

The Right Question Project in Adult Education

Improving Critical Thinking, Self-Advocacy Skills and Motivation to Vote

Adult learners face a range of challenges. In the classroom, they are often playing ‘catch up’, trying to develop learning skills they have not acquired along their educational journey. In their own lives, they struggle to secure decent housing, income, transportation, job training, and health care for themselves and their families. Overwhelmed by the challenges inside and outside of the classroom, they rarely consider the one time event of voting as a top priority, nor do they see it as directly relevant to their lives and the daily problems they cannot ignore. Many voter education initiatives, despite offering mounds of important information, fail to convince adult learners about the value of voting and do not manage to significantly bump up voting rates.

The Right Question Project (RQP) offers a *strategy that invests in the ability of adult learners to think and act on their own behalf in several realms*. It builds skills that can help adult learners acquire valuable learning skills and prepares them to be more effective self-advocates when addressing problems outside of the classroom. And, at the same time RQP also increases the motivation of traditional non-voters to vote for the very first time.

Core Content: RQP accomplishes this through simple teaching materials, learning activities and a workshop that can be used in various formats to teach fundamental, but often overlooked, skills for formulating questions and for focusing effectively on decisions. The end result is adult learners who are active, sharper students, better self-advocates for themselves and their families and newly motivated, better informed and more likely voters.

Outcomes of RQP’s Voter Engagement Strategy

- ***Improves Learning and Critical Thinking Skills:*** Adult learners who participate in RQP describe how they learn to produce their own questions, improve those questions, and strategize on how to use them. They see how they can use the skill of question formulation in their classroom work. Adult educators report significant changes in adult learners who have learned how to formulate their own questions. The adult learners are transformed into active learners and ask more questions in class.
- ***Increases Self-Sufficiency and Self-Advocacy Skills:*** Adult learners who participate in RQP report how they use their skills for focusing on decisions and formulating their own questions to identify decisions being made that affect them on a “micro” level, in their ordinary encounters with public agencies that have a major impact on their lives. They are more confident participating in those decisions, more prepared and often secure better outcomes for themselves and their families.
- ***Increases Civic Participation and Motivation to Vote:*** Adult learners name for themselves how, as a result of participating in RQP, they now see the connection between decisions elected officials make and their lives. They feel a new sense of urgency to have a voice in who is making those decisions and declare that they now want to vote in the election. They begin to ask more specific questions about registration and the logistics of voting. Adult educators observe how adult learners in RQP become more interested in elections and initiate conversations with family members, friends, and neighbors about the importance of asking questions and voting.

In 2004, RQP piloted a Voter Education Initiative as part of work with the state adult education programs in Arizona and New Hampshire. Teacher and adult learner responses were overwhelmingly positive about the training experience, the educational content and the results in the classroom and beyond. A graduate student at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University reviewed evaluation data of the initial pilot and found clear examples of “strong success...particularly in strengthening critical thinking skills.” A pre- and post-assessment of one group of adult learners in Arizona also found that learning skills for focusing on decisions and asking their own questions led 93% of them to feel “more prepared” to vote and 87% to confirm they are much more likely to vote than if they had not learned the skills.

RQP Civic Engagement Program in Pennsylvania

In the 2008-2009 Program Year, PA adult educators are participating in RQP's Civic Engagement Program. This program includes:

- Professional development for teachers of adult learners who were eligible to vote in the November 2008 presidential election
- Instructional materials and techniques that allow teachers to deliver RQP instruction to adult learners
- A research component that enables Yale University researchers to collect data from participating teachers and adult learners to determine the impact of RQP instruction on adult learner skill development, attitudes about civic participation, and voting activities

Teachers who volunteered for this program were randomly assigned to one of two teacher groups:

- An intervention or treatment group of educators who received training and implemented RQP instruction with students prior to the November 2008 election
- A control group of educators who did not use RQP methods with learners prior to the election, but will receive the same training later this spring

Teachers assigned to the pre-November 2008 professional development workshop were asked to deliver RQP instruction to their adult learners sometime in September and October 2008. Post-session surveys were completed by teachers and adult learners in both the treatment and control groups.

The RQP teacher workshop is delivered in a single 6-hour session and participants receive:

- A step-by-step guide for the student workshop
- Follow-up lesson ideas and resources
- Templates for student materials
- On-going technical assistance
- Access to online materials and discussion with colleagues

RQP Evaluation

Researchers at Yale University's Institution for Social and Policy Studies are conducting an evaluation of the program using a randomized field experiment design. This research project aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the RQP civic engagement strategy for increasing civic skills and voter participation among adult learners in the context of the 2008 General Election.

Yale researchers are measuring the differences in adult learners' civic skills, political efficacy, political interest, and voting behavior between the intervention/treatment group and the control group.

Basic demographic information about the adult learners in these classes was provided to the researchers for use in tracking voting activities in the November 2008 election. Outcome measures will be determined based on data collected through post-intervention surveys and by direct observation of adult learner voting behavior. Direct observation of adult learner voting behavior is possible by obtaining a voter list from relevant public sources.