

**Forum: Responses to Stephen Reder's Article***(Part 1 of 4)*

# Engagement Over Time: A Response to Reder's Longitudinal Study of Participation and Skill Growth

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Reder (2026) makes an important contribution by leveraging longitudinal state administrative data to examine adult literacy participation and skill development across multiple years and providers. In a field where persistence is often framed primarily in terms of barriers and short-term engagement, the study highlights a more asset-oriented dimension of adult education. Although not explicitly framed in those terms, the findings reveal that a meaningful subset of learners sustain participation over extended periods and accumulate measurable gains.

The contribution also reflects an important distinction in how participation is conceptualized and measured. Earlier longitudinal work, including the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL), examined participation as a lived and contextualized process embedded in learners' goals, motivations, and everyday practices (Reder, 2012). In contrast, state administrative systems operationalize participation through enrollment episodes and instructional hours within an accountability framework. Participation is therefore represented as institutional exposure rather than lived experience. The present study works within this institutional definition, extending longitudinal analysis into the administrative data context. In this sense, administrative data records provide the institutional footprint of engagement over time.

A key strength of the study is the de-duplication of student records across program years. Because state systems typically report unduplicated participation within single years, multi-year trajectories remain hidden. This step does more than improve data accuracy; it fundamentally alters what can be observed. When records are linked across years, patterns of multi-year

participation, re-entry after breaks, and movement across programs become visible. For example, a learner who attends briefly in one year, re-enrolls two years later, and accumulates additional instructional hours would appear in single-year reports as separate short-term participants. After de-duplication, that same pattern emerges as an extended participation trajectory with interruptions rather than fragmented episodes.

Furthermore, Reder's use of reconstructed data reinforces the importance of longitudinal linkage. In the present analyses, when student records are connected across program years, persistence appears more substantial and more varied than single-year reports suggest. About one-quarter of students exhibit participation spanning a year or longer, with wide variation in accumulated instructional exposure and common patterns of breaks and discrete periods of participation. The distribution of instructional hours further underscores this heterogeneity, with some students engaging briefly while others accumulate substantial exposure over time. Age differences across short- and long-term spans also suggest distinct patterns of engagement. Overall, these results indicate that participation in adult education is not uniformly episodic but instead reflects diverse trajectories that become visible only through longitudinal reconstruction.

In parallel with these descriptive trajectory analyses, Reder evaluates whether instructional exposure is associated with skill growth using predictive models that relate gain hours to assessed skill gains over extended intervals. Although total hours of instruction provide a useful summary of exposure, they do not preserve the timing, spacing, or continuity of participation that distinguish

sustained engagement from intermittent participation or concentrated bursts of instruction. As a result, similar totals can reflect quite different participation processes, even when those totals are useful for estimating average relationships with skill growth.

A common way researchers address temporal dynamics in longitudinal data is by modeling repeated observations as nested within individuals across time. Reder's analyses does not apply such a nesting specification, and imposing one may not adequately capture the structure of participation observed in these data. In particular, a nesting structure applied uniformly across years may fail to represent the mobility that characterizes adult education participation. As reflected in Reder's descriptive analyses, students move across programs, experience interruptions, and engage at varying durations and intensities.

Therefore, future quantitative work could move beyond both cumulative totals and fixed nesting assumptions. Two extensions are especially important. First, participation can be modeled as a process unfolding over time rather than as a single accumulated total. Such approaches would allow participation trajectories—capturing the timing, continuity, and interruptions in engagement—to be modeled as predictors of skill development over time. Researchers could then examine how learning unfolds during sustained participation, how growth shifts after interruptions, and whether gains accelerate or slow over time. This perspective attends not only to how much exposure occurs, but to how learning progresses relative to timing and continuity. Second, analytic models could explicitly account for students' movement across programs and instructional contexts. Approaches that allow learners to be associated with more than one instructional setting over time can better represent this mobility and clarify whether differences in students' skill gains are primarily linked to individual persistence, program characteristics, instructional environments, or their interaction.

Expanding the analytic lens in this way does not eliminate the inherent limits of administrative records. Reder appropriately acknowledges that state administrative

data do not capture learners' motivations, instructional content, classroom interactions, or the lived experience of engagement. They reflect institutional exposure rather than personal meaning-making. As discussed earlier, this represents a conceptual shift in how participation is defined.

Yet precisely because engagement is operationalized in this institutional way, it becomes even more important to examine the longitudinal structure embedded in these records. If participation is defined through attendance, enrollment episodes, and instructional hours, then patterns of accumulation, interruption, re-entry, and cross-program movement become central to the analysis. The limitations of construct dimensionality heighten the importance of temporal dimensionality.

Importantly, this quantitative infrastructure need not stand in opposition to interview-based research. Instead, the two approaches can be mutually informative. When attendance patterns are examined as longitudinal trajectories, they provide a structural context for interpreting individual narratives. For example, a learner may describe how their skills improved during sustained participation, or how they continued to make progress even after a short break from classes. Another learner might explain that after a lengthy period away they felt they had to relearn material they once understood. Rather than situating a learner's experience only within total hours of exposure, researchers can locate interview accounts within predictive models that link trajectories of instructional participation with changes in skill development over time. In this way, quantitative trajectory models clarify whether individual accounts reflect broader patterns of participation and learning or more exceptional experiences.

Taken together, Reder illustrates how longitudinal administrative data can reshape how participation is understood in adult education. By revealing sustained and varied engagement trajectories, it invites more refined modeling approaches and closer dialogue with qualitative research traditions. In doing so, it moves the field toward a more comprehensive understanding of persistence, development, and institutional context over time.

## References

Reder, S. (2012). *The longitudinal study of adult learning: Challenging assumptions* (Research brief). The Centre for Literacy. [https://centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/CFLRsrchBrief\\_Chllngng\\_Assmptns.pdf](https://centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/CFLRsrchBrief_Chllngng_Assmptns.pdf)

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