

Media Release

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Harvard Comes to QCC

Researchers from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education are working with three classes at Quinsigamond Community College to help improve instruction to intermediate readers in the adult basic education program with the hope of getting students to a high school reading level faster.

“What we’ve found is that these students have a great deal of motivation and ability,” said John Strucker research associate and instructor at the National Center for Study of Adult Learning and Literacy at Harvard University and head of the research team. “But they can’t spend seven years getting to a high school reading level. If we can find the right mix of instruction and technology, we think these students could move much faster and reach their goals quicker.”

For many adult basic education students at Quinsigamond Community College, improved reading skills is a first step to getting a GED and advancing on to college. This, in many cases, leads to higher and more fulfilling employment upon graduation.

The reality for most of these students, though, is that gaining the reading skills needed to advance is a slow process. Hindered by poor reading word recognition and a lack of a literate meaning vocabulary, these students, who typically read at a fourth to

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eight grade level, make slower progress than they or their instructors would like. Coupled with work and family obligations, improving reading skills can seem a daunting task to most adult basic education students.

To reduce the time it takes students to reach a high school reading level, Strucker and his research team are incorporating new elements and modifying the instruction of two adult basic education classes for intermediate students at QCC's CitySquare site. First, they are modifying instruction to try and optimize student learning. Second, they are incorporating technology to help students learn in the classroom and independently.

Strucker explained that when students' reading levels are tested, they often need remediation in all reading categories – comprehension, fluency, vocabulary etc. But research has discovered that intermediate readers often spend an inordinate amount of time decoding the words on the page, something most of us do automatically, and don't have enough energy left to ferret out the meaning of the text. Therefore, part of the modified instruction stresses gaining fluency and improving comprehension.

Additionally, the researchers are working to improve the vocabulary of the students. These students, explained Strucker, haven't been exposed to as large a vocabulary as some. They come from working class families or their parents might not have been native speakers, but for whatever reason, they don't have the vocabulary depth that most people have.

Because instructors can't teach students all the words they need to know the instructors concentrate on teaching meanings so when students encounter words they

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might not know they can decipher meaning from context and other clues, said Strucker.

The theory is that by modifying instruction to focus on fluency and vocabulary from the outset of the class, students will be better equipped and learn more from subsequent classes.

“What we’re trying to do is look for the keys under the lamppost,” Strucker said. “If we can increase student fluency and vocabulary first, then they’ll be able to get that much more out of the instruction that comes afterward.”

Strucker added, “This isn’t something we just pulled out of a hat either. This methodology has worked with adolescents and we’ve seen results at the Harvard Reading Lab.”

To prepare them for the new instructional methodology, QCC teachers Jeremy Bruce, Ildiko Toth and Cathy Coleman spent several days in training and sharing best practices with other instructors.

Augmenting the revised instruction is the use of technology in the classroom. Students in one of the classes using the revised instruction at CitySquare have also had the benefit of using laptop computers loaded with voice recognition software. The students listen to lessons on a pair of headphones and read into a microphone installed on the computer. The computer then identifies areas where the students might need improvement and corrective measures.

“Adult learners are often hard pressed for time because of family obligations and many are holding multiple jobs,” said Strucker. “The vision is to use the technology so

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students can learn more efficiently at home and in less time.”

Eventually, Strucker envisions the speech recognition software being delivered over the Internet or at the very least, offered over a college network in its computer labs or the library.

According to Strucker QCC was selected because of the quality of its program and its instructors.

“Everybody at QCC has been great to work with,” said Strucker. “We selected QCC because of the quality of the instruction and the overall coherence of its program.”

“QCC has a well run program that really takes care of its students. And you don’t always see that with this population,” said Strucker.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the study is being conducted in 24 classrooms in colleges in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. Strucker hopes to have the result of the study by February.

If successful, Strucker believes the methods being tested could also be used in developmental classes at community colleges.

“More students coming to college has to take developmental classes,” said Strucker. “These instructional methods can be used in those classes and could significantly decrease the amount of time a student has to spend taking developmental classes.

“What we’re hoping, is that the improvement shown by the students over the

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course of the semester is greater than what you would normally expect,” Strucker said.

“If that’s the case then students could begin working on their college degrees that much faster and graduate that much sooner.”

-30-

Photo Caption: Prentiss L. McNeill (middle), research coordinator at the National Center for Study of Adult Learning and Literacy at Harvard University Graduate School of Education with Jeremy Bruce, QCC instructor (right) test the voice recognition software on a laptop computer being used at an adult basic education class at QCC CitySquare.

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