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Forum: Responses to Stephen Reder's Article

(Part 4 of 4)

Supporting Lifelong Learning while Addressing Basic-Need Barriers: A Practitioner Researcher Lens

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Author Note

It is a sincere privilege, especially as a long-time adult education (AE) practitioner and researcher, to have the opportunity to respond to Stephen Reder's most recent longitudinal study. The study's finding that adult learners' skill growth is systemically related to long-term instructional hours over time and across programs is important for many reasons; for me, however, as well as for others in the AE space, this finding is particularly important because it is such an unsurprising one for us. This, I believe, is what makes it so powerful.

As an experienced AE practitioner turned researcher, I've come to deeply value research, such as Reder's, because it unearths insights that adult educators—either intuitively or through hard-won experience—can see, allowing these insights to become visible outside the AE space. By sharing longitudinal participation patterns and skill growth of half a million adult learners in one state, Reder's study reveals many such insights, such as the vital understanding that AE supports lifelong and life-wide learning.

I believe that practitioners drawn to the AE field often share an awareness that educational trajectories, especially in adulthood, are less linear and more circuitous than traditional educational schemas; they also realize that this circuitousness is not necessarily wasted educational time. While learners may at one point stop-out of their programs, these same learners will also step back in, eventually making meaningful educational progress. For example, I've seen learners who, over extended periods of time, stop out and come back later; while they may remain within the same skill range for several periods of participation, there comes a point where they make skill-range leaps, moving from a linear point A to G on an educational trajectory. In stopping-out to when they step in again, AE learners can find themselves stepping backward into a slingshot.

Similarly, Reder—in both his current study as well as in previous studies (Reder, 2008)—provides evidence that the impacts of program participation take place gradually over time, often taking three to five years to fully develop. This evidence, Reder explains, provides strong support for practice engagement theory (PET), which posits that there is a reciprocal relationship between skill growth and skill use in everyday life over time. Unfortunately, as Reder points out, because only short-term metrics are used to measure AE effectiveness, the effects of PET are difficult to identify and report on, discouraging AE research from "conceptualizing program participation and skill development as part of lifelong learning" (Reder, 2026, p. 6).

Like Reder, I also believe that the AE field suffers by not recognizing this type of learning—learning that is not easily assessed in a one-year program time span using only standardized assessments. By not doing this, the field misses out on conveying AE's potential to provide adults with deep and meaningful learning experiences. Despite historical and current tensions around the purpose of AE programs (Prins, 2020), some form of learning is still taking place, whether learners are enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) or higher-level certification programs. And this learning can foster engagement in practices outside the classroom, reinforcing and building upon programmatic learning over time, resulting in an education "that serves as the social practice of human

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development, potent with possibilities for awakening the efforts that mark us as human" (Allen, 2016, p. 50). This, I believe, is worth a better understanding.

However, in addition to better understanding the learning reciprocity that happens within extended periods of participation, I also believe it is imperative to better understand and address the barriers that can cause constant disruptive patterns of participation.

I first began questioning Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs when I was a beginning AE instructor. I replaced the Pyramid's hierarchical lines with the same circuitousness I had mapped onto an adult learner's traditional linear educational trajectory schema. It went something like this: AE learners need their basic needs met in order to attend AE programs, yet many learners do not have their basic needs met, so they need to attend programs so they can position themselves to meet their basic needs.

During the last decade of my AE career, I have been working with the Academy of Hope (AoH) Adult Public Charter School in the District of Columbia. The District is rare in that it is home to over 10% of adult charter schools in the nation (Simpson Baird, 2020). As one of the nation's largest adult public charter schools, AoH operates within a governance model that allows for instructional innovation while maintaining accountability for outcomes. This flexibility enables AoH to offer an array of AE services, such as beginning literacy and numeracy, Integrated Education and Training (IET), high-level credentialing, and postsecondary preparation.

In addition, AoH is also able to provide critical wraparound support. After years of experience in the AE field, AoH recognized that education alone could not sufficiently address the inequitable societal and systemic barriers facing many learners. AoH also realized that adults could not wait for these barriers to be completely addressed before successfully participating in AE programs.

Through various funding sources, AoH has been able to provide student support specialists who work with at-risk stop-out learners, providing both short- and long-term resources. For example, AoH recently started a small Emergency Fund Program to help students at dire risk of losing housing or having utilities disconnected. While emergency assistance addresses immediate crises, its strategic purpose is long-term persistence. Even brief stabilization can extend a learner's enrollment trajectory, increasing cumulative instructional hours, skill growth, and, ultimately, lifelong learning.

AoH is beginning to work with national research organizations to help us use our own program data to both better understand how barriers, such as housing instability and food insecurity, may affect periods of participation, as well as how our interventions may be helping to address these barriers to support longer periods of participation. However, to do this well, we are contending with the same data collection challenges that Reder discusses in his closing. Like many AE institutions, AoH faces structural constraints in collecting longitudinal outcome data beyond compliance requirements. I join Reder in urging the field to invest in data systems that extend beyond short-term compliance reporting to truly better understand lifelong learning.

I end with thanking Stephen Reder for this study. It has not only re-inspired my own resolve to meet the challenges of collecting robust programmatic research data; it has also reminded me of the importance of persevering toward the building of a lifelong and life-wide learning AE research agenda.

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