research and evaluation studies (Hohn, 1998; Rudd, 1995), has told us that student participation and leadership in the health work are vital to the successful integration of health into adult basic education.

The participation and leadership of students ensure that:

- Health topics are "on target" for student needs,
- The health work is embedded in everyday life, concerns and questions,
- The education honors different cultural beliefs about health, and
- The teaching and learning can be approached through creative and involving methods.

## Here are some approaches for involving students.

- **Let Students Choose the Health Topic** – an important part of effective health education in ABE is student input into the choice of the health topic. Sometimes students vote from a list of possible health topics in the classroom or classrooms. One program wanted to develop their curriculum around health content so they held focus groups with students to discuss health issues important in their lives. In another program, the topic evolved out of a "Crossroads Café" video for ESOL classes in which one character has a heart attack. The students wanted to know more about heart attacks which led to a wider program including prevention of heart attacks through improved nutrition, exercise and stress reduction.
- **Learner-centered Curriculum Development** – Student choice of the health topic and embedding the education program into everyday life issues, questions and concerns is the start of learner-centered curriculum development. Some programs have elected to go further into the process by including students in developing or modifying curriculum. Sometimes students have been involved in making curriculum framework standards come alive through health integration. For example, one health team contributed to "Navigating Systems" by mapping health facilities (with annotation of services) in their city to help students "navigate" the local health care system. Another approach is to look at an existing health teaching/learning program and have students suggest ways to simplify it (identifying words and concepts they don't understand etc.) and where different cultural beliefs might promote misunderstanding and/or disengagement. Piloting

curriculum pieces in classrooms for student feedback can also be a way to gather student input.

- **Doing Research, Surveys and Other Classroom Projects** – Classrooms can undertake research or survey projects about health to share with other students with the content and method targeted to the interest and instructional level of the students. For example, a class might be interested in learning more about asthma. An ESOL or ABE class might start with defining basic vocabulary and developing a simple health history form to take to the emergency in case of sudden asthma attack. They might also want to develop their knowledge and understanding about asthma, current theory about its causes, and treatments. Students might accomplish this through reading brochures from local health organizations, consultation with a health practitioner, or searching reputable websites such as The Health and Literacy LINCS site. They might then decide to develop a very simple brochure for other students. There is a lot of opportunity to develop reading, writing, speaking, listening and technology skills in all of these activities.

Surveys about health topics or related topics are also an excellent way to gain knowledge and skills. Students can survey other students, families, neighbors or friends about health knowledge or behaviors. Topics such as eating and food buying habits, smoking and exercise work very well here. Developing survey questions, carrying out the survey, tallying results and producing the results in a graphic form encompasses reading, writing, listening, speaking, math, public speaking and technology skill development.

- **Project-based Learning** - Any project-based learning approach is appropriate for health. Students could:
  - Do a photography project to document unsafe housing, unsanitary conditions or health hazards,
  - Create a map of local health care facilities and their services,
  - Interview community police about violence in the community and how it is being addressed.

Any type of health topic and project that interests students can be connected with literacy activities at the appropriate level for the particular class. Classrooms can also teach each other about what they have learning, directly or through the materials they may have developed.