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Catherine Green

American Institutes for Research

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Delivering Research-Based Professional Development to Adult Educators: Innovative Online Options

Catherine Green, American Institutes for Research, USA

Abstract: *Research demonstrates that an effective means of improving learner outcomes is by supporting instructors with professional development (PD), preferably job-embedded. Yet in California, the challenges of providing professional development to adult literacy providers are myriad and include funding issues, lack of job security, lack of adequate teacher preparation, etc. In light of these and other challenges, this paper highlights several innovative techniques used to deliver research-based PD to adult educators online.*

Research from K-12 education has shown that one of the most effective means of improving learner outcomes is by supporting instructors with professional development (PD). Though less abundant, research on professional development for adult literacy providers, suggests the same.

Yet for the population of adult literacy providers in California today and most likely for the coming few years, the challenges of providing professional development are myriad. Chief among them are the following:

- 1) a precipitous decline in state funding;
- 2) the instability of the teaching population;
- 3) adult educators' limited knowledge of methodology and adult learning processes as compared to their knowledge of subject-area content;
- 4) a frequent lack of program support for new instructors (e.g., orientation, mentors)

How can we address the many challenges of providing research-based professional development to adult educators in California? What are some innovative techniques being used to overcome these obstacles? This paper highlights relevant research, defines the challenges in more detail, and describes several innovative practices currently used by the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO), a State Leadership Project of the California Department of Education, Adult Education Office.

The research on professional development for adult literacy providers is relatively scant. The following highlights relevant findings regarding planning and designing professional development. In 2003, Smith, Hofer, et alia published the results of their study of 106 adult basic and literacy teachers, called *How teachers change: A study of professional development in adult education*. In it they recommended that instructors collaborate with professional developers to design professional development activities whose content is most relevant to their needs.

Sherman, Kutner, Tibbetts, & Wiedler (2000) and Smith et al. (2003) underscored the importance of examining data to determine what kinds of teachers are needed, which levels they serve, and what content knowledge teachers need to possess in order to be effective. Sherman et al. (2000) recommended that teacher needs assessments include strengths, areas for improvement as well as individual preferences for learning and professional development. Dennison and Kirk described the adult learning process as a cyclical one of “do, review, learn, apply, do, review, learn, apply” (1990); this cycle can be used effectively when designing professional development for adult educators.

In reporting on their three-year longitudinal study of the effects of professional development on math and science teachers' instruction, Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2002) found that professional development focused on specific instructional practices increased the teachers' use of said practices with their students. Moreover, they found that incorporating active learning opportunities increased the effectiveness of the professional development on the teachers' instruction. Besides incorporating active learning opportunities into professional development, a supportive environment can be influential. Rosenholtz (1989) found that teachers who felt supported in their own learning and instructional practices were more committed and effective than instructors who did not have supports such as teacher networks for learning, sharing, and problem solving. Applying Etienne Wenger (2006)'s concept of *communities of practice* to groups of educators, such as Professional Learning Communities, can yield tremendous support for learning, sharing and problem solving among teachers.

The challenges identified above have been reiterated in the literature as well. For example, two research publications from the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) Network, *Professional Development for Teachers of Adult English Language Learners* (2007) and *Education for Adult English Language Learners in the United States: Trends, Research, and Promising Practices* (2008), describes the instability of the adult education teaching population, which are comprised primarily of part-time instructors. From the above literature, some common points emerge: many adult educators lack access to and support for professional development of any kind, but especially job-embedded PD. Teachers also frequently feel isolated from their colleagues and are more likely to make changes in their attitudes and/or behavior when they take part in the decision-making within their programs and are given additional opportunities to connect with colleagues.

What role can technology play, if any, in addressing these points? While the medium is not the message, it may offer some additional options. In its discussion of professional development and teacher quality, *Education for Adult English Language Learners in the United States: Trends, Research, and Promising Practices* (2008) cites as a promising practice "using technology-based approaches to offer professional development options that optimize financial resources, reach geographically scattered teachers and programs, and promote collaboration and community." *More recently, with the* advent of many new, free or low-cost Web 2.0 tools, professional developers and teacher educators can increase teachers' access to professional development and offer them additional opportunities to learn from fellow teachers and mentors. For example, Steve Hargadon founded the Web site *Classroom 2.0*, using Ning, a free, social networking technology tool, and in so doing, established a community of practice of educators who are interested in using technology. *Classroom 2.0* recently celebrated its third anniversary and has grown to 40,000 members worldwide. In such environments, teachers' sense of isolation may be reduced when they are given a chance to work with colleagues from their own programs and/or with remote teachers who share similar professional development interests and needs. When given access to information and support from experienced mentors and peers, instructors may be more motivated to apply what they are learning with their own students.

The California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO) is harnessing technology in innovative ways to deliver professional development. Administered for the California Department of Education, Adult Education Office, by the American Institutes for Research, CALPRO currently employs four types of alternative delivery methods to provide online

professional development. Each of these will be described briefly and considered in light of the challenges identified in this paper.

1. Facilitated Online Courses

Led by a subject-area expert, these courses are asynchronous, meaning participants may access them around the clock, engaging in weekly discussions with their facilitator and peers and completing weekly assignments when convenient. Four weeks long, each course requires approximately 12-16 hours of study. New course content and related written discussion forums are unveiled weekly within a course management system. CALPRO now uses Moodle, the open-source course management system; until Fall 2009, it had used Blackboard.

Current titles include:

Designing Programs for Adults with Learning Disabilities, Session 1: Understanding Learning Disabilities: Awareness for Adult Educators

Designing Programs for Adults with Learning Disabilities, Session 2: Effective Instructional Strategies

Effective Lesson Planning

Enhancing Learner Persistence

Managing the ESL Multilevel Class

Optimizing ESL Instructional Planning: Management, Monitoring, and Reflection

Understanding the Adult Learner, Session 1: Adult Learning and Development

Using Questioning Strategies to Improve Instruction, Session 1: Strategies that Improve Cognition

Because these courses are free and asynchronous, they address the challenges of lack of funding and access to PD. Also, they offer many opportunities for the educators to develop a community of practice and build in teacher networks as support; they also allow teachers to connect research to practice and use methods that build on adult learning processes.

2. Self-Directed Online Courses

Each course offers 12-15 hours of independent professional development, in which the individual participant works at his/her own pace. Neither facilitator nor other participants is present. Registration is open year-round, and the participant can access the course 24/7. These courses are modular, and the participant may choose to do as many or as few of the self-study units as desired. They are delivered through Moodle and employ a variety of multimedia to accommodate different learning preferences and stimulate the independent learner.

Current titles include:

Learner Goal Setting in Adult Education Programs

Orientation for New ABE Teachers
Orientation for New ESL Teachers

Because these courses are free, asynchronous, and self-directed, they address the challenges of lack of funding and access to PD. Also, because they are research-based and built on principles of adult learning, they offer many opportunities for the educators to build on their prior knowledge and connect theory and research to practice.

3. *Virtual Workroom for Multilevel ESL Instructors and companion electronic Professional Learning Community (e-PLC)*

Two distinct but paired asynchronous PD resources: housed on the CALPRO Web site, the *Virtual Workroom* presents a series of challenges in teaching multilevel ESL classes to adult learners focusing on five areas: needs assessment, lesson planning, group work, materials, and evaluation. To meet these challenges, the Virtual Workroom offers a wealth of research-based PD resources and effective strategies. Registration is open year-round and access is available online, any time.

The Multilevel ESL *electronic Professional Learning Community (e-PLC)* is also available online, any time, but requires visitors to become members. Membership is free and open to all adult literacy providers working in programs funded by the California Department of Education, Adult Education Office. In the e-PLC, educators can discuss research-based materials and resources presented in CALPRO's Virtual Workroom and practitioners can follow a blog by subject-area expert, ask an e-PLC mentor for help, exchange ideas, teaching tips, and materials with their peers. The e-PLC uses Ning, the same social networking technology found in Classroom 2.0.

Together, this pair of asynchronous PD resources addresses several challenges: 1) declining funding for adult education and, by extension, access to professional development for adult educators; these PD resources are free and require no travel. Because they are asynchronous, they are open around the clock and make PD more accessible; 2) a frequent lack of program support for new instructors (e.g., orientation, mentors). The e-PLC provides ongoing community of practice and support to new and seasoned teachers alike. While less experienced teachers can seek advice from more experienced teachers, the Ning technology at the same time encourages leadership: because it is asynchronous and there is a great deal of freedom of choosing discussion topics, a teacher who might not feel comfortable leading an in-service at her school would be able to be a leader in the e-PLC.

4. *Synchronous Online Trainings*

This last type of alternative delivery method features meeting online but in real time. Here educators come together to discuss a topic of interest, listen to a presentation by a expert, watch a demonstration by a seasoned practitioner, or engage in a question-and-answer exchange with a researcher. Depending on the topic, audience, and goal, the format may vary. For example, presentation-oriented Webinars typically accommodate large numbers of attendees (50, 75, 100), are about 60 minutes long, and feature a short question-and-answer period at the end. By contrast, interactive online workshops typically accommodate smaller numbers (20-30), may last longer than an hour (e.g., a three-hour workshop delivered in two 90-min. segments), and require a great deal of audience participation. Between these segments, these workshops also feature interim assignments, which vary in intensity. The web-based meeting platform CALPRO

uses is called Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro, or “Connect”; Connect is equipped with voice-over IP and CALPRO has also utilized a toll-free teleconference.

To provide opportunities for enhanced learning and community, CALPRO has been offering synchronous Webinars as part of its asynchronous online courses since 2008 (two per four-week course). Beginning in Spring 2009, CALPRO collaborated with CDE and State Leadership Projects to offer the Administrators Forum, a series of Webinars on emerging priority topics for administrators in the changing adult education California landscape. In 2009-2010 CALPRO offered its own Webinar series on College Transitions. Finally, in Spring 2010, CALPRO offered several newly developed interactive online trainings on the following topics:

Managed Enrollment

Teaching Critical Thinking

Study Circle Facilitation Training

Advising the Adult Learner: The Teacher’s Role

These synchronous online trainings, whether Webinars or interactive workshops, address all four challenges: 1) lack of funding and access to PD; 2) instability of the teaching population; 3) adult educators’ limited knowledge of methodology and adult learning processes as compared to their knowledge of subject-area content; 4) a frequent lack of program support for new instructors (e.g., orientation, mentors). By bringing seasoned educators together with new practitioners, the synchronous online events build community and capacity; they also provide training in instructional strategies and adult learning principles. Because they are free and are offered in short segments, it makes it possible even for part-time instructors, who make up the bulk of the adult education teaching population, to access research-based PD online, at a distance.

In conclusion, while technology is not the answer to all the challenges of providing research-based professional development, using alternative delivery methods can expand access to PD and help build meaningful communities of practice to support adult educators in their individual and collective development.

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- Additional Resources: The California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO)*
<http://www.calpro-online.org>