

# RETENTION THROUGH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

Once a student begins literacy instruction, it's imperative that the experience be positive enough to encourage both students and tutors to continue. Libraries have an advantage in being able to provide a wide range of materials that address student interests.



Bringing learners into literacy programs and keeping them enrolled long enough to meet their goals is a continuing challenge to teachers, volunteers, and program managers. Because recruitment and retention go hand in hand, we find that the same problems that often keep learners from entering programs in the first place resurface as factors that contribute to their ability to stay in a literacy program.

One approach to retaining students in literacy programs is developing a strong instructional component that serves students' interests and focuses on learning content that matters to them. At the New York Public Library Centers for Reading and Writing, content-based instruction in health and history were developed as part of the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) project. These two content areas brought noticeable increases in students' attendance and strengthened instruction.

## ESSENTIAL STEPS

- Start with what students already know about a topic they have chosen. Being able to demonstrate their knowledge can often help students feel comfortable at the beginning of a literacy program. And realizing that higher-level literacy can lead to increasing that knowledge provides an incentive to continuing.

- Find out what more the students want to know. Libraries are ideally suited to this phase in content-based literacy instruction, given the wealth of materials available to customize learning to student needs. Library literacy programs do not have to rely exclusively on prepackaged curriculum materials.

- Break down the topic into smaller units to focus the investigation. Choose one or more subtopics to emphasize in each session.

- Facilitate collaboration between students and tutors. Library staff can provide assistance to both students and tutors in searching for topic-based information.

- Help students to investigate, write, read, and discuss the topic and their findings in small groups. This will require collaboration between program staff and volunteers, but the rewards in increased retention are well worth the effort.

- Evaluate what the students have gained by comparing what they knew before to what they know after this unit. A sense of progress is a major factor in student decisions to continue participation in literacy programs.

## SUMMARY

This approach is only effective if the choice of the content areas is based on genuine student interests. Involve students from the very beginning both in selecting content areas and developing ways to approach the topics. Maintain student involvement throughout the entire project by gathering feedback. Be sure to respond to student concerns and suggestions. Tutor involvement—both with students and staff—is also very important. Their “buy-in” is essential. Even though customizing tutoring sessions to take account of what students already know and tailoring future sessions to focus on specific areas of interest may seem like more work at first, both students and tutors will gain a strong sense of satisfaction.

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ALA AmericanLibraryAssociation

Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) is an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

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