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International Research Conference (AEGT2020)
(Vancouver, BC)

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Jennifer Kobrin

Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

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Recommended Citation

Kobrin, J.(2020).The role of peer inquiry communities in advancing technology integration for practitioners in adult basic education. Peer reviewed and approved by the AERC Steering Committee for the Adult Education in Global Times Conference. University of British Columbia. Canada. (Conference Cancelled).

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HOW PARTICIPATION IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE INFLUENCES TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION FOR ADULT EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS

Jennifer Kobrin

Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania (USA)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how peer communities, one element of a larger collaborative, inquiry-based professional development project in adult education, advance participants' knowledge and use of technology. As the designer and facilitator of the project, the author drew from memos and field notes, in addition to interviews and written reflections with 6 of 9 total participants who were teachers and administrators in Adult Basic Education programs. Findings indicate successful technology integration entailed participants combining their own experiences with established research to create "knowledge-of-practice" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and that knowledge generation within the peer communities reflected a horizontal trajectory.

Keywords: Technology integration, technology adoption, technology, adult education, adult basic education, communities of practice, practitioner inquiry, professional development

INTRODUCTION

As integration of technology is more and more a necessary component to teaching in Adult Basic Education (ABE), opportunities for support are needed (Newman, Rosbash, & Sarkisian, 2015; Rosen & Vanek, 2017). At the same time, as the former technology director of an adult education intermediary in a Northeast U.S. city, many technology training initiatives I led or participated in narrowly focused on the "technical." Jacobson (2012) notes that although approaches that support more ongoing, open-ended inquiry for teachers can be important factors in long-term technology integration in adult education, opportunities are lacking in the field.

Starting in 2018, I designed and facilitated a collaborative, inquiry-based project in a Northeast U.S. city focused on technology integration for adult education teachers and administrators for approximately a year and a half and conducted a research study investigating its' affordances and limitations for participants. This design allowed me to understand the approach through the lens of a researcher-practitioner. The goal of this paper is to explore how one aspect of the project, peer communities, may have advanced participants' knowledge and practice related to technology integration.

As part of the larger project, groups of 3-4 participants self-selected into peer communities based on shared problems of practice. They refined their broader problems into inquiry questions to explore, both collective and individual. Each group met at least once monthly and wrote joint reflections.

The research question I explore here is: What was the role of peer communities in advancing technology integration for practitioners in a collaborative, inquiry-based model of professional development?

PERSPECTIVES

The design of the peer communities and my interpretive lens as a researcher-practitioner was informed by communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Community of practice theory emphasizes the social aspect of knowledge generation and making sense of on-the-ground experiences for practitioners (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Communities of practice have been used in technology adoption efforts in education, such as one element in a larger professional development model including mentoring and coaching (Kopcha, 2010).

In their framework for practitioner inquiry, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) emphasize knowledge, practice, and community. Using the term "knowledge-of-practice," Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) problematize the dichotomy between informal knowledge generated by teachers and formal knowledge generated by researchers. Instead, knowledge-of-practice emphasizes a focus on collective knowledge generation of practitioners, a breakdown of the informal/formal dichotomy, and the local-global dialectic. Practitioner inquiry has been employed as a lens for exploring teaching practices related to technology (Johnston, Hadley, & Waniganayake, 2020; Maxwell, 2015; Noguerón-Liu, 2017), and "collaborative inquiry" has also been used for educators to explore digital literacy practices (Hobbs & Coiro, 2019).

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

As a practitioner-researcher, I designed and facilitated the larger technology integration project, documenting my experiences through memos and field notes. The methodology used for the study reflects a practitioner inquiry approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Near the end of the project, I also conducted interviews with six of the nine individuals who participated to completion, and analyzed artifacts produced by the participants who opted-in to the research. The artifacts included reflections they had written throughout the project where they made sense of critical moments in their programs and explored data gathered using a variety of methods, from learner interviews and observations to formal assessments. Limitations include the lack of in-depth classroom observations and interviews with learners, an important perspective the author hopes to include in a future project.

FINDINGS

The experiences of the participants in peer communities highlights the complex relationship between knowledge and practice. I found that successful technology integration required individuals to combine their own experiences with established research and theoretical frameworks, and that knowledge generation within the peer communities reflected a horizontal trajectory.

This finding is highlighted in one participant's journey to increase retention. As the chief administrator in a new school for adults whose prior experience was primarily in K-12, John (name changed) found the research literature was incomplete:

"Because...the literature says, right, there's like a 25 to 35% attrition rate and...anywhere you go...the adults who enter some sort of adult education program are going to leave in the first like, three to four weeks probably. Like all the papers say that, but it doesn't really tell you how that happens," (Interview, 12/19/19).

John relied heavily on his peers' experiences, who had spent a longer time in adult education, and those of his learners, to further understand why individuals might leave his program.

Despite being relatively new to adult education, John also contributed expertise in his group, using his technical knowledge of Google Forms and his emerging learnings about retention patterns during the project to help one of his peers implement a survey. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), "knowledge-making is understood as a pedagogic act that is constructed in the context of use, immediately connected to the knower, and, although relevant to immediate situations, inevitably a process of theorizing," (p. 133). John successfully increased retention; most of the knowledge he used to do so was not from formal theories or research, but from peers and feedback from learners.

Findings have caused me to engage more deeply with my theoretical frameworks and question some elements. For example, although communities of practice are rooted in the idea of experts and novices through "liminal peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), practitioners in this project instead engaged with a more horizontal theory of knowledge generation where all members made important contributions regardless of expertise or background (Gutiérrez, Hunter, & Arzubiaga, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Rather than being an "implementer of other people's knowledge," (p. 137), practitioners' are uniquely equipped to theorize about their own experiences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Despite the lack of a coherent standard of professionalism or credentialing system within the field (Bierema, 2011), the diversity of prior life experiences which are common to practitioners in adult education creates a richness of perspective that can be generative to engaging with dilemmas of practice.

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