

Forum: The Role of Research in Policy and Practice*(Part 3 of 3)*

Educational Research and Practice: A State-Level Professional Development Perspective

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The relationship between research and practice in education, especially in adult education (AE), has generally been tenuous with most educational research focused on K-12 contexts and structured classroom environments that do not directly translate to adult learning contexts. However, the ever-increasing pace of change in the instructional landscape over the last two years has driven us, in our professional development (PD) center, to rely heavily on research about how people learn in diverse environments and to respond quickly with approaches and strategies that can be immediately applied to instructional practice. COVID has reshaped the educational landscape, requiring those in the educational enterprise to be flexible and adaptable in how they view learning and the learning environment.

The ever-changing demands of the pandemic has instructors and programs constantly shifting how they deliver instruction and how they design programs. As PD providers, we have worked to keep pace with these changes while focusing on quality, evidence-based offerings. This article describes how our use of educational research in developing PD has shifted, challenges we face when using and translating research, and suggests future research areas for AE.

Our State's PD Center: What We Do

The Virginia Adult Learning Resources Center (VALRC) is a PD center that serves AE programs across the state. Our work covers a range of activities in response to the state's local programs, our state's office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, and national initiatives. VALRC employs specialists who create and deliver PD through webinars, face-to-face training, online facilitated and self-paced courses, professional learning communities (PLCs), and one-on-one technical assistance. Our work is informed by what we learn from the instructors themselves and from the PD we invest in ourselves, including scholarly educational research, best practices from other states and national projects, and reports on what works in AE. Translating these types of knowledge into accessible PD that instructors can easily utilize in their classes is a foundational component of VALRC's work.

Why We Use Research

As a PD center, we aim to support adult educators in Virginia with evidence-based instructional strategies and program design. Research provides a foundation for us, as PD providers, as we consistently change course to support new ways of teaching and learning. In addition to using

research to guide the *what* of AE, there is an increased call for research that guides the *how* of AE, especially research that provides potential keys to harnessing learning, motivation, and persistence, and to expanding engagement through inclusive learning strategies. As PD providers, we work to keep pace with current research to provide the field with revised or new teaching methods, such as inclusive practices and virtual instruction. Additionally, we actively and intentionally seek input from the field to learn about what kinds of practices are working in our instructors' classrooms and which are not. Following that input, we direct our PD development toward research on practices important to them, and recently, these have been practices that support motivation, socioemotional learning, and culturally responsive education.

Challenges We Face

Adult learners bring various experiences and knowledge to the learning environment, which means that the most helpful research focuses on the adult population, taking into account the varying contexts in which they learn. Unfortunately, there is not always research available on key concerns of practitioners. More often than not, most of the research we utilize comes from the K-12 context. Thus, it is not readily applicable to the AE context. We attempt to be diligent about what K-12 research we use, how we use it, and how heavily we rely on it, but we find that it can often be hard to translate to the AE context, and instructors are hesitant to consider it appropriate for adult learner groups.

In our work as PD providers, we consistently hear from practitioners that they often “build the plane as they fly it.” Devoting time and resources to accessing and translating educational research is considered a luxury with uncertain

benefits. While some could argue that “teachers are teachers,” there are nuances in AE that can hinder the applicability and usefulness of research: a mostly part-time teaching staff (Condelli et al., 2010; Smith & Gillespie, 2007), lack of paid time for PD, different teaching contexts (pedagogy vs. andragogy), teaching and learning spaces that are often physically built for small children rather than adult learners, and retention rates that strain long-term instructional planning processes.

There is also a disconnect between what kinds of research are considered valid by researchers and which are valued by instructors. Standardized and generalizable research findings do not often readily translate into actionable instructional strategies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004), specifically in AE classrooms that are contextually situated, evolving from one moment to the next. What works in a large educational research study does not predict what works in the individual classroom. On the other hand, instructor-driven research reflects the actual experiences of operating in an almost constantly changing set of circumstances, shifting strategies and approaches in response to the immediate needs of learners (McIntyre, 2005). Our PD center is increasingly focused on creating spaces for instructors to share and learn through action research. However, practitioners' time constraints and lack of easy access to educational research to inform their practice make action research challenging to accomplish on any large scale.

How We Use Research for PD Design

Although we encounter challenges in finding relevant research for the AE context, research on effective PD models plays a significant role in determining the structure of our offerings. Over

the last few years, we shifted from a majority in-person PD model to a primarily virtual model, which allows for more interaction and collaboration among educators across the state. We also diversified the types, lengths, intensities, and formats of the PD we offer. To accommodate varying teaching contexts, schedules, workloads, instructional goals, and capacity for PD, we differentiate our offerings and present more of a choice catalog where educators can find what works for them (Desimone & Garet, 2015). We also provide more sustained PD options for those who can participate and collaborate with others during an in-depth study of a topic (Desimone, 2009).

We decided to offer more PLCs in response to the sense of isolation many educators felt at the beginning of the pandemic and the increase in reliance and comfort with virtual platforms. The PLCs allow educators to work through instructional and programmatic challenges, such as quality teaching online, content area instruction, and data management. In line with research findings on PLCs, we have witnessed increased instructor collaboration, innovation, and self-reported improvements in practice (Brown et al., 2018; Doğan & Adams, 2018).

In addition to using research to guide how we structure PLCs, we also rely on research when designing the content of specific PLCs, such as our Teacher Leader PLC. The overarching aim of this PLC is to learn about and apply strategies and instructional practices that are based on neurological science to promote learning in diverse educational environments. The decision to design this PD opportunity as a PLC was grounded in the thought that equity-focused practices require a shift in mindset and that this cannot be accomplished in stand-alone workshops (Leonard & Woodland, 2022). Additionally, this mindset shift requires an ongoing commitment from and

collaboration among instructors (Walton et al., 2022). Creating opportunities for educators to interact with one another over several months helps create shared practices (Alhanachi et al., 2021) as instructors build knowledge together using a more bottom-up PD approach (Leonard & Woodland, 2022).

Not every instructor has the capacity for PLCs or intensive PD because of our field's overwhelmingly part-time instructional workforce (Condelli et al., 2010; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Therefore, we also work to accommodate the irregular schedules, workloads, and instructional goals of adult educators, by offering a mix of the following:

Research-driven models:

- Differentiated PD, similar to a choice catalog, to accommodate varying contexts, schedules, and capacity for PD (Desimone & Garet, 2015)
- More sustained PD options, such as multi-week, semester, or year-long to support deeper learning on a topic, with opportunities to collaborate with others across the state (Desimone, 2009)

Practitioner-driven models that are responsive to schedules and emerging areas of need:

- Support through small groups and discussions to tackle areas of need, such as math instruction and distance learning
- Sixty- to ninety-minute bite-sized, interactive, online sessions
- Synchronous facilitated online courses
- Asynchronous, self-paced tutorials

Research is limited on what works with our specific instructional cohorts who have competing life and work obligations. As much as we can, our PD is designed to follow research-based best practices (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Desimone, 2009) and

from instructors' input on what works for them to improve their practice (Desimone & Garet, 2015). While we can adjust some of our offerings, others require more research, specifically in the AE context (e.g., English language acquisition, various literacy areas, numeracy, high school equivalency, and other life skills).

An Example of How We Use Research for PD Content

As PD providers, a large part of our task is to facilitate the translation of research into strategies that instructors can readily integrate into their instruction because "PD is less effective when it does not help teachers translate the knowledge or strategies into daily instructional routines and lessons" (Desimone & Garet, 2015, p. 256). Over the last two years, the PD that has been the most repeatedly well attended has explicitly focused on inclusive learning, including socioemotional learning, and delivering quality online teaching. And, while most of the research on these topics comes to us from the K-12 arena, they are sometimes easily translated into the adult education context.

One example from the last year is Zaretta Hammond's (2015) book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, one of the primary texts for our Teacher Leader PLC, described above. This PLC is a series of four synchronous Zoom sessions with asynchronous interaction in response to readings and assignments geared towards reflective practice and a cycle of improvement. While this book does not rely on primary data, it does translate research into practice and provides practitioner-oriented suggestions and strategies, which is why we chose to focus on it. In this instance, the combined use of the research-driven PD model and content, the instructor-driven content selection, and a focus on instructor-to-instructor sharing of practice

resulted in learning that, from our observations and informal evaluations, transformed instructors' approaches to teaching and learning and engaged them in sustained PD to improve their practice.

Future Research: Calls to Action

Based on our work, how and why we use research, the research currently available, and the expressed needs of instructors in the field, we offer some calls to action to help direct the future of AE research.

Practitioners as Research Partners

Soliciting and incorporating feedback is essential to help us improve our offerings; however, we have taken this one step further to include practitioners in the planning and facilitation of our offerings. Practitioners are the first line of contact with learners, and their voices and perspectives are invaluable when planning PD opportunities that meet their needs. In addition to including practitioners in the planning and facilitation of PD, creating research partnerships with them would be a way to elevate their expertise further (Hillier & Gregson, 2015; James & Augustin, 2018). One way to involve practitioners in the research process is by supporting them as they develop and carry out action research (AR) projects, which involve cycles of planning, reflecting, acting, and observing (Hine, 2013; James & Augustin, 2018).

Through AR, instructors can "become better at what they do by conducting research," leading to higher quality instruction and improved learner outcomes (Zeichner, 2003, p. 302). Involving practitioners in the planning, execution, and dissemination of research could also help strengthen the relevance of the research and help provide ways to communicate the research

findings in a timely and usable manner. This practitioner-involved process would also equip us as PD providers with invaluable insights into what research is most usable and how that research is best translated into practice.

Research in Virtual Learning for Adults

Feedback from practitioners indicates they are seeking ways to teach effectively in virtual environments, going beyond the use of collaborative platforms or digital tools. We all made a quick shift to virtual and remote learning in spring 2020, doing what had to be done at the moment. Now is the time to invest in developing robust, research-based virtual programs for adults. However, we first need to understand how virtual learning is similar to and different from in-person learning, what strategies are best for virtual learning, how to ensure learners receive the academic support they need and deserve, and, just like in-person learning, we need to know how to keep learners motivated so they persist. An important focus for PD could be developing instructors' capacity to foster the "social aspects" of synchronous virtual learning, including interactivity, collaborative learning, and student-centered instruction to engage learners and increase motivation (Racheva, 2018). Knowing how to develop quality virtual programs is crucial moving forward if programs continue to offer various learning environment options to meet the needs of learners' lives and schedules.

Rethinking Adult Education Models

In addition to rethinking and redesigning how classes are offered, we also need to reconsider how we offer instruction. In order to truly and authentically consider all that adult learners bring with them (lived experiences, culture, background, funds of knowledge, etc.), we need research that helps practitioners understand

why and how to build capacity for responsive, inclusive, and differentiated instruction. Building off research regarding culturally responsive education (CRE) practices for adult multilingual learners (Rhodes, 2017; Sanczyk, 2020/2021), more research is needed to understand how instructors in other AE contexts (e.g., high school equivalency, literacy, integrated education and training, etc.) internalize and use CRE practices. We also need to understand the learner's perspective to ensure that teaching practices align with their learning needs and the ways they conceptualize education. Additionally, emphasizing a more learner-centered practice could increase learner motivation and persistence; however, research is needed in this area to make these connections.

Focusing on Learner Motivation

The topic of understanding and increasing learner motivation is consistently mentioned when we ask practitioners what other areas would be of interest to them. We know that learning and motivation are tied to culture (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2019; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995); therefore, practitioners must understand how to make these connections authentically. Research shows that many factors motivate adult learners to enter AE, which can impact persistence and retention (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). To fully understand the motivational factors that impact all our learners, we need research that considers their race, ethnicity, culture, and background (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2018;). Combining the knowledge gained from this research with the knowledge gained from understanding culturally responsive practices in the adult context, practitioners could design instruction and programs that meet the needs of learners in an authentically motivating way.

Concluding Thoughts

Over the past decade, our experience as PD providers has shown us that to make scholarly research on teaching and learning of interest and value for practitioners in the field, two overarching conditions must be met: the research needs to be presented in manageable pieces that can be easily translated into instructional practice with minimal adaptations; and the content of the research must be relevant to the immediate

needs and goals of the instructors and their learners (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Providing PD opportunities for instructors in all contexts and across varying levels of time availability can help strengthen the ways practitioners deliver instruction, design programs, and incorporate inclusive practices. Finding ways to develop coherence between research and practice, particularly with a focus on adult education, could help encourage lifelong and lifewide learning.

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