Adult Education: What Makes Teaching Effective?

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Introduction

Adult education instructors across California represent a group as diverse as the programs and organizations with which they work. Any meaningful discussion about effective adult teaching practices must account for diverse teaching contexts—including school districts, community colleges, community-based organizations, libraries, and correctional facilities[1]—that serve students with skills that range from basic literacy to international professional training.[2] In California, more than 25% of adult learners are enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs, 13% participate in Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and nearly 60% are English language learners (ELL).[3] Relevant discourse on the skills, competencies, and practices that contribute to effective instruction will therefore be adaptable to the various roles and statuses of adult educators. In California, only 9% of adult educators teach full time, while nearly 30% are part-time staff, and more than 60% are unpaid volunteers. In addition to teaching loads, some of these positions also include administrative, supervisory, or other ancillary responsibilities. To complicate matters further, adult educators often arrive to the field with a range of prior teaching preparation (e.g., teachers of English to speakers of other languages [TESOL], special education, K–12, or adult education certifications; or in some cases no formal training at all). They often have (a) varying numbers of years and experiences in the classroom[4] and (b) content focus that spans multiple subject areas, including ABE, ASE, ELL, reading, math, and career technical education (CTE). In addition to the diverse organizational and programmatic factors, state and federal funding for adult education is often limited, leaving few resources for instructors to engage in professional development. This brief provides an overview of research on effective teaching[5] that can be applied in multiple settings by a broad range of teachers across adult education programs who share a commitment to reigniting and nurturing students' lifelong love of learning and preparing them for postsecondary and career success.

What Makes an Effective Teacher?

Effective teaching[6] requires instructors who are sensitive to the unique backgrounds, motivations, and goals of individual students and who possess and can apply specific pedagogic, instructional, and subject-matter knowledge and skills. Subject-matter content knowledge and subject-specific pedagogical understanding[7] are most successfully implemented by instructors who are attentive to the complexities of social, emotional, and cultural dynamics. The data show that effective adult education teachers focus attention in several areas, including using student data to plan and implement evidence-based instruction, communicating with and motivating learners, and pursuing relevant professional learning of their own.

Student backgrounds

Adult learners come to the classroom with rich life experiences and rooted identities as family and community members, productive workers, and lifelong learners—among many other roles.[8] In addition, many adult learner populations in California actively respond to challenges of under or unemployment, family obligations, and a range of educational barriers while engaged in their education. Data from 2014 indicate that California's adult learner population includes over 11,000 single parents, nearly 24,000 individuals on public assistance, and over 200,000 students who are either unemployed or outside the formal labor force, which is twice as many as the number employed.[9] These everyday conditions, coupled with factors such as literacy level, language ability, age, gender, race, and ethnicity, shape adult learners' understanding of their social position in relation to societal privileges and barriers, political agency, representations of authority, access to physical and intellectual spaces, and degree of cultural capital.[10] Upon entering the classroom, these forged identities are again negotiated vis-à-vis other students and the instructor, and play out in the form of engagement, motivation, comfort, and willingness to take educational risks.[11] Relevant and

meaningful instruction should reflect, complement, and support deep understanding and engagement with these lived realities and the goals that are shaped by these individual circumstances.[12]

To do this, an educator might, for example, begin a lesson on financial literacy by inviting students to share their prior knowledge, initial assumptions, and individual experiences about a prompt in order to construct questions and follow lines of inquiry that are relevant to the encounters, concerns, and expectations of, perhaps, the single parent of a teen who is applying to college; an employed ELL who lacks health care benefits; or a young adult, inexperienced in financial decision-making, who would one day like to own her/his own home. Without a humanistic approach to student-driven inquiry, the collection of data and evidence cannot be utilized in an impactful way in service to instruction and the holistic needs of learners.

Using student data

Student data can be used to enhance instruction by supporting teachers to (1) understand learners' needs, (2) set learning goals, (3) make instructional decisions, and (4) assess progress and adapt instruction based on that feedback.[13] Accountability and standardized assessments are often the first tools to come to mind when thinking about student data. While these diagnostics provide a useful overview of students' academic skills and deficits for differentiation, program evaluation, and informing instructional practice, other forms of data—such as common formative assessments, transcripts and work experience, questionnaires, and learner interviews—can also be good sources of information to understand student learning needs at the beginning of a course. Though great emphasis is rightly placed on the importance of data to measure educational outcomes,[14] this end is only one aspect of the data's usefulness. Teaching is both a science and an art. Therefore, instructors must be thoughtful and use expert professional judgment to interpret and apply data within rigorously developed learning domains that have been shaped and tested by educational experts.[15] Working within a scientifically proven framework provides the stability for teachers to implement strategies that can be systematically reflected on, adjusted, refined, and iterated upon to build valuable instructional knowledge that is both sensitive to student contexts and applicable across classrooms, and therefore contributes to the field at large.[16] The art of co-constructing a healthy and productive learning environment with students as collaborators will prove successful when practiced within an evidence-based structure and methodology.

Effective goal setting, day-to-day instructional decision making, and progress monitoring benefit from collecting data such as completed homework assignments, products of in-class activities, or drafts of a final project, which can serve as good indicators of individual learning styles, academic strengths, and gaps in understanding. For example, an analysis of in-class and take-home writing assignments might reveal that, while most students seem to understand a particular skill when they work in pairs during class, many struggle with similar tasks undertaken independently at home. Based on this data, the teacher may plan differentiated in-class learning activities so that all students have the opportunity to work individually, in small groups, or directly with the instructor to discover and target specific misunderstandings and challenges. A portfolio of student artifacts—such as completed quizzes and tests, informal reading or word analysis inventories, journal dialogues, written feedback, and participation records—can also provide solid data for periodic check-ins with students and a solid foundation from which to adapt instruction, plan supplemental learning activities, and help students to refine their individual goals.

Using evidence-based instructional practices

Adult education teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel. When time and resources are limited, sticking to familiar teaching strategies can seem like the safest way to avoid a disastrous lesson. However, an established and growing body of evidence-based instructional practice can inspire, augment, and enrich the planning and carrying out of effective teaching. A curated selection of peer-reviewed tools and resources can be found on websites including the California Department of Education's CALPRO project (http://www.calpro-online.org/) and the U.S. Department of Education's LINCS database (https://lincs.ed.gov/). Evidence-based practices are those that are grounded in empirical data; supported by rigorous research; and tested and recommended by researchers, practitioners, students, and program administrators based on a demonstrated positive impact on student learning.[17] Evidence-based instruction has five key components:

- ■ **Objective:** Data that any evaluator will identify and interpret similarly;
- ■ **Valid:** Data that adequately represent the tasks needed to accomplish success;
- ■ **Reliable:** Data that will remain essentially unchanged if collected on a different day or by a different person;
- ■ **Systematic:** Data that are collected according to rigorous observation or well-designed and well-implemented experimental or quasi-experimental designs; and
- ■ **Refereed:** Data that are approved by independent experts or are peer reviewed.[18,19]

Despite limited research linking specific instructional activities to measurable adult learning gains, evidence points toward some important practices that increase the effectiveness of teachers. The following sections on learner-centered instruction, content knowledge and

contextualization, using standards, and building foundational and higher-order thinking skills are areas where evidence strongly indicates that well-planned practices increase effective instruction and learning.

Learner-centered instruction

Among the many practices that fit the criteria for evidence-based instruction, learner-centered andragogy—the method and practice of teaching adult learners[20,21]—stands out as both paramount and foundational to effective teaching. Rooted in the progressive and constructivist learning theories[22] of education pioneers such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Paulo Friere, learner-centered teaching treats knowledge as a social and relational process of meaning construction that empowers students to pursue understanding based on their own curiosities, insights, and intellectual strengths, which are guided rather than dictated by the instructor.[23] Successful learner-centered approaches to teaching account for the spatial, social, intellectual, and emotional dimensions of learning. Spatial adjustments as simple as arranging desks into a circle rather than rows or encouraging students to sit in a different place each class period, can help facilitate the real work of effective instruction, and perhaps even advance the loftier goal of transformative education.[24] Research suggests that adult learners, in particular, benefit from a safe and trusting educational environment in which a hierarchy of expert over novice[25] is dissolved into a collaborative and democratic undertaking.[26] Such an approach prioritizes student interaction, active engagement, and ownership of one's own learning over long instructor lectures and the passive reception of information.[27] The embodied practice of these principles supports the development of autonomy, self-criticism, and critical thought that are central to the demands of democratic citizenship, postsecondary success, and a productive career.[28] Examples of learner-centered instruction might include:

- Providing flexibility for students to pursue a topic of their choice related to a specific learning objective;
- Supplying space for exploration and experimentation around an idea or task;
- Deferring first to members of the class before immediately answering a student's question;
- Periodically asking for student input on the course syllabus as the term progresses; and
- Allowing time for students to engage in productive struggle and peer-to-peer learning and to share what they have learned with their classmates.

Content knowledge and contextualization

Subject-matter content knowledge is the meat and potatoes of teaching. Educators must have a solid understanding of the facts, concepts, skills, and operations of the covered material in order to effectively design learning progressions, scaffold activities, clearly and accurately communicate information, and address students' questions and misunderstandings. And yet seeking more, advanced subject-specific content is not necessarily the most effective way to improve instruction. Rather than focus exclusively on the *amount* of content knowledge possessed in a disciplinary framework, it is also important to be intentional about the *type* of knowledge that is needed for teaching. This blend of content and pedagogy is often referred to as *pedagogical content knowledge*.[29]

One such way that pedagogical content knowledge is expressed in the classroom is through contextualized instruction. Learner-centered instruction is enhanced when content is understood as a means to learning rather than as a set of facts to memorize or "know."[30] Though content knowledge forms an important part of any topic's substance, flexibility of content delivery—through multiple narratives, diverse perspectives, and different sets of facts—can help students to better make connections and develop secure understanding. Contextualized instruction is a learner-centered, evidence-based practice by which (1) content is presented in relation to the real-world scenarios in which it is used and (2) these real-world scenarios are relevant to learners' goals and experiences. This instructional practice helps to cultivate students' deep personal connection to content knowledge and lays the groundwork for the continuous integration of new content.[31,32,33] For example, a lesson on business English that places vocabulary and content about professional etiquette within the setting of a law firm will meet the first criteria for contextualization, but likely not the second. To adjust this lesson to meet both criteria, a teacher could solicit student examples of environments where professional language is used, and build activities around these various settings.

Using standards

The adult education field is changing rapidly in response to the disappearance of low-skill jobs, the emergence of a new knowledge-based economy, and the fast-paced evolution of disruptive technologies.[34] With federal funding for adult education now flowing to California through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) legislation, renewed pressure has been placed on student outcomes that lead to success in job training, employment, and postsecondary education. Achieving these goals means increasing rigorous instruction that is aligned to the standards and expectations that students will encounter in college and career and within their communities. Evidence-based academic standards for adult education provide a common framework of benchmarks to support educators in shaping curriculum and grounding lessons in clear, consistent, and rigorous expectations about what students should know and be able to do in order to succeed in their next steps.[35] Standards are used to guide curricular design and provide a vertically and horizontally aligned frame for everyday instructional planning. Standards in adult education

that align with both the K–12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the requirements for entry into credit-bearing postsecondary coursework demand that adult educators implement three important instructional shifts:

- **Regular practice with complex text and its academic language:** Research finds that text complexity is one of the greatest predictors of success in college and career.[36]

- **Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational:** Postsecondary education leaders emphasize the importance of the ability to cite textual evidence to construct well-supported claims, analyze sources and conduct written research, and communicate and understand verbal academic language.

- **Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction:** The types of informational texts most commonly encountered in college and the workplace require literacy across disciplines that include science, history, and technical fields.[37]

Widespread attention to academic standards by classroom instructors (and not just curriculum developers and program administrators) raises the level of rigor across the field and provides a common language for continuous improvement.

Building foundational and higher-order thinking skills

Research tells us that effective teaching of foundational skills—such as reading, writing, math, technology, and English language—depends on many factors.[38] Some of those include clear lesson objectives, relevant and applicable content, fostering strong classroom community, providing multiple means and modalities for presenting and engaging learners with concepts, coherent sequence and progression of learning, frequent feedback to students, various grouping strategies, and modeling.[39] Instructional practices grounded in student data provide educators with insight into strategies that will best meet the diverse needs of individual learners. For example, one study of ABE and adult English as a second language (ESL) reading instruction found that teaching strategies that work with ABE learners are not always as effective for ESL students.[40] Textual summary, for instance, is an effective reading comprehension strategy for ABE students, but for ESL students, cultural differences regularly impede this approach, obscuring the purpose of the exercise and complicating the outcome when relevant cultural knowledge is lacking. Using evidence-based approaches to inform teaching supports educators in choosing activities that are appropriate for their unique learners.

Evidence-based practices also help teachers to target the development of higher-order thinking skills that include analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and creating[41] and encourage learners' self-direction, self-advocacy, self-evaluation, and effective communication.[42,43]

Learner-centered pedagogy, contextualized instruction, and standards-based instructional planning require students to take on the intellectual heavy lifting—selecting, organizing, analyzing, and applying content knowledge—that employers and postsecondary institutions require. Moreover, these teaching strategies provide students with the content and skills to be flexible problem solvers, who are able to develop and refine questions, frame understanding, and synthesize complexity.

Professional Learning and Identifying Support

Planned professional learning

Beginning and experienced teachers alike can benefit from professional learning.[44] To target the most important areas for improvement, instructors should consider three aspects of any professional development opportunity: relevance to their own teaching, relevance to their own proficiency, and program priority level.

There are always multiple areas for instructional improvement, so determining the relative value of particular teaching competencies to one's current teaching context is especially important. (More details about teaching competencies are presented in the next section.) Assessing relevance to one's own teaching ensures that professional learning focuses on areas that are critical to the learning needs, therefore yielding a higher immediate impact on student engagement, motivation, and skills development. For example, if culturally appropriate feedback is a frequent impediment to the academic growth of students, then planned professional development that targets a better understanding of diversity will have a greater classroom impact than professional development that targets such a competency as technology-based teaching strategies to deliver subject-matter content. Self-assessment should be performed periodically as teaching contexts change and as a teacher evolves in her/his own craft.

Equally important to making targeted decisions about professional learning is to self-assess one's own areas of strength and need for growth in subject-specific content and pedagogical knowledge. Professional learning opportunities will have the greatest impact in areas where a high need for improvement in content proficiency overlaps with high relevancy to one's teaching context. A final area to consider and align with the others is program priority level. Many programs prioritize certain areas for sitewide improvement, such as learner-centered teaching and learning, evidence-based instruction, or technological literacy and problem solving. Administrative leaders often give extra support to professional development around these topics and will draw a natural group of colleagues with whom to discuss efforts toward instructional growth.

Connecting with a mentor, colleague, or program administrator who can support teachers' professional learning goals is an important component of successful professional learning. While some programs provide a formal teacher induction pathway, many, unfortunately, do not.[45] In both cases, however, four key questions should be considered when identifying a strong mentor:

1. Does the mentor support reflective practice? A strong mentor will model lesson planning, reflection, analysis of practice, and instructional revisions based on evidence.

2. Does the mentor give effective feedback? A good mentor will provide feedback on instructional practice that is constructive, timely, evidence-based, and offered in the spirit of inquiry and support.

3. Does the mentor scaffold guidance and support? Where and when appropriate, a valuable mentor uses an "*I do, we* do, *you* do" approach to strengthen teacher skill and confidence.

4. Does the mentor use student work to inform practice? An effective mentor will ground guidance in instructional artifacts collected from actual lessons.[46]

Successful professional learning does not take place in isolation. In addition to identifying a mentor, Professional Learning Communities and Communities of Practice are also great resources for engaging in the work of improving instructional effectiveness.[47]

Teacher competencies

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, under contract with the American Institutes for Research, produced a set of nationally validated competencies that describe effective performance in the domains in which adult education teachers must act. The *Adult Education Teacher Competencies* provides an organizing structure for framing evidence-based instruction and making decisions about where to focus attention on improvement. This structure is organized by broad areas of skill and knowledge (domains) and then by specific demonstrable and observable actions and behaviors (competencies). For example, one domain promotes monitoring and managing student learning and performance through data, and another emphasizes planning and delivering high-quality, evidence-based instruction. Competencies within these domains include monitoring student learning through summative and formative assessment data, and designing standards-based instructional units and lesson plans. Indicators for these competencies specify providing regular, detailed feedback to learners on the progress of their learning, and outlining clear and explicit standards-based purpose for the lesson, stated in terms of the desired student learning outcomes.

Domain	Four domains represent broad areas of activity for an adult education teacher: 1. Monitors and manages student learning and performance through data; 2. Plans and delivers high-quality, evidence-based instruction; 3. Effectively communicates to motivate and engage learners; and 4. Pursues professionalism and continually builds knowledge and skills.
Competencies	Within the four domains of activity, 17 observable competencies represent the knowledge, skills, and abilities that an adult education instructor should possess to be effective in that domain. Each domain has four or five competencies.
Performance Indicators	Each competency has a set of indicators that articulate what the performance of the competency looks like in an adult education context.
Sample Illustrations	Each performance indicator is accompanied by a sample illustration that provides examples of the practice in different adult education settings (e.g., a multilevel ESL classroom, a basic literacy class for native English speakers, or an ABE reading or math class).

Conclusions

Effective teaching is a complex and rewarding endeavor. But the diversity of California's adult education learning environments and student population and the wide range of instructor experiences, backgrounds, and preparation make it challenging work. This brief provided an overview of the elements that contribute to effective teaching across educational contexts. Importantly, these include giving thoughtful attention to student backgrounds, collecting and using student data to inform the implementation of evidence-based practices, and planning for professional development that targets specific teacher competencies. Research suggests that several evidence-based practices are most effective: learner-centered instruction, rich and contextualized content knowledge, use of standards to inform learning objectives, and attention to foundational skills and higher-order thinking. Reflective practice is central to the successful improvement of instructional craft.[48] The ability to take stock of classroom experiences and professional learning and understand their impact on teaching and student outcomes is what propels iterative, creative, and engaged instructional development and effective teaching.

Resources for Continued Learning

California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO)	CALPRO provides quality professional development and learning experiences to personnel working in California's adult education and literacy delivery system. CALPRO's new *Instructor Competencies Self-Assessment and Individual Professional Development Plan* allows teachers to self-assess along 17 competencies in four categories that are significant to adult education instruction.
Outreach and Technical Assistance Network for Adult Educators (OTAN)	OTAN provides professional learning resources for effective teaching and support to literacy and adult education providers in California. In particular, it offers electronic collaboration and information and support for instructional technology and distance learning.
Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS)	LINCS is a national leadership initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), to expand evidence-based practices in the field of adult education. LINCS is comprised of four components: 1. LINCS Resource Collection; 2. Regional Professional Development Centers; 3. LINCS Community, an online community of practice; and 4. Learning portal. These components provide adult educators with the information, resources, professional development activities, and an online network to enhance their practice and ensure their adult students receive high-quality learning opportunities.

Teacher Effectiveness in Adult Education

This LINCS site provides resources and tools to enhance teacher effectiveness in adult education:

1. The *Adult Education Teacher Competencies* identify the knowledge and skills expected of any adult education teacher. A self-assessment, introductory online course, and interactive framework are also available.
2. A research brief and course about evidence-based instruction principles and strategies highlighted in the National Research Council's Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Supporting Learning and Motivation.
3. An infographic, course, and toolkit about teacher induction— an evidence-based strategy to accelerate the effectiveness of beginning teachers and those new to adult education or a new content area.
4. An annotated bibliography, audio introduction, and a glossary of terms related to teacher effectiveness.

LINCS ESL Pro

This LINCS site provides three suites of new evidence-based resources. Each suite contains an issue brief, online learning modules, and a companion learning resource. These resources serve as a professional development tool or offer help in planning and delivering lessons. These resources are intended to build the capacity of teachers, programs, and states to improve and sustain the effectiveness of adult ELL instruction nationwide.

National Academies	**Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research**
	At the request of the U.S. Department of Education, the National Research Council convened a committee of experts from many disciplines to synthesize research on literacy and learning in order to improve literacy instruction for the nation's adults. Resources include:
	1. Full committee report;
	2. Short summaries and policy briefs on the findings; and
	3. Information on the public briefing of the report.

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