

## ***Session 304***

### Individualized Group Instruction: A Reality of ABE by Perrine Robinson-Geller, NCSALL-Rutgers University

#### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Individualized Group Instruction (IGI) is a classroom model whereby each student works independently on materials that have been assigned to them based on their diagnostic testing. The teacher rotates among the learners, assisting as needed. IGI is common in ABE, Pre-GED and GED classes but not in ESOL classrooms because ESOL learners are usually grouped by level, and learner-to-learner interaction is essential to practicing speech. This instructional model has not yet been well described or researched.

The objectives of this research were to:

- Describe IGI and some of its variations.
- Trace the history of the development of IGI – where did it come from?
- Identify the factors which contribute to the continued use of IGI.
- Identify issues in IGI that warrant further research – including ways that IGI may or may not support student success.

#### **METHOD- OLOGY (sample, methods, type of data)**

This descriptive study combines data from an extensive literature review with seventeen interviews of people active in adult basic education.

Interview respondents generally both had a long tenure in the adult education field and extensive backgrounds in ABE instruction. The respondents averaged twenty-five years of experience in adult education, with a range from three years to more than fifty years experience. Current and former teachers, program administrators, former state directors and other state level administrators, professional development staff, instructional material vendors, and researchers were among the interview respondents.

The literature review focused on the history and development of IGI in ABE.

## FINDINGS

IGI appears to have developed as a pragmatic response to the structural realities of ABE, especially open entry/open exit patterns of participation, mixed level classes and part-time staff (with high turnover rates, who are generally not paid for prep-time). IGI relieves the pressures of these practices by allowing learners to work at their own pace, not be penalized for absences, work on targeted tasks that they need and not spend time on tasks they have already mastered. Teachers do not need to prepare lessons as most of the instruction comes from the materials, although they do need to be very familiar with the materials so that they can make appropriate assignments. In addition to being a pragmatic response, IGI is believed to be learner-centered in that each learner's goals and abilities are considered individually.

IGI takes several forms. For example, there are classes that are completely IGI, in which learners are never grouped and there is minimal structured interaction between learners. There are also IGI classes in which small groups are occasionally formed for mini-lessons and others that begin with a whole-group activity followed by individual tasks. The data from our interviews revealed that supplementing IGI with impromptu small group work is a common variation. Learning centers and computer labs that use Computer Aided Instruction (CAI) are also a form of IGI. In general, IGI is characterized by the following: 1) heavy dependence on materials (usually commercially produced, sequential and leveled by difficulty); 2) initial placement, by the teacher, into materials by means of diagnostic testing; 3) progression through the materials monitored by mastery testing; and 4) learners working independently, with teachers assisting as needed.

IGI has been present since the initial creation of ABE as a federally funded program in the 1960's. At that time enrollment was increasing exponentially and there was a need for new teachers and new methods. Programmed instruction was popular in higher education and appealed to adult educators as an instructional system that was well suited to the adult population and the structural issues of ABE. Programmed instruction is based on a behaviorist model of education where everything is broken into small steps; learners get immediate feedback and must achieve mastery before proceeding onto the next step. Generally, programmed instruction is done individually. Additionally, IGI was adopted widely because it supported adult education learning theories of the time, such as the self-directed adult learner. Early federal teacher training institutes encouraged programmed instruction and the individualization of instruction. As those teachers went out into the field they took those ideas and adapted them to the realities of ABE, and IGI became part of the fabric of ABE. It became institutionalized and "how things were done". Although there have been movements in

literacy since this time, (e.g. whole language and Freirean literacy), IGI has remained a strong presence in ABE because of its established nature and its ability to handle the structural realities of ABE.

If IGI is entrenched in ABE then it needs to be better understood, in both its weaknesses and its strengths. During the interviews, and, to some extent the literature search, issues about IGI emerged which warrant further research.

- Many of the interview respondents indicated that IGI worked for some types of learners and not for others. Generally, it was felt that low-level learners did not do well with this model. Also, it was better suited for learners who were able to identify that they needed help and were comfortable asking for it.
- Some interview respondents felt that learners became isolated and that a sense of community did not develop. (To some extent this was mitigated by those who either did some whole group or small group activities in conjunction with IGI). Other interview respondents felt that the student-to-student isolation was offset by the increased connection with the teacher. Several respondents commented on how well they knew their students in the IGI model.
- Waiting is an issue for the IGI model. There are two aspects to waiting: learners who are unable to continue until they have teacher input and assistance, and teachers who feel the stress of students stacked up waiting for their attention.
- Interview respondents had differing opinions as to the demands on a teacher who is using an IGI model. Some respondents felt it was very difficult to do IGI well because they needed to have an in-depth knowledge of the materials so that they could assign appropriate materials and offer alternatives to struggling students. Additionally, the rapidly switching from topic-to-topic and level-to-level, as different students need help, can be difficult and exhausting. Other interview respondents thought that using the IGI model for instruction was boring to teach and that it led to teacher attrition.
- IGI classes are heavily material dependent and these materials tend to be decontextualized, discrete basic skill materials. This may limit the types of learning opportunities afforded IGI learners. Additionally there may be certain soft skills that may or may not be addressed by the IGI model. Metacognition, higher order thinking skills and interpersonal communication skills are areas which need further examination.

<p><b>IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE</b></p>	<p>This study has identified and described a gap between research and practice. IGI is a common practice and yet it is rarely discussed or acknowledged. Those who are engaged in professional development may want consider what kind of classroom model their teachers are currently using and work from that point.</p>
<p><b>POLICY</b></p>	<p>Models of classroom instruction in ABE vary widely and yet are often not part of the national, state or local level policy discussions. Types of classroom instructional models should be included in the thinking of policy makers.</p>
<p><b>FURTHER RESEARCH</b></p>	<p>IGI needs to be better understood. Does IGI enable student success? If a decision is made to use an IGI approach, are there ways to improve it? Many of the other issues that need further research are discussed in the findings above. In addition, the question of prevalence needs to be addressed. How prevalent is IGI? We only have strong indicators that it is very common but no hard data on how prevalent. More research needs to be done at the classroom level, looking at all models of instruction in ABE. Currently studies tend to be either at the individual student level or at the program, state or national level.</p>
<p><b>IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY</b></p>	<p>This study identifies and describes a highly prevalent model of instruction which has been nearly invisible in the professional and research literature. If we hope to improve instruction and support student success it is crucial that we understand what actually occurs in classrooms and work from there to implement change.</p>
<p><b>FOR MORE INFORMATION...</b></p>	<p>Contact: Perrine Robinson-Geller at <a href="mailto:perrine@rci.rutgers.edu">perrine@rci.rutgers.edu</a> or 732-932-7496 x8236</p>