

Special Research Feature and Forum

Introduction to the Special Research Feature and Forum

Daphne Greenberg, Elizabeth L. Tighe, M Cecil Smith

We are excited to introduce a feature that we hope to include periodically in future issues: specifically, a scholarly research article followed by responses from a range of voices engaging with the scholarship. In this issue, we are proud to feature Dr. Stephen Reder, Professor Emeritus from Portland State University, who reports findings from his 12-year longitudinal study of a state’s administrative data on learner participation in adult education programs and their skill development. Analyses of this kind are invaluable to our field—it is extremely rare for longitudinal analyses to be conducted in adult education, and it is only through this type of work that skill gain in adult education can be best understood. This insight is particularly important given that funding decisions are often predicated on demonstrated participation and measurable skill growth. Although Dr. Reder’s result of skill growth increasing with instructional hours may seem intuitive, it provides empirical support for the need for sustained funding of long-term instructional hours in a field that unrealistically encourages gains to occur within limited instructional time.

Responses to Dr. Reder’s work include researchers who focus on quantitative and/or qualitative research, a policymaker/researcher, and a practitioner/researcher. Dr. Kaldes’ response focuses on the strength of Dr. Reder’s use of de-duplicated student longitudinal records, with the suggestion for other quantitative researchers to extend this type of work through different analytical approaches. She also offers that adding qualitative interviews to quantitative research can enrich the information gained—something that is true no matter what the subject area. Dr. Kobrin responds to Dr. Reder’s work by emphasizing the importance of reading his

article while thinking about distance education and how participation and skill development may be impacted by technology. She praises Dr. Reder for describing various nuances regarding adult education distance learning and encourages all of us to include distance education in our work—an important suggestion as distance education continues to expand and may offer benefits for learners who need flexible options due to other demands (such as work and childcare). Mr. Lilly explains the difficulties that states have in assigning unique identifiers for learners across programs and years. As a policymaker/researcher, he finds Dr. Reder’s study of a specific state illuminating and informative of potential future adult education data system improvements. Mr. Lilly also suggests further longitudinal research in areas such as investigating student goals and how long-term skill gains translate into learners transitioning from one program to another (such as ESL to ABE). Finally, Dr. Lotas writes how Dr. Reder’s work is powerful because it gives credence to what many adult educators know in their hearts, but those outside of adult education do not understand. She is appreciative of the acknowledgment of “stop-out” vs. “drop-out” and that adult learners gain skills over an extended period of time. Dr. Lotas shares that her program supports adult learners when they are at risk for “stopping-out.” She stresses the need for and importance of adult education to explore the barriers that learners often face.

As readers, do any of you—after reading Dr. Reder’s work and the responses to his scholarship—want to share your own comments? We would love to hear from you! Please write to us at ALEjournal@prolitteracy.org. In the subject line, write “Reader’s response,” and we may publish your letter.