

Professional Development for Adult Literacy Tutors

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What is professional development? Within the field of adult literacy, professional development usually refers to training activities available to administrators, teachers, tutor trainers, and tutors; some trainings are mandatory, others are optional. Most receive the bulk of their professional development through single-session workshops; tutors usually attend a pre-service workshop.

Research, however, defines high-quality professional development as more than a single pre-service training, or sporadic attendance at random - albeit interesting - workshops. Rather, it is the continuous and systematic improvement and broadening of knowledge and skills necessary for the effective performance of professional duties. It should be viewed as essential to professional success, not as an adjunct to professional duties.

It is important to acknowledge that the research on professional development for adult literacy tutors is limited; however, much can be learned from research that has targeted the professional development of teachers. Research has consistently indicated that the teacher is the most important factor in student achievement. In the field of adult literacy, this includes both teachers and tutors, as tutors are often adult learners' only teacher and the single most important factor in the learners' achievement. As such, professional development for tutors is as important as it is for teachers and what we know about the knowledge and skills teachers need to help students learn can help us do a better job of preparing tutors for working with adults with diverse learning needs.

It is also of value to recognize that the role of the tutor is challenging for other reasons, as well. Tutors work part-time as volunteers, yet they are often paired with adult learners who require highly individualized instruction that incorporates multiple instructional approaches to teach basic literacy skills. It is important to emphasize that teaching basic skills can be as, or more, difficult than teaching higher-level skills, and lower-level students are more likely to have learning difficulties.

According to Smith and Gillespie (2007), we can increase adults' learning gains only if we improve the effectiveness of our adult literacy teachers, which includes tutors. The research clearly suggests that high-quality professional development can help tutors, like teachers, be more effective. Not only will this have a positive impact on adult learner outcomes, but tutor retention will also improve as tutors' feelings of

self-efficacy and satisfaction increase due to the success they experience as they make significant differences in learners' lives of the learners they tuto.

Best Practices for Tutors

The very best practice is always striving to be a better tutor. With regard to tutoring, although there are different ways of providing instruction, some teaching practices are more effective than others. The critical fact is that there are not only best practices, but also worst practices, and the differences between them, in terms of learner success, can be significant.

Effective teaching (tutoring) practice cannot be separated from teaching/learning theories that tell us *why* those practices work. Many tutors dislike hearing about theories – they would rather be told what to do in simple terms. But, if they don't understand the theory, they will have a difficult time individualizing the practice to fit the needs of learners and determining if they're doing it well or if it is working.

The best teaching practices are the best because they are better than other practices–this means that they get better results under specified conditions. They also change with new research findings and theories. So, high-quality tutor professional development is a necessity if we are to provide learners with the most effective tutoring.

Tutors as Learners

In order to develop and provide high-quality professional development, we need to understand tutors as learners. Joyce (1983) proposed five interesting categories to describe teachers as learners, which we can apply to tutors:

- *Omnivores* are tutors who seek out and actively use every available source of information and professional development opportunity. They are highly motivated and self-directed problem solvers.
- *Active consumers* are tutors who seek out and use information, and participate in professional development within a particular area. They, too, are highly motivated and self-directed, but may need encouragement to expand their areas of expertise.
- *Passive consumers* are tutors who attend professional development opportunities that are presented to them, but they do not seek them out. They may or may not try new ways to provide effective instruction, and rarely engage in self-directed problem solving.



- *Entrenched tutors* are suspicious of change, and participate in professional development only in areas where they already feel successful. They may actively or surreptitiously oppose new ideas. Research indicates that they may feel they are more knowledgeable and effective than they actually are.
- *Withdrawn tutors* are actively opposed to engaging in professional development opportunities. We need to try to understand why they are opposed to professional development, and we must be ready to replace them, if they refuse to learn and implement effective tutoring practices.



Joyce's categories suggest that not all tutors are motivated to learn new ways of teaching adult learners. So, what do we do about tutors who are unlikely to want to change their practices through professional development? A first step is to try to understand what motivates tutors to engage in professional development. Fuller and Brown (1975) identified three types of *concerns* that pertain to teachers' feelings about their effectiveness. If we apply these concerns to tutors, we can use them as possible reasons why tutors might want to participate in professional development.

- **Self-survival concerns:** Having adequate knowledge, finding one's place in the agency, and satisfying others' expectations of them. These concerns might be those of newer tutors.
- **Task concerns:** The ability to plan and deliver instruction, and handle administrative work.
- **Impact concerns:** The ability to meet a student's individual needs and provide an environment that increases a student's motivation to learn. Experienced tutors are more likely to be concerned about impact.

However, studies have also found that concerns change over time – suggesting that, as tutors change their practices by adopting new attitudes and strategies, they develop different types of concerns. Linking the content of professional development to tutor concerns is one way to motivate active participation in ongoing professional development.

Teacher Self-efficacy

The research on teacher self-efficacy can also help us better understand tutor concerns and what will motivate them to participate in professional development. Research has found that teachers are more likely to adopt new practices as a result of professional development if they believe they can be successful as teachers – in other words, if they can increase their feelings of self-efficacy. However, some teachers perceive themselves as highly competent and don't believe they need to adopt new practices; consequently, they are less motivated to learn and try new instructional strategies. New teachers, on the other hand, often have low levels of self-efficacy, which translate into questions about whether or not they

can be successful as teachers. If they believe professional development can help them develop the skills necessary to be effective, they are likely to participate and increase their level of self-efficacy.

Smith (2003) found that stronger motivation to attend professional development was related to teacher change, which, in turn, had a positive impact on student outcomes. Researchers agree that teachers who implement a new practice, as a result of professional development, show an increase in perceived self-efficacy when they see that the new strategy has worked. Research has also indicated that teachers increase their level of self-efficacy, proportional to the duration of professional development. Again, we can apply this to professional development for tutors.

When we think about motivating tutors to actively engage in ongoing professional development opportunities, we also need to consider the perceived value, as defined by impact, of tutor training. Research indicates that teachers believe professional development activities significantly improve their teaching only if followed by follow-up activities and additional training (NCES, 2001). If tutors fail to see improved outcomes as a result of professional development, their motivation to participate in ongoing training will diminish.

High-Quality Professional Development

So, what is high-quality professional development for tutors? The short answer is that high-quality professional development changes tutor practices in a way that increases adult learner outcomes. After all, that is the ultimate goal.

Research indicates that the type of professional development is not as important as the amount and quality of professional development teachers/tutors attend – in other words, the type of training can vary, as long as it has the following features of high-quality professional development.

- Has a strong connection to practice.
- Is based on analysis of student performance data.
- Presents research and theory as the foundation of effective practices and instructional strategies.
- Is ongoing and of longer duration.
- Is continuous and builds on previous learning.
- Includes modeling and provides tutors with opportunities for guided practice of newly learned strategies with feedback.
- Includes independent, follow-up, job-embedded activities and practice.
- Provides follow-up assistance and support while tutors apply newly learned strategies to practice.

- Has a strong emphasis on reflection and helps tutors develop a way of looking at their own practice by analyzing, adapting, and always challenging their assumptions, while learning from one teaching situation to inform the next teaching situation.
- Encourages collaborative learning activities among teachers and tutors.
- Encourages the sharing of concerns among teachers and tutors.

It is important to acknowledge that pre-service tutor training is necessary, but is not sufficient. New tutors cannot learn all they need to know in a few hours, nor can they be expected to successfully implement everything they learn without continuing guidance, practice, and support.

Professional Development for Reading Instruction

Reading serves as the major conduit for all learning (Podhajski, Mather, Natan, & Sammons, 2009). Each stage of the reading process requires intensive professional development that explains the research-based reasons for recommended practices – the goal is to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet students' diverse and changing reading needs. Yet, research reveals that many teachers are underprepared to teach reading and have limited knowledge of the structure of the English language.

When tutors work with beginning adult readers, their ability to provide effective reading instruction is of paramount importance. Tutors need to understand how language works at the sound, word, sentence, and text levels. They need to be able to (a) organize and sequence information for instruction, (b) choose the best examples of words for teaching sound-letter relationships, (c) use knowledge of word parts to explain spelling, (d) integrate word study into meaningful reading and writing activities, and (e) interpret and respond to student errors (Moats, 1995). Yet, research indicates that teachers of struggling readers have reported that their limited knowledge of how to teach word recognition skills and phonics is a major obstacle to their instruction (Bos, Mather, Silver-Pacuilla, & Narr, 2000), and researchers' direct observations further substantiate that teachers spend minimal instructional time teaching students various word recognition and analysis skills (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). These findings reveal that a substantial gap exists between research-based reading instruction and how prepared teachers and tutors are to implement those research-based practices (Moats & Foorman, 2003). These findings also indicate a need for high-quality professional development to prepare tutors to teach reading skills.

We cannot rely on tutors to tell us they need professional development in reading because researchers have found that teachers may believe they are more knowledgeable and prepared for teaching reading than they actually are. In fact, a 2004 study (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004) found

that the teachers who reported that they were experts in phonemic awareness had a more difficult time counting the number of phonemes in words than the teachers who indicated that they had minimal skills in this area. The researchers concluded that teachers tend to overestimate their reading-related knowledge, which may make them less likely to participate in and implement new ideas from professional development. In another study, Bell, Ziegler, and McCallum (2004) obtained similar results, finding little relationship between teachers' actual knowledge of reading instruction and their self-ratings of their knowledge and competence.

Professional Development for Writing Instruction

Writing is important in daily life, as a family member, as a worker, and as a citizen. Research tells us that writing can be taught. Tutors need to know research-based strategies to teach adults the process of writing, and the *hows* and *whys* of writing opinions pieces and arguments, expository/informative pieces, and narratives.

Professional Development for Math Instruction

Adult literacy learners need basic math skills to perform daily life tasks, to pass the GED®, and to qualify for jobs and postsecondary education and training. Yet, studies of adult education professional development have found that adult educators rank math instructional strategies last or near last in training requests, and do not see math as a high priority area for professional development (Sabatini et al., 2000).

Professional Development Challenges

While the research is quite clear regarding the need for high-quality tutor professional development, the following challenges must be addressed:

- Many tutors have very little previous training or experience related to teaching adults, yet they have part-time volunteer status, which makes it difficult to participate regularly in professional development activities or for extended periods of time.
- Tutor turnover is high, which requires ongoing tutor training at all levels.
- Tutors are often matched with adults who have learning challenges.
- Tutors are often required to teach in multiple subject areas, which means trainings need to cover all subject areas.
- Professional development opportunities are not always offered locally, which requires tutors to travel or participate virtually.
- Tutor trainers need to understand the material in order to teach it effectively.

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