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# **Contextualizing Professional Development in Adult Learning with Urban Alternative High Schools**

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**Abstract:** *This case study presents the design, delivery and evaluation of a professional development curriculum developed in response to educators' and departmental needs in urban alternative high schools and based on a model of adult learning.*

## **Purpose of the Study**

A university-based professional development and research center developed and delivered a professional development model for administrators and staff in diverse high school settings that were undergoing extensive reorganization of curriculum and staff. This unique and contextual model and the professional development program were developed based not only on theory and research in adult learning and literacy, but also through extensive dialogue with the educational leadership and the teacher participants. The purpose of the study was to explore questions regarding how professional development consistent with adult learning principles could be designed and delivered to teach/refresh literacy and numeracy concepts, introduce adult learning principles relevant to at-risk high school students, provide practical strategies for classroom success, and support a learning community of professionals.

The school programs for at-risk high school students included those in incarcerated settings, pregnant teen programs, and low literacy programs. These programs were located throughout a large urban area setting that was undergoing extensive organizational and curricular restructuring. The goals were to update faculty on literacy and numeracy concepts (Belzer & St. Clair, 2004; Campbell & Malicky, 2002; Tout & Schmidt, 2002), while providing a grounding in a variety of androgogical and adult learning principles and practical strategies for classroom success (Caffarella, 2001; Cranton, 1996; Lawler & King, 2000). The professors worked with the region's educators to develop a model and professional development program that would address this specific region's diverse teaching and learning programs.

The model, distinctive in its formative, dynamic design, affords flexibility and responsiveness based on teacher, program, learner, and community needs (King, 2002, 2003). In this initiative considerations of prior experience, self-direction, transformational learning, and political dimensions of professional development came into play. At a time when political, budgetary, and organizational dynamics create profound demands on educational programs (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 1996), a professional development design that addresses context and supports learner participation, voice, and empowerment presents a unique framework for discussion.

## **Theoretical Bases**

Rather than "telling" educators what they need to do, the approach here utilizes adult learning principles to: (1) welcome and build on their valuable professional experience, (2) engage them as active learners, (3) create a climate of respect, and (4) emphasize critical analysis and application. (Caffarella, 2001; Lawler & King, 2000). Such an adult learning approach can provide an orientation and experience that expands the teaching and learning repertoire of participants while also facilitating their growth as learners.

The emphasis of such learning ties fundamentally to learner-centeredness, critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987) and constructivism (Fostnot, 1996) by incorporating teacher values and beliefs (Cranton, 1996, 2000; Pratt, 1998), and developing a frame of reference that is inclusive of diverse understandings (O'Sullivan, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1999, 2003). Consistent with Wlodkowski's model, the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsible Teaching, (1999, 2003), this approach incorporates demographic and programmatic distinctives, instructional support and action research perspectives. This approach integrates an action research orientation as teachers are constantly examining the context and needs of the learner and gathering data to use in instructional planning, delivery and evaluation (Creswell, 2003). An action research perspective emphasizes problematizing, assessment, research methodologies, analysis, and evaluation. Importantly, this method does not delegate evaluation to a summative position, but instead starts and continues with a framing perspective of research and evaluation initially and formatively so that participants see its vital connection.

### **Research Method**

Using a case study model, this research was guided by qualitative inquiry by the professors and professional developer (teacher-researchers) (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988). This research model is especially applicable to the research project as the teacher-researchers were applying the same reflective practice perspective they were articulating and demonstrating to the group of educators. Going further than reflective practice and action research however, this research provides a case study analysis of a model of professional development rooted in adult learning theory and research.

Six program site visits and concomitant multiple educator interviews were also conducted by the professors over several months. Data were collected from program site observations, multiple educator interviews, open ended surveys, formative and summative evaluations conducted during 2, two day and 1, one-day professional development workshops. These data were analyzed through tabulation, frequencies and constant comparison for emergent themes (Creswell, 1998). Additionally the professors reflected on the place the experience had in light of previous experiences, research and the literature. This process revealed that a synthesis of the findings and the development of a model for professional development and instruction could be developed and useful for others to consider and modify in different settings.

### **Program Design**

Professional development included two full days of participation for educators and one day for principals. This laid the groundwork for offsite support for the teachers for the academic year. Major purposes of the professional development were to present the new framework and orientation, provide bonafide opportunities for input in the reorganization and professional development planning, cultivate an environment of support, respect, and dialogue, and build community.

A Contextualized Model of Active Learning (CMAL) was developed and used in these initiatives and provided a solid foundation of pedagogical and andragogical theory, research and practice, while also vitally incorporating the professional expertise of the educators. This dynamic, flexible instructional design and delivery model considered not only the external contexts of the teacher's school and system, but also the internal contexts of the teacher's prior experience, attitudes, questions and concerns.

A welcome letter and reading assignment were sent to participants two weeks before their two-day workshops. The workshops actively engaged the educators in relevant, practical, and multiple activities. They wove interactive activities, whole group and small group discussion with illustrated presentations of adult learning and literacy concepts and vocabulary. They provided authentic projects in lesson planning and opportunities for reflection and collaboration. Formative evaluation by the professional developers were drawn from participant observation, discussion, feedback, and memo notes posted on available flip charts. At the end of each workshop day, participants completed written evaluation forms as well as debriefed in discussion groups.

It is critical to note that although this is a somewhat familiar educational perspective for adult educators of some persuasions, in the K-12 tradition within which these educators work, it is rarely experienced. Specifically the professional development these participants had usually engaged in before did not involve them in its initial nor continued development and it was not primarily learner-centered.

### **Participants**

101 teachers and administrators (69 female and 32 male) from programs from middle-school through post-secondary settings participated in the professional development. Their experience in teaching or advising, not necessarily in literacy programs, ranged from five to twenty years. The ethnic constituency was 60% Euro-American and 40% African-American. Their programs included, but were not limited to, incarcerated settings, pregnant teen programs, alternative high school programs, early offender programs, vocational education programs, and low literacy programs.

This group of teachers faces many challenges in their classrooms and professional lives including limited resources, students who have high risk, high need, and often with high absenteeism/truancy, students who need extended individual attention, needing to cope with multi-level curriculum in one classroom, and not often gaining much recognition or attention. These circumstances can create hopelessness and/or a resistance to change.

These attitudinal and systemic contexts were foundational considerations in understanding and developing a professional development model that is relevant to the needs of the educators. Rather than being based in an idealistic basis of theory and research it was critically important to recognize, discuss, affirm, and validate the educators, their students, their work and the environments they work in daily. An accurate understanding of the participants and communication with them was a valuable element of this project.

### **Findings**

Findings show that educators, who were willing to self-reflect and reevaluate their teaching strategies and methods, benefited from this form of professional development by integrating and sharing what they learned in meaningful ways. For example, small groups in each session were given an authentic assignment to produce a design for instruction, applicable to their context and considerate of their learners' needs and preferences. In a numeracy based project, they planned a house renovation project, employing math and problem solving skills to measure carpet, estimate sheetrock, and build bookshelves. This renovation project led to planned extended interdisciplinary studies through neighborhood and city-wide architectural and cultural study and field trips. The brainstorming, negotiating, and planning they exhibited in creating their plan and the creativity of the final presentations illustrated many aspects of active

learning. The educators experienced learner-centered learning in different ways than they had ever before. The firsthand experience was much more valuable than reading about instructional methods and educational perspectives. The educators increasingly became excited about the project as they saw how their students could also engage in them. Their group presentations demonstrated energy, creativity and their professional expertise.

A 73.3% response rate, 110 completed forms received from 150 distributions across multiple days, was gained in this program. The following table shows the most frequently, explicitly cited benefits of the professional development for the educators in the evaluations.

Table I. Benefits of Professional Development Sessions

	N	Percent
Practical classroom application development	51	46 %
Teachers' sharing of resources and expertise	35	32 %
New perspectives of learners, teaching and learning	27	25 %
Empowerment of teachers	22	20 %
Encouragement of teachers	9	8 %
Revitalization of teachers	7	6 %
Validation of teachers' expertise and practice	6	5 %

N=110

The instructional model that was developed, presented, discussed, used, and refined in the professional development was welcomed by the participants on several levels. Participants remarked on the effectiveness of this learner-centered model in contrast to prior professional development experiences. Initial skepticism of the intent and value of this professional development was replaced with active interest and involvement. A reading of an article about the importance of the initial orientation of at-risk students and another on critical reading skills, for example, gave rise to active dialogue in small groups about teacher authority and students as adult learners. When presented with a scenario addressing the motivation and retention of three fictional students, workshop participants brought the characters to life with passionate debate. The pace of the workshops and the “work” mediated active and transferable learning. As one participant expressed, she “will try more role playing and journal writing to teach a lesson.” They experienced the strategies and processes of adult learner centered environment and could weigh their worth in their own social and individual contexts.

In addition the large group, small group and informal dialogue and feedback saw articulation of empowerment, encouragement, revitalization and vitalization emerge frequently. Familiar with marginalization in teaching and students, the participants responded powerfully to this new experience focused on their concerns. Participants responded to the variety and timing in this professional development which interwove presentation, learning activities, discussion, demonstration and hands-on projects by staying engaged. Resources and strategies were introduced and then often revisited and reinforced throughout each session. They practiced, for example, a reading strategy for breaking up a lengthy passage into manageable chunks, called a “jigsaw,” by having each small group report on their portion of the article to the whole group. Often they recommended using that same strategy in their instructional plan presentations as

well, indicating their approval and learning. Again while many of these techniques, and others, were not necessarily new to the educators, they might not have thought about them or used them since their academic teacher education programs.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The focus on a dynamic, flexible instructional design and delivery model was a dramatically different orientation and experience for these teachers and learners. The emphasis on action research, accountability, constructivism, balanced literacy, active learning, collaborative learning, diverse learning styles, differentiated learning and learner-centeredness proved effective in sustainable professional development. The formative evaluation design allowed for this professional development to respond fluidly to the needs and concerns of the educators, demonstrating a respect for their expertise and addressing their needs in content. It allowed a flexibility that enabled professors and the developer to try approaches and take risks to see how the group would respond, to modify activities as needed and plan accordingly. Additionally this formative evaluation design flows into an action research perspective that poses questions about classroom settings, plans for and gathers data, analyzes the results and makes instructional decisions based on the data, educational expertise, theory and research.

Continued research by these researchers and others could assist in extending our understanding connections between reflective practice and action research in professional development, alternative high school programs for at-risk youth and adult education theory and practice, and integrated, contextualized change models. In order to extend this line of research inquiry questions that could be pursued may include: How do we most effectively bridge the body of knowledge and expertise of adult learning with the k-12 at-risk youth teaching community? What are the most effective linkages and venues for this mutual communication and dialogue? How do we build opportunities to focus on relationships, context and communication as we pursue professional development in scalable models? Specifically regarding the contextualized model, a larger study would seem merited to determine the benefits and limitations of the model.

On a more individual basis for the educators: How do educators of at-risk youth measure success for themselves? How do they develop increased understanding and facility with reflective practice? How do they develop increased understanding and facility with learner-centered classrooms? What do they see as the benefits and limitations of learner-centered classrooms? What are the challenges for active-learning, learner-centered professional development for these educators? What support do educators of at-risk youth desire most?

This paper presents a tested approach to the field of professional development that holds promise for long term impact and improvement among educators. It describes the development and implementation of a contextualized model of active learning (CMAL). Based on adult learning principles, this model concentrated on creating an environment of trust, inclusion and respect where participants felt safe and free to pose questions, gain practical information, and have authentic projects to present. Educators who have engaged in this professional development start with face to face daylong workshops and then are supported through school-based instructional support and assistance. The model of teacher and student empowerment has been enthusiastically received and yet critically improved through teacher participation.

Professional development that supports sharing dialogue, learning, insights, suggestions regarding teaching and learning can cultivate new perspectives and experiences in instructional

design, active learning techniques, context-based learning, adult learning principles, action research, and content.

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