

**BEST PRACTICE****The Blessings of Volunteers in ABE and ESOL Programs****Sara Jorgensen**The Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service  
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I do not have the solution to the cycle of poverty and the depths of societal inequities that we face in America, but during 20 years of teaching adults in Brooklyn, New York, volunteers have been a great help to me and the students I have worked with. Adult Basic Education teachers do not usually have such time, but with minimal commitment, volunteers can fill in gaps that could not otherwise be filled and they can delightfully enrich the classroom. Let me see if I can convince you.

For several years, Vilma, a retired social worker, volunteered weekly with students from Cuba, Palestine, Israel, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Italy, China, Russia, and Brooklyn, New York. Some had HIV/AIDS, others were in substance abuse recovery, and a variety had learning disabilities. We had students with mental illness and domestic violence issues; all wanted to escape the cycle of poverty which seemed to be their destiny without the power to use written words. Vilma became involved in all of the class activities, providing individuals with a little extra support. Once she initiated a "crochet project" after discovering that students were interested in sewing. Crocheting seemed a natural flow, so she introduced new readers to reading instructions about how to crochet. The steps were easy to follow. Students tried crocheting and reflected on it in their journals. For a small group of Arabic women and one man, it was a great motivation for getting words on the page. This project created a bond between Vilma and the students, freeing me up to attend to other projects. Vilma stayed in our community of learners for several years of her life, including the loss of her husband, an event she shared with us through her own writing and tears.

In another instance, a board member of a non-profit organization volunteered in my pre-GED class to set up a historical timeline that wound around the top of the classroom like an attractive border. His excitement about the project was contagious. He invited students to help him devise a scale; 1 foot equaled 50 years. The timeline helped students plug in their prior knowledge, placing events in history by actually marking historical events on the wall as they read about them in the news. At the same program, a volunteer hosted a weekly Bible reading

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group which had been requested by the students. A volunteer photographer once took pictures of students for their portfolios. Other volunteers baked homemade cakes for a writing circle.

I will never forget the times I have been in organizations that invested in training volunteers for the classroom. After an initial investment of basic tutor training, a group of incarcerated men in substance abuse recovery in the South Bronx embarked on helping new readers with their goals. Almost every new reader had a tutor to read with him; this freed me up to work with the advanced level. It was a win-win situation; tutors benefited by "giving back," an essential part of substance abuse recovery, and the ABE students received the individualized help they needed to start understanding the books they chose to read. An elderly tutor who had been incarcerated most of his life said, "I am learning to care, something I never thought I could do."

I recently worked with a group of professionals recruited in downtown Brooklyn who were trained to run small groups or work one-on-one in an ABE classroom. I was available, but the volunteers facilitated the reading and some vibrant discussions. Some tutors helped students begin communicating through e-mail. One woman insisted on stocking our library with a variety of dictionaries and handy large-print reference books. Another donated hundreds of greeting cards. Still another creative woman developed a board game based on ideas and words students were using in class.

I hope to develop our volunteer program further because the needs of the students are great, class hours are limited, and students deserve a little bit of what the richest nation in the world has to offer. It remains clear to educators, however, that investing in adult education is an investment in our nation's children, who fare better in school when their parents do, too. Although learning takes time and resources, students agree with the trend. They want to learn English to speak with their child's teacher. They want to read, write, get a job, understand math, and earn their GEDs as soon as possible.

So what can a conscientious but reasonable adult educator to do in these desperate times? I have found that if the program incorporates student-centered goals, volunteers can fit in and help lift the burden of juggling multiple student-levels and interests. Sometimes the most extraordinary gifts are delivered in human packages.

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