



# Teachers as Adult Learners

## Implications of Theory and Research for Designing Effective Professional Development

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Just before the start of school in August 2015, a widely-circulated meme on social media featured a pair of teachers slumped over a table, with the following caption: “When I die, I hope it’s at a faculty meeting or teacher in-service, because the transition from life to death would be so subtle!” This meme was so popular because of two inconvenient truths: research shows that professional development (PD) experiences are pervasive in education, and that teachers often view those experiences as ineffective. For example, Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) analyzed large-scale, national surveys of public and private school teachers and found that participation in PD is nearly universal, with short-term conferences or workshops predominating. However, “most teachers were not enthusiastic about the usefulness of the professional development they received,” with less than two-thirds describing their PD experiences as useful or very useful (21).

Research on PD in Christian school settings reveals similar findings. Educators at member schools in the Pacific Northwest, Mid-Atlantic, and Mid-America regions of the country also reported via surveys that Christian school teachers participate in PD at a high rate (Headley, 2003; Finn, Swezey, and Warren 2010; and Neuzil and Vaughn 2010, respectively). However an in-depth study by Montoro (2013), using the National Staff Development Council’s (NSDC) Standards Assessment Inventory, found that “professional development opportunities for the Christian teachers in this study appear to be well below

the ideal shown in the NSDC standards” (63). Specifically, PD opportunities varied little, tending to be “traditional, mostly conferences and workshops, without taking into consideration teacher experience or knowledge” (63). Additionally, while teachers wanted content-specific PD experiences, school leaders more often designed broad PD experiences without direct application to content areas. And while teachers expressed a strong desire to collaborate and network with other teachers, school leaders “rarely” scheduled such opportunities in their PD programs (63). Overall, while Christian school teachers “believed that their educational leaders had strong beliefs about the importance of teacher professional learning... [they] wanted their leaders to *be better role models* of professional growth and learning” (60, emphasis added).

While certainly not all PD experiences are ineffective, and many Christian schools have developed robust PD programs to address the specific needs of their teachers, there is room for improvement across the field of Christian education. It is against this backdrop that Swaner (2016) conducted a literature synthesis of effective practices in PD for Christian school teachers and leaders. The synthesis’ findings are shared in this ongoing *CSE* series, with this issue examining how adult learning theory and related research can inform PD design.

### Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning theory—as the name implies—provides

a conceptual understanding of the nature of the learning process in adulthood. Perhaps the most significant insight from adult learning theory is that optimal adult learning is *active and iterative* in nature, as opposed to passive and linear. Kolb's (1984) seminal theory portrays this in terms of a learning cycle, where adults begin with their own experiences, reflect on those experiences, develop new understandings, and put their new learning back into action. It follows that teacher PD should provide opportunities that engage in this full spectrum of learning. For example, instead of sitting through a single workshop on the use of technology in the classroom, teachers who are learning to use that technology would first experiment with the technology, next spend time debriefing with fellow teachers, then rework a lesson or unit to incorporate the technology, and finally implement the integrated lesson in their own classrooms.

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Adult learning theory also posits that adults learn best by addressing *authentic problems of practice* in their own workplaces (Schön 1987; Garvin 2000). By having to work through complicated or uncertain situations, adults learn how to reflect and make adjustments in action. This is a particularly valuable skill for complex environments like classrooms, where teachers must continuously attend to all the elements that impact learning (e.g., student needs, teacher actions, content, assessment/feedback loops, and class dynamics). For PD, this means that instead of hypothetical situations that are explored away from the classroom, teachers can engage in ongoing experimentation and reflection within the context of their own teaching. Activities such as peer coaching and co-teaching are PD activities that can help facilitate this reflection-in-action.

Additionally, adult learning theory suggests that learning doesn't stop at acquiring new knowledge or skills and implementing them in practice. Rather, as described by Mezirow (1991), learning can become *transformative* when it affects teachers' identities as professionals. Transformative learning is initiated when adults experience a "disorienting dilemma" in their work, and facilitated when that dilemma is followed by self-examination, questioning assumptions, exploring new options, planning a course of action, acquiring new knowledge and skills to implement this plan, and integrating this experience into their identity and roles. By having teachers focus on their own dilemmas of practice, and supporting them through this process of working through those dilemmas, PD experiences can become transformative and enable teachers to grow in their roles and identities as professionals.

Finally, adult learning theory proposes that adults learn best when engaged in *social contexts*, rather than in isolation. Wenger (1998) asserts that adults make meaning in "communities of practice." For teachers, these communities are the school settings in which they work. Wenger's view would caution against teachers' participation solely in off-site PD, or in PD that is disconnected from the realities of their specific schools. Rather, PD should provide opportunities for teachers to engage in ongoing "actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value" (Wenger 1998, 10). In a PD program that regularly facilitates community-wide engagement, school leaders and teachers share responsibility for identifying areas for improvement in teaching and learning. By working collaboratively to address these areas, they can forge a culture of continuous school improvement together.

## Related Research

Adult learning theory grew as a conceptual basis for teacher PD around the turn of the century (Stewart 2014; Desimone 2009). As Drago-Severson (2004) explained, it became "generally accepted that professional development in the 21st century must center on creating opportunities for teachers to examine and reflect on their practice and how it can be improved... It attends to the individual and collective growth of teachers and is based on the philosophy that learning is a lifelong process" (105). Correspondingly, many "site-based" forms of PD emerged during this time, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), coaching and mentoring, and inquiry-based PD (Hooker 2008; Gaible and Burns 2005). Federal legislation from the same period further encouraged the development of these approaches; for example, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) provided descriptors for "high quality" PD that intentionally excluded workshops and other short-term, direct-delivery methods (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center 2011).

In addition to PD practice and legislation, adult learning theory came to inform research on PD effectiveness. From the mid-1990s until approximately 2010, substantial research was conducted around "a core set of features of effective professional development" (Desimone 2009, 181) that could be built into any PD practice—whether workshops, coaching, mentoring, and so forth—and thereby bolster its effectiveness. Five such features, all proposed and supported by adult learning theory, figure prominently in the literature:

1. Content focus, or a PD focus on the specific academic subject matter taught by teachers;
2. Active learning, which is the opposite of teachers passively listening to or watching a presentation of information;
3. Coherence, which most frequently is described as PD alignment with school, district, and state reform initiatives;

4. Duration, or longer time span as well as greater total number of hours spent in PD; and
5. Collective participation, which entails grouping teachers who work together within the school for PD activities.

In the research, teacher self-report data suggests that these features do in fact bolster the effectiveness of PD experiences. In analyses of several large-scale teacher surveys (Garet et al. 2001; Desimone et al. 2002), correlational data indicated that teachers found PD experiences with these features to be the most worthwhile. Teachers also reported that PD experiences with these characteristics were more likely to influence or change their teaching practice. Interestingly, some studies suggest that duration of PD experiences is particularly influential (Blank and de las Alas 2009; Garet et al. 2001), as duration may not only have a direct impact on PD effectiveness, but also can indirectly support other components (for example, weekly PD time may afford teachers greater opportunity to collaborate over the year, as opposed to one or two PD days at the end of the summer).

Unfortunately, there are a number of important limitations to this research, due to the fact that these surveys relied solely on teacher self-report. In addition to their susceptibility to recall issues and respondent biases, these studies neither verified whether teachers actually changed their practice as a result of PD nor measured the impact of PD on student learning. Later and smaller studies attempted to remedy this, by examining student achievement and evaluating PD programs specifically designed to incorporate the five features. However, results from this subsequent research are mixed and largely inconclusive (Hill, Beisiegel, and Jacob 2013). Additionally, a lingering question is whether other features—such as teacher readiness and attitudes, or PD facilitators' skills—might be equally if not more important for PD effectiveness. It is also undetermined whether a tipping point exists, where enough of one feature or the addition of other features is combined to yield an effective PD experience (Desimone 2009).

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### Implications for Schools

In the literature synthesis by Swaner (2016), empirical evidence was the bar set for determining PD effectiveness. While falling somewhat short, it must be acknowledged that these PD features—content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation—are aligned with the tenets of

adult learning theory, and teachers themselves report that these features help to make PD more effective. Further, these features have tremendous face validity, or make “common sense,” for designing PD. In a popular book on faculty development, Reeves (2010) asserts: “We know what effective [PD] looks like. It is intensive and sustained, it is directly relevant to the needs of teachers and students, and it provides opportunities for application, practice, reflection, and reinforcement. We also know what it doesn't look like: death by PowerPoint, ponderous lectures...” (22) As in the meme from 2015, effective PD doesn't look like the two teachers slumped over a table, contemplating death as an easy transition from PD.

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Taking this all into account, it makes sense to consider adult learning theory as providing not a set formula for ensuring PD effectiveness, but rather guiding principles for overall design of PD programs. Croft et al. (2010) arrive at this conclusion in their own review of the research on job-embedded PD (JEPD):

Much of the research on professional development for teachers is descriptive without causal investigation, making it hard to pinpoint what factors contribute to highly effective [PD] that leads to improved practice, which leads to improved student learning outcomes... Although more rigorous research is needed, including both experimental and nonexperimental research, the existing research base does provide *important guidance for the design of high-quality JEPD*. (8, emphasis added)

Certainly more and better research is needed, but in the meantime school leaders face real-time decisions about how to provide quality PD programs. Incorporating features supported by adult learning theory—like content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation into PD programs—can be a promising place to start. When it comes to designing PD experiences, it may be a good idea to treat teachers like adults.

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A bibliography containing all citations, as well as the full synthesis, can be accessed at [www.acsi.org/pdswaner](http://www.acsi.org/pdswaner).