Self-Directed Learning Projects of Adult Basic and Literacy Educators: A Professional Learning Model

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Adult basic education and literacy (ABEL) educators face the same scrutiny of their professional practice as do today’s public school teachers and administrators, as they contend equally with increased standards and heightened expectations of student performance outcomes. The press for professional development is keen, despite insufficient funding to meet the demand. Learning projects, well established as a viable model for developing proficiency among workers in various fields of employment, is little understood or recognized as such in the ABEL field. The conceptual foundation of this qualitative study included acceptance of adults as intentional, self-directed, and effective learners (Eckert, 2003; Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Penland, 1977; Rose, 2004; Scribner, 1986; Tough, 1979); that learning is largely implicit and, therefore, challenging to articulate (Eraut, 2004; Reber, 1993); and that the learner, process, and environment are seamlessly integrated in a progressive process (Eckert, 2003; Greeno et al., 1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). The sample included 12 educators, 8 women and 4 men, who were working part-time in four different ABEL programs. To obtain suitably rich data, two sustained conversation-type interviews were conducted using an initial and follow-up semi-structured protocol; all interviews were taped and transcribed. Data were analyzed following Creswell’s (1994) recommended procedure, which was reductive, inductive,
and interpretive. The iterative and reductive process of analysis used yielded common themes and patterns which informed the research questions. Knowledge gained extends the view of what constitutes effective professional learning in the workplace. Results suggest that a broader, blended view, rather than a dichotomized one depicting professional learning as either formal/traditional or informal/nontraditional, and ascribing greater value ascribed to the former, is warranted.
Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Self-Directed Learning Projects of Adult Basic and Literacy Educators:
A Professional Learning Model

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Today’s educators face increasing professional and public scrutiny about their proficiency and ability to meet heightened academic standards and rigorous performance outcomes. Adult Basic Education and Literacy (ABEL) educators, a marginalized group of professionals within the public education field, are dealing with this same scrutiny and expectations, but with far less access to suitable professional development and learning support resources (Lopez, 2007).

The U. S. Congress passed the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, AEFLA, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, WIA, in 1998 (P.L. 105 - 220), launching a new era of accountability for the ABEL field (Tamassia, Lennon, Yamamoto, & Kirsch, 2007). The ABEL field includes adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), general education development (GED), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESL, ESOL), U. S. citizenship preparation, family literacy, and workplace education programs. For ABEL educators serving the learners enrolled in these programs, the WIA established new instructional standards with specified core indicators, and increased expectations for performance outcomes to which future funding was tied (Lopez, 2007).

ABEL programs in Connecticut serve individuals who are 17 years of age and over, not enrolled in public schools, and lack sufficient reading, writing, speaking, problem-solving, and computation skills necessary to improve their personal circumstances, such as access to better employment and career opportunities (Tamassia et al., 2007). The ABEL population is a distinct learning group, presenting unique teaching
and learning challenges for educators (Smith, 2006). Specifically, the literature (Smith, 2006; Chisman, 2011) typically described ABEL learners as being complex, diverse, non-traditional, anxious, lacking self-confidence, and often possessing histories of academic failure. Estimates of the ABEL learner population thought to possess learning disabilities range from 30 to 50% (Smith, 2006).

In 2009 – 2010, over 144,000 adult educators worked in the ABEL field, serving more than two million students (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). Only 17% worked full-time; 39% part-time; and 43% volunteered. They typically earned low wages, worked without benefits and employment contracts, and had few to no career enhancing opportunities (Smith, 2006). The workplace itself was often unstable, and teacher turnover high (Smith & Hofer, 2003; Smith, 2006).

While it is widely acknowledged that educators working at all levels, pre-kindergarten through grade 12, should be adequately prepared, the ABEL workforce “falls short” of such expectations (Smith, 2006, p. 180). Unlike their public school counterparts, ABEL educators often possess widely diverse educational and training backgrounds, insufficient knowledge about adult learning principles and practices, and little to no experience teaching adults. Providing sufficient professional development for a workforce with such diverse backgrounds poses a unique challenge for the field’s administrators and leaders (2006). Nonetheless, in today’s age of accountability, with close public, federal, and state scrutiny of educator and program effectiveness, results matter more than ever, and funding depends, in no small part, on educator performance and learner and program outcomes.
Statement of the Problem

Meeting today’s demand for increased educational standards, rigorous core indicators, and aggressive service benchmarks will be challenging for ABEL educators (Smith, 2006). Reporting on the results of roundtable discussions convened by the Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy, CAAL, and involving the field’s leadership, Chisman (2011) wrote that achieving the new, increased expectations will require well-qualified, proficient educators, who already want – and will require – more training support than programs are able to provide (2011).

It is unlikely, however, that professional development alone will sufficiently meet the training needs of the ABEL workforce. In writing about the changing world of work in general, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) reported that organizations already fail to benefit from a $60 billion dollar annual investment in professional development, regardless of its quality, manner, or duration. More recently, Fullan (2007) wrote that professional development as a strategy for improving educator proficiency may have “run its course” (p. 35), and suggested we rethink professional learning and reconsider working conditions, as well.

One alternative professional learning model worth re-examining is the intentional, self-managed adult learning project phenomenon. The adult learning project, defined as a deliberate effort to gain knowledge, skill, or to change in some way (Tough, 1979), is neither new nor radical, as research is replete with examples of its utility in improving the skills, knowledge, and abilities of workers in various workforces (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough 1979). Livingstone’s (2000) national Canadian survey, for
example, demonstrated that adults are nearly universally engaged in such learning efforts, spending an average of 15 hours a week to improve their knowledge and skills. Based on his findings, Livingstone suggested that the intentional, self-managed learning efforts of adults represented a far greater phenomenon than leaders in the adult education field recognized, understood, or valued, and, therefore, warranted further study.

Various reasons explain why the learning project phenomenon is generally unrecognized and undervalued, including the tendency of adults to equate learning with formal education and professional development (Eraut, 2004). Familiar as adults are with the codified structure of public and formal education, they find it difficult to articulate, acknowledge, or even value the learning they do independent of any activity orchestrated by others for them. In practice, they typically perceive their self-managed learning projects as nothing more than meeting workplace demands or as an aspect of their general capability, even though they engage in such efforts to a considerable degree (Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004; Livingstone, 2000). Another reason adults have difficulty articulating and recognizing their self-managed learning efforts for what they are, Eraut wrote, is due in part to the largely tacit nature of learning.

The problem confronting the field, therefore, is how ABEL educators, possessing diverse educational preparation backgrounds and instructional experience, will meet increasing workplace demands at a time when professional development alone is insufficient and the workplace, unstable. While research (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979) has shown that adults, including public school teachers and university faculty, routinely engage in learning projects to address their self-identified needs, much less is known about this approach in the ABEL field. This study, therefore,
is an attempt to gain understanding about how ABEL educators use learning projects to
develop proficiency in a challenging workplace environment.

**Background**

The results of several studies (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979) illustrated that workers in all fields, including public school education and university institutions, used learning projects to improve proficiency. Scant evidence exists, however, demonstrating that ABEL educators do so as well. This section highlights the groundbreaking research (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979) on the learning project phenomenon, which served as the impetus and foundation for this ABEL study.

For clarification purposes, proficiency is defined as the ability to skillfully apply knowledge within a particular domain and consisting of a complementary construction of domain-specific knowledge, tacit knowledge, and metacognitive skills (Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). Tacit knowledge is the complex skills acquired largely independently of the learner’s awareness (Reber, 1993), and metacognition, the ability to think about thinking and to be conscious of the self as a problem-solver. The ability to assess, plan, monitor, and control one’s mental processes are all skills associated with the metacognition knowledge base (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Lastly, as represented in the literature (Brookfield, 1988; Candy, 1991; Tough, 1979), the learning project equates to self-directed learning, given that both represent processes by which adults initiate and manage all aspects of their learning, with or without the assistance of others.

Distinguishing ABEL educators as avid, motivated, capable managers of their own deliberate learning was a result of Houle’s (1993) early work. Adults demonstrated common ways of thinking about and managing the learning process, which Houle
described as relatively straightforward: Adults identified and determined the goals, methods, resources, and conditions for their learning activities, which they typically undertook in response to a recognized need or interest. Though independent in their efforts, adults seldom learned alone (1993). Instead, there was a strong social component, as they typically tapped into existing enclaves of support, explained as social networks of peers, friends, and kin (1993), to achieve their ends. While the learning project phenomenon was not the focus of Houle’s study, his results led others to examine the intentional learning efforts of adults more closely (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979).

The learning project construct emerged from Tough’s (1979) investigation about the degree to which adults engage in deliberate learning, including why, what, and how they learn; and how much time they devote to such efforts. Among those interviewed ($N = 66$), 98% were found to use learning projects in various workplaces. In his view, learning projects represented a natural response to triggering events in the environment that undermined an adult’s sense of competency. Such feelings precipitated a complex planning phase during which the adult determined an approach, and the structure of the activities, resources, and support needed for resolution. The learning project unfolded through a series of self-managed episodes, tied together by a common theme, that included such activities as research, collaboration with others, experimentation, reflection, and practice (1979). For each episode, adults articulated a range of actions, thoughts, and feelings, framed within a specific timeframe. Tied together, the episodes constituted a learning project and represented a sustained, intentional focus on the development of applicable knowledge, skill, or behavior.
Penland (1977) sought to extend Tough’s (1979) original work by examining the intentional knowledge-seeking activities of adults. In his national U.S. survey of randomly selected adults (N = 1,501), Penland confirmed that they engaged in their own learning to a significant degree: Over 76% of the respondents had undertaken learning projects during the previous year. On average, they conducted between three to four projects per year/per person, and devoted a mean average of 155.8 hours to such learning efforts. Prior to his study, the learning project phenomenon was primarily described in terms of numbers, hours, means, and averages. But a clearer understanding of the nature of learning occurring within adults’ projects began to emerge. For instance, Penland, like Tough, found that adults initiated learning projects in response to triggering events or catalysts within the environment, and that projects represented a set of complex psychological tasks. Unlike Tough, however, Penland did not find that all adults were conscious, strategic planners: Some were, while others began their planning phase in a seemingly random manner before becoming more focused and strategic over time.

Penland (1977) described the learning project as unfolding in three developmental stages: articulation and description (i.e., the adult collected and reviewed data to describe, define, or compare one concern or interest with another); diagnosis and analysis (the adult explained data in terms of assumptions and correlations and related it to other dimensions); and synthesis and application (the adult developed and tested hypotheses, or tried out new or refined skills). This learning process was not unlike that of Kolb’s (1984) work on experiential learning. In effect, Penland’s learning project model represented a progressive pattern of planning, implementing, and evaluating.
Three themes emerged in the foundational literature; first was the recognition that learning projects represented a natural, organic response to an ever-changing workplace (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). The second theme concerned the intentionality of learning projects, which was their immediate, direct applicability and utility for addressing workplace related challenges. Ownership and control constituted a third theme, as adults typically managed their learning projects in their own way and at their own pace – even while they engaged others to assist in planning, conducting, and assessing individual projects (Candy, 1991, Cross, 1981; Tough, 1979).

Despite both the emergence of these common themes and Penland’s (1977) efforts, however, the nature of the learning occurring within the project construct remained nebulous, with critics (Brookfield, 1988; Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) challenging the value of what had been gained. Subsequently, enthusiasm about the learning project construct waned and research came to a near standstill. But in 2000, Livingstone revisited the construct by investigating the extent and distribution of self-reported learning activities among the Canadian adult population.

Livingstone’s (2000) findings showed that adults spent a great deal of time undertaking and managing their own learning projects. He used the metaphor of an iceberg to suggest how little is known about the phenomenon despite its apparent widespread usage. The learning project phenomenon, he wrote, warranted the attention of educational and political leaders, particularly in light of Canada’s embrace and singular promotion of credential-styled professional learning and education. Specifically, he recommended that leaders consider the self-managed learning of adults when determining funding, policies, educational opportunities, and research support.
This study, therefore, represents an initial attempt to understand the learning ABEL educators undertake on their own to develop their proficiency; the results will contribute to the broader conversation about professional learning in the workplace. To develop this initial understanding, the study examined what and how ABEL educators learn when engaging in their learning projects. By listening to educators describe in their own words how they experience their learning projects; including what precipitates them; how they plan, organize, and implement them; and how they assess results; new insights and understanding can emerge about the phenomenon as it unfolds in a uniquely challenging environment: the ABEL program. For the ABEL field, such insight can guide future policies and funding decisions that impact educators who seek to meet challenging standards and increasing program demands by improving their professional proficiency through their own efforts.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Introduction**

Due to the paucity of research on the learning project phenomenon in the ABEL field, the conceptual framework presented in this section rests on the work of the foundational researchers previously discussed and on those who studied the development of proficiency among adults in other work environments. The framework also draws from research on problem-solving skills (Kornell & Metcalf, 2006; Scribner, 1986), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and informal and unintentional learning in the workplace (Daley, 1999; Eraut, 2004; Grenier, 2009; Rose, 2004), as such constructs relate to the proficiency-development of adults and are often found in adult learning projects. This study was not undertaken to determine whether adults engage in learning
projects in the workplace, as this is already well established, but to explore the nature of
the learning that occurs within them from the perspective of ABEL educators.

Three integrated propositions regarding the nature of the learning project
phenomenon emerged from a review of relevant literature. The first proposition is that the
adult learning project is an intentional, sustained experience that consists of a series of
episodes, including informal and formal activities, tied together by a common theme, and
focused on the development and application of self-identified knowledge, skills, or
behavior. Throughout the experience, adults retain responsibility for managing their
learning projects, which they integrate within the workplace while typically involving
peers and colleagues in the process (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979).

Second, the learning project represents an ecological experience by which the
learner, the learning process, and the environment are integratively involved in an on-
going process of change and development (Greeno, Eckert, Stucky, Sachs, & Wenger,
1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). The learning project is a natural, organic response to
occurrences within the environment, where resolution is achieved through the strategic
use of human and non-human resources (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). From an
ecological perspective, it is nearly impossible, and probably unwise, to talk about
learning as distinct from the environment in which it occurs (Candy, 1991; Eraut, 2004).

The third proposition is that the learning project, from initiation to completion, is
metacognitively managed by the learner (Eckert, 2003; Enos, Kehrhaun, & Bell, 2003;
Eraut, 2004). Ample evidence exists to support the view of adults as strategic, effective,
resourceful, and independent learners (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Kornell & Metcalfe,
2006; Penland, 1977; Rose, 2004; Scribner, 1986), even when working in environments
that lack suitable support (Enos et al., 2003). Evidence also supports the largely implicit nature of learning (Reber, 1993), which makes it difficult for adults to articulate their personal learning narratives. Inarticulateness, however, should not be interpreted as an adult’s failure to manage and conduct specific events in the learning process, such as planning and evaluating (Eraut, 2004; Schraw, 1998).

In summary, the adult learning project represents an interactive, integrative process of growth, development, and change (Penland, 1977), conducted within an environment that is in flux (Eckert, 2003; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). The relationship between the learner, the learning process, and the environment is mutually symbiotic and represents an experience best captured in the ecological metaphor suggested by Eckert (2003), Greeno et al. (1999), and Sheckley & Keeton (2000). Within the proposed conceptual framework, the three propositions interact with and support one another.

Proposition 1: The adult learning project is an intentional, sustained learning experience consisting of related episodes, including informal and formal activities, tied together by a common theme, and focused on workplace application.

The notion that adults gain knowledge and develop sophisticated skills informally and under difficult circumstances is not new (Kett, 1994). History is replete with examples of adults, such as Benjamin Franklin and the Wright Brothers, who developed and managed their informal and independent learning to remarkable effect. Franklin, a lifelong learner, improved his scientific knowledge through extensive reading, experimenting, corresponding with learned men, and presenting papers to colleagues (1994). The Wright brothers, too, built their knowledge about flight by reading extensively, corresponding with aviation experts, connecting with an informal network of
experimenters, and obtaining feedback by developing and testing models (Cavaliere, 1992). The Wright brothers’ learning experiences, however, best illustrate the features of an adult learning project, as their efforts, besides being deliberate and sustained, were designed to gain applicable knowledge and skills. They made all of their own learning decisions – from goal-setting to locating and using resources, determining the rate of progress, and identifying methods of evaluation (1992).

*Intentional, sustained learning and motivation.* Despite historical evidence of adults effectively managing their own learning, specific research on the learning project phenomenon did not begin until 1971 with the work of Allen Tough (1979), whose original study had roots in the pioneering work of C. O. Houle (Cross, 1981). Tough and Houle’s work articulated the intentionality, sustained focus, and applicability of particular – though not all – learning efforts among adults (1981). Specifically, Houle’s study of a group of diverse adults (N=22) uncovered shared commonalities among their learning experiences, including the personal management and control of the learning process. Three categories of learner motivation emerged in his data: goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. Of these, goal-oriented learners had the most clearly defined goals and practical application as their primary aim. Their approach to learning was sustained and described as ever-recurring, though typically more episodic than continual or steady. They self-managed the entire learning process, from goal-setting to determining methods, resources, and conditions for learning.

Following Houle’s (1993) work, Tough (1979) focused on the degree to which adults engage in deliberate learning, including why, what, and how they learn; and how much time they devote to such efforts. The learning episode, which is elemental to the
learning project construct, emerged from interviews Tough conducted with adults. Participants described their self-managed episodes as being tied together by a related theme or focus and including such activities as reading, writing, researching, observing, etc., for the purpose of retaining and applying the knowledge or skill in the workplace, community, or home. For any single episode, adults articulated an entire range of actions, thoughts, and feelings, and framed them in a specified time period with a beginning and end point. The desire to gain, retain, and use specific skills or knowledge was a dominant feature in defining a single episode of learning.

Tough’s (1979) study involved a small, purposive sample ($N = 66$) consisting of various workplace populations including beginning elementary school teachers ($n = 6$) and social science professors ($n = 10$). Replicating Houle’s (1993) methodology, Tough conducted intensive, structured interviews using questions designed to help participants recall and describe their learning efforts. Data revealed that 98% (all but one adult) had conducted at least one learning project in the year preceding the interviews. On average, adults conducted eight projects a year and spent a total average of 816 hours on them.

Of the subgroups in the sample, the university professors spent the most amount of time on their learning projects. On average, they conducted 12 projects during the year, spent a mean number of 1,491 total hours learning, and an average 117 hours on individual projects. Beginning elementary school teachers, on the other hand, engaged in fewer projects than any other subgroup. As novices, they reported feeling overwhelmed with work-related challenges; nonetheless, they conducted a fairly large number of projects (10.2) in the year, but spent less time on each (mean number of hours per project was 42). In a subsequent doctoral study conducted by James Fair (1973), however,
slightly more experienced elementary school teachers reported spending a mean of 500 hours on nine learning projects over the course of the year.

A clear distinction exists within and between Tough’s (1979) populations regarding the amount of time adults invested in their projects. For instance, the range in the total number of hours spent on learning projects by university professors was 385 to 2,509, and among elementary teachers, between 159 hours and 677 hours. The range of knowledge and skills educators sought to develop was also broad, with subject matter ranging from simple and routine to difficult and abstract. The majority of Tough’s participants fit Houle’s (1993) goal-oriented category, as they typically sought to retain and apply some defined skill or knowledge to the workplace. The beginning elementary teachers, for instance, represented goal-oriented learners, seeking to improve their performance in the classroom by engaging in projects designed to deepen their content knowledge, improve their pedagogy, and enhance their understanding of their students’ learning (1979). It was clear among Tough’s sample, too, that adults wanted control and responsibility for managing their own learning projects. This allowed them to make decisions as to the approach to take, resources to use, pace to set, as well as where, when, and how to implement the project.

Penland (1977) also found that adult motivation for conducting learning projects included increasing and applying knowledge (85.3%), meeting a particular responsibility (77.8%), solving problems (66.6%), and improving job skills (50.5%). Like Houle (1993) and Tough (1979), Penland found that adults were enthusiastic about their self-managed learning efforts. Among his participants, 65% reported that they were “very enthusiastic” about their learning, and 29.2% were “fairly enthusiastic.” Asked to assess the degree to
which the learning actually benefited them, Penland’s participants reported that it did so to a “large extent” (44.9%), and 57% indicated that they gained a “great deal” of knowledge in the process.

The findings of the foundational researchers concurred on several points. Primarily, their findings showed that adults were intentional, pragmatic learners, seeking to develop applicable knowledge and skills. Adults readily assumed responsibility for managing and controlling their projects as it allowed them to make their own decisions regarding the conditions for learning. Lastly, adults enjoyed their learning experience and recognized the benefits of their efforts to a considerable degree.

*The learning process and related learning episodes.* Criticism about the learning project research primarily concerned how little had been uncovered about the nature of the actual learning that occurred within it (Brookfield, 1988; Cross, 1981). Tough (1979) focused on the initiation and planning phases primarily, without providing significant insight into other aspects of the learning process occurring in the project. The learning model he suggested was relatively straightforward: Adults typically initiated a learning project in response to a growing sense of inadequacy or to resolve a personal workplace challenge. In response to this sense of need, they planned, initiated, and managed a chain of episodes that led them to undertake some responsibility or action more effectively and efficiently, for which they anticipated some genuine benefit.

In the process of conducting learning projects, new competencies developed as adults observed others, received instruction, undertook trial performances, and obtained feedback. As adults engaged in their learning projects, they improved their flexibility, efficiency, and independence in self-managing their learning skills (Penland, 1977;
Tough, 1979). These findings were not unlike those discussed in Eckert’s (2003) study of farmers, where adults self-organized the development of their proficiency by improving their domain-specific knowledge and metacognitive skills in the act of learning how to do the work, receiving feedback, and working within an ecology of support. Eckert, while not associating the development of proficiency with the learning project phenomenon, offered a model that reflected its general features and nature. For example, she noted that activating events triggered reflection, whereby skill discrepancies were identified. Skill discrepancies led to the self-management of learning activities such as seeking out and learning from peers, reading journals and research reports, attending workshops, presentations, and membership in associations.

Penland (1977) sought to gain greater clarity about the nature of the learning process by focusing on the behavioral and psychological aspects of the adult’s learning experience within the project construct. He reported that the ever-changing nature of the world of work necessitated that adults be continuously engaged in their own learning efforts, and that the intentional learning adults did, which was focused, sustained, self-designed, and initiated to deal with such challenges, was nothing more than a natural, organic response. Still, the planning and development of sequential learning episodes involved a complex set of tasks, and as such, it was surprising that adults engaged in as much of their own learning with as little professional assistance as they reportedly did.

Penland (1977) found that adults experienced three developmental stages while implementing their learning projects: articulation and description (i.e., adults gathered and examined data to describe, define, or compare one concern or interest with another); diagnosis and analysis (adults explained data in terms of assumptions and correlations in
relation to other dimensions); and synthesis and application (adults developed and tested hypotheses, and demonstrated new or refined skills or created new work). A self-managed progressive pattern of planning and implementation unfolded, though adults were not always able to articulate actual aspects of the process (1977).

**Broading the view of professional learning.** For purposes of this study, the term formal learning conveys any learning activity, such as adult education offerings, workshops, conferences, and workplace training programs, conducted by a trained facilitator or instructor, and provided in connection with an educational or training institution (Livingstone, 2000). Informal learning describes any activity that is designed and implemented by the adult learner, and occurs outside of an education, workplace, or training institution, and without a traditional provider of professional development (2000).

Daley addressed the process of developing proficiency, which he described as involving a complex of interrelationships of content, knowledge, and professional practice, in two studies, one involving teachers (2000), and another, nurses (1999). Teachers described professional development as an important resource for obtaining information, staying abreast of research-based approaches relating to content and pedagogy, gaining access to ideas and resources, and supporting their willingness to be creative and inventive in the classroom. But little of the professional development was meaningful, they claimed, until they thought about it, connected feelings to it, and applied it to practice. Moreover, the context of their work environment influenced the degree to which they made use of the information and knowledge gained from professional development. Various contextual factors interfered with the transference
process, such as the decentralized nature of school administrations, lack of autonomy, disconnection with colleagues, and the state and national mandates driving reform initiatives. Nonetheless, teachers persisted in seeing professional development as significant for developing and improving their classroom skills (2000).

The difference in how novice and expert nurses used formal and informal learning activities to develop proficiency was the focus of Daley’s (1999) earlier study. Novice nurses were typically inarticulate about aspects of their learning process, though they seemed to depend a great deal on memory, the accumulation of information, and reliance on the approval of their more experienced colleagues or supervisors. Their knowledge base depended primarily on formal learning, nurse educators, textbooks, and conferences. They reported feeling overwhelmed and afraid to try something outside of explicit policy or procedural guides in fear of causing harm to patients. Such feelings limited their willingness to explore alternative solutions and expand their skill repertoire.

Expert nurses, on the other hand, viewed their formal preparation as background information, and referred to informal learning opportunities, such as dialoguing with colleagues, reading, and conducting research, as significant to their learning process. They were self-directed, intentional constructors of their own professional knowledge, and unlike novices who tended to use a best-fit approach, expert nurses used their experiences to strengthen their provisional understanding, remain open-minded, and as continual opportunities to learn.

Similarly, volunteer docents developed their skills by engaging in formal learning activities, self-directing a set of complementary informal activities, performing responsibilities, and working with colleagues, according to the results of a study.
conducted by Grenier (2009). Docents working in three different museum models reported that the formal learning provided in classrooms, group work, and supervised practice, created an initial foundation of content and procedural knowledge. Some docents reported that the initial formal learning they received was insufficient, while others expressed curiosity to know more about the content associated with their particular site or a desire to improve specific skills. Regardless of motivation, however, the docents purposely self-initiated learning actions to improve their competence; a sampling of actions included observing and shadowing experienced colleagues, practicing presentation skills, and obtaining feedback from peers, friends, and family.

In addition to formal and purposeful informal activities, docents also learned incidentally, or tacitly and less-consciously, in the process of doing their work. In doing their work, multiple opportunities emerged whereby all docents could hone and practice various skills. They reported such practice as necessary and valuable. Learning with others, or the socially-engaged aspect of their work, was also seen as key to their development of proficiency. For example, more experienced docents consolidated and strengthened their skills by acting as role-models, confidants, and practice-helpers for their less experienced colleagues, who benefited from such efforts as well. Docents also used technology to create and tap into a wide-network of peers, which again they applied to for assistance in developing their proficiency. In effect, docents worked within communities of practice that provided learning opportunities and support.

Clearly, learning in the workplace can be formal and informal, planned and unplanned, intentional and unintentional, as previous examples show. Workers do develop their knowledge and skill bases informally and incidentally through every-day
occurrences and by doing their work and solving routine and novel problems (Rogoff & Lave, 1999), although such unintentional, informal learning was not the focus of this ABEL study. For education and organizational leaders, however, broadening their collective understanding of what constitutes effective professional learning to include intentional and unintentional learning models, alongside formal learning, is surely warranted in light of the degree to which such learning occurs and the effectiveness of its results. Such knowledge can better inform decisions regarding research and funding.

Marsick and Watkins (1999), for example, depicted an organizational learning model that cohesively integrated informal and incidental learning opportunities with intentionality to promote employee proficiency. In their model, employees and managers developed a collective strategy, engaged one another, assigned responsibilities, and defined outcomes. Learning from experience and solving real work problems were at the heart of their model. Employees deepened their knowledge informally by increasing the ways they thought about a situation and the factors affecting it within the context of conducting their work. They analyzed the context from different angles and perspectives, and experimented with different skills. In such a way, informal organizational learning was, in part, incidental in nature. But in assigning roles and responsibilities and pre-determining outcomes, for instance, Marsick and Watkins’s model incorporated intentionality, especially as the workers’ application of new and refined skills in the workplace was a key motivation. In such a way, their learning model resembled the learning project construct. Ample evidence suggests that informal learning, intentional or otherwise, constitutes a critical avenue for developing skills and improving proficiency, as Livingstone (2000) found.
Livingstone (2000) suggested that the widespread investment by adults in intentional workplace learning warranted greater attention. Too little is known about the actual competencies gained from such professional learning efforts and the value adults assign to them. Many adults reported gains in levels of skill competency as a result of their learning project experiences, which Livingstone noted stands in interesting contrast to Canada’s credential-focused society. In actuality, the less schooled adult, he wrote, appears in many instances to be “at least as competent as the more highly schooled” (p.13) in managing complex and sophisticated learning activities. Moreover, adults may actually manage significantly more learning projects on their own than his data indicated. Unfortunately, Livingstone wrote, just as adult learners typically fail to recognize or value their own learning efforts, so does the adult education field’s leadership.

A U. S. 2001 National Household Education Survey (Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004) mirrored Livingstone’s (2000) findings. Kim et al., promoted new research into the self-managed and independent learning activities of adults because such efforts appeared to constitute a major source of knowledge and skill acquisition in the workplace. Nearly two-thirds of the adults in the U. S. study reported that they engaged in self-managed, informal learning activities during the year preceding the interviews. Based on their findings, the authors (2004), like Livingstone, proposed that policy makers and educational leaders consider recognizing and understanding the intentional learning activities of adults in light of on-going funding challenges.

There is a genuine paucity of research on the informal, incidental, and intentional learning projects used by ABEL teachers. But others (Eraut, 2004; Scribner, 1986) have studied the informal learning adults undertake in the workplace beyond the professional
development that has been traditionally provided. Enos et al. (2003), for example, whose research primarily concerned the development of proficiency in the workplace, including the transferability of knowledge and skills gained informally to the work-site, considered the degree to which adults engage in their own learning activities, and the types of activities they use. Noting that in previous research (Day, 1998), 70% of the learning occurring in the workplace was achieved informally, Enos et al. found that among their sample (N = 188), 63% developed core managerial skills informally, and primarily through interactions with others. Other informal learning options included job experiences (23% of the study’s participants reported that they learned in this manner), observing others (12%), and reflective practice (2%). Research on the informal learning that occurs in the workplace aside, investigation into the intentional learning projects of ABEL teachers who work in a marginalized field would constitute a beginning step in responding to the suggestions of Livingstone (2000) and Kim et al. (2004).

Summary of Proposition 1. In closing, there is insufficient research on the use of learning projects by ABEL teachers. The proposition that they use them to develop their skills, however, rests on the foundational work of researchers who have shown adults to be robust users of learning projects in other environments (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). One hypothesis of this study is that the learning project phenomenon used by ABEL teachers will mirror those used by other professionals, in that projects will represent an intentional, sustained learning experience, consisting of related episodes that yield improved proficiency. Such episodes will include a variety of informal and formal activities, the support of colleagues, and the adaptive use of resources to meet adults’ self-identified goals. Researchers concurred that environmental triggers or activating
events caused adults to feel some troubling sense of skill discrepancy, which when reflected upon, led to the initiation of a planning phase for undertaking a sustained and intentional learning project. The desire to be responsible for – and in control of – their own learning was a common theme in the research, as was the realization that adults do not learn alone, but involve others in the learning process.

Evidence also suggested that a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, denoted the degree to which adults were conscious planners of their learning projects; that is, rather than adults being conscious or not about their planning actions, they demonstrated varying degrees of articulateness about their actions. Some adults were very detail-oriented, specific, and articulate about their planning efforts; and others, more opportunistic, serendipitous, and inarticulate. Researchers demonstrated that a learning project, seen as a natural, organic response to problems emerging in the environment, was primarily designed and implemented by adults for the specific purpose of practical application. Teachers, for example, conducted learning projects to address classroom challenges, and used a complement of formal and informal learning activities to improve their practices (Eraut, 2004; Livingstone, 2000; Tough, 1979).

Based on the literature review, this study represents an attempt to uncover and analyze the nature of the learning projects used by ABEL teachers to build and improve their teaching proficiency within a marginalized field, acknowledged by many (Lopez, 2007; Chisman, 2011) to be uniquely challenging.

Proposition 2: The nature of the learning project is ecological, wherein the learner, the process, and the environment are interconnected and interactive. All aspects of the workplace, including human and nonhuman resources; students; the work itself, with its
associated tasks, problems, and responsibilities; and the physical, social, and administrative structures, affect the learning experience.

The views of Eckert (2003), Greeno et al. (1999), Hoekstra, Beijaard, Brekelmans, and Korthagen (2007), and Sheckley and Keeton (2000), align with regard to the adult learner, the learning process, and the environment as being so inextricably connected as to constitute an ecology. Sheckley and Keeton defined an educational ecology as any set of multi-layered interactions that contribute to the adult’s progress toward the realization of an idealized performance within a changing work environment. The learning ecology consisted of two layers, one constituting the individual learner and his or her mental cognition, personal dispositions, domain specific knowledge, and reasoning skills. The second layer represented the environment in which the adult learns, including opportunities for problem solving, deliberate practice, and engaging with a community of other learners. The interactions in and between both layers, as well as the synergy from such interactions, constitute an ecological learning situation from which the adult’s learning process and the environment cannot be truly disentangled.

The notion that the workplace environment constitutes an ecological learning environment is relatively new. Eckert’s (2003) research, however, effectively demonstrated that adults and their learning environment were inextricably integrated in a continual spiral of development. As adults learned new and increasingly sophisticated skills by resolving problems that continuously emerged in the environment, they in effect, changed that environment, just as they were changed in the process. The spiral of development kept the adult learner and the environment continuously engaged in a dynamic learning pattern, as new and strengthened skills allowed the adult to engage with
the environment in increasingly complex and mutually beneficial ways. Eckert suggested that the totality of the relationships, including the spiraling results of the on-going interactions between the learner and the environment, led to improved proficiency. More than any single feature within the environment, the totality of the interactions and their synergy was most significant. The environment, she and others suggested, constituted an active, integrative factor in the learning process.

From an ecological perspective, many opportunities exist in the environment for adults to develop their proficiency experientially. Experiential learning is defined by Kolb (1984) as a holistic process of adaptation to the world, involving the integrated functioning of the total organism (thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving), and transactions between the learner and the environment. In his view, learning represents a “process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). His experiential learning model involves four adaptive learning stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

In the first stage, the adult carries out a particular action, while observing its effect on the situation. Next, the adult reflects on the action’s effect in a particular instance, which increases his or her ability to anticipate what will happen when the action is taken again. In the third stage, the adult forms an understanding of the general principle that pertains to the particular instance and the actions taken. Generalizing action, Kolb (1984) explained, is an attempt to connect actions and their effects over a range of circumstances, leading some adults to form guiding rules of thumb. The final stage represents the adult’s application of the knowledge gained to a new circumstance within
the range of generalization. This final concrete experience, by generating the cycle anew, acts to strengthen or refine skills in a spiraling, progressive process. Kolb’s model provides one means of looking at the way ABEL educators make sense of their experiences and develop their skills informally, intentionally or otherwise, in the classroom.

Differing views on the role and impact of the environment on the learning process. Not all researchers agreed as to the impact of the environment on the learner, the learning process, and the learning project. Among the researchers reviewed, for example, Spear and Mocker (1984) described the role of the environment as being one dimensional, deterministic, and constraining. Basing their research on Tough’s (1979) findings, Spear and Mocker expected to find that their study’s 78 adult participants were conscious and strategic planners of their own skill development. Instead, they found no such evidence, though participants’ learning projects appeared to be logical and rational in design and implementation. As a result, Spear and Mocker postulated that factors outside of the adults’ consciousness and situated within the environment were responsible for initiating and organizing the development process. Some triggering event in the environment acted as a catalyst (an organizing circumstance) that had the effect of determining the nature, structure, conditions, and resources for improving skills. The environment, they determined, was a subjective element that adult learners gave meaning to, but actually constituted a reality apart from any conception or perception of the individual learner.

Seemingly uncomfortable with the resultant notion that an adult’s development was constrained by such environmental determinism, Spear (1988) conducted a
qualitative investigation involving 10 professional developers to reconsider the impact of
the organizing circumstance on the intentional learning efforts of adults in light of two
factors: the adult’s psychological response to the organizing circumstance and social
learning theory. Data from this follow-up study indicated that a more interactive
relationship existed and involved environmental features, as well as behavioral and
personal elements of the learner. In his view, environmental features influenced,
modified, and largely determined the learning process. But rather than the organizing
circumstance determining the structure and conditions of the learning episode within the
environment, the adult acted as an integrator, but not director, of the process. Spear
concluded that the relationship of the adult learner and the environment was more
interactive and less deterministic than his earlier research with Mocker (1984) had
indicated. Instead, adult learning in the workplace occurred partly by chance and partly
through the deliberate intention and self-activation of the learner. The process was seen
as dependent on the organizing circumstance within the environment, as well as the
knowledge, social engagement, and actions of the learner (1988).

Another researcher (Scribner, 1986), however, showed adults to be the directors
of their own learning, demonstrating flexibility, creativity, and resourcefulness in solving
workplace-embedded problems, which contributed to the development of their
proficiency. Scribner found adults to be effective learning agents who redefined their
work-related challenges and made mental tools of resources within the environment to
complete tasks efficiently and accurately. Environmental properties, such as social
aspects and triggering events, contributed to the initiation and construction of problem-
solving activities, but the learner was not constrained by them. Scribner’s work
essentially veered away from a one-dimensional notion of the environment, such as its being an envelope or container within which actions played out.

Scribner’s (1986) studies of workers engaged in naturally-occurring actions associated with their work, found that they routinely departed from literal formats and work orders that were meant to direct their actions, and instead, found various creative and adaptive ways to complete tasks, using available resources and supplies. Workers made mental calculations to determine the most efficient means to complete their work and associated problems, even transforming problems to make them more readily solvable so they could complete their tasks with speed, efficiency, and accuracy. She found, as did Eckert (2003), that adults incorporated the workplace environment into their problem-solving system. In Scriber’s view, learning was inextricably interconnected with work-related tasks and the environment.

Both Eckert (2003) and Houle (1993) saw the environment as providing the impetus, the activating events, that triggered reflection and led to the articulation or transformation of the adults’ mental models. These events provided the challenges that were the substance, the content, for learning. In her study, Eckert did not question the degree to which the environment provided optimal support for the development process. Enos et al. (2003), on the other hand, illustrated that even where less than optimal support existed, adults still managed to learn 70% of their skills informally within their environment. Investigating workplace variables that affect the adult’s development of proficiency, Enos et al. found that adults learned more of their skills informally, and mainly through their interactions with others, suggesting that outcomes would be enhanced with the inclusion of suitable resources to support the organic learning
pathways that are naturally embedded in the environment (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). Enos et al. proposed that adults developed their proficiency through a well-integrated process that included the social network of relationships with its entangled interactions and responsibilities, solving genuine problems that were continuously emerging, deliberately practicing skills, and obtaining feedback from peers. These activities occurred within and involved the environment itself in the developmental process.

Social aspects of learning projects. The fact that adults, desirous of managing and controlling their learning projects, were not necessarily independent in their planning and implementing efforts was clear among the foundational studies (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). In short, the learning projects of adults included a significant social component, a finding that Spear (1988) supported in his later work. Adults, for example, reported that they routinely conducted their learning projects within enclaves of support, defined by Houle as social groups that accepted, fostered, and valued learning. These enclaves, embedded within the environment and representing a natural network of family, friends, and colleagues, illustrated that the adult learner did not necessarily plan or implement the learning project in an isolated or solitary way (1993). Instead, just as maintaining personal control and responsibility for the project was important to the learner, the engagement of others, the social aspect of the learning project, was likewise significant. As shown in the literature on organizational learning, by working collaboratively, employees co-constructed the knowledge needed for personal and collective proficiency (Marsick & Watkins, 1999).

In reviewing workplace models, the learning process was ubiquitous in all ongoing activities, whether intentional or not, and intricately integrated and socially-
mediated within a specific context (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993). The context constituted a milieu that included the work itself, problems and tasks to be resolved, physical and conceptual structures, purposive activity, and social norms. Though they were not investigating the intentional learning efforts of adults, Rogoff and Lave (1999) explored the development of cognition in everyday activities, and identified the centrality of social roles and norms to the learning process. Mutual interest and engagement in a particular domain had the power to bring adults together in a common context, such as teachers teaching in the same discipline at the same grade level in the same school. Practitioners who shared a domain, engaged in common activities, and discussed their experiences with one another in a manner that promoted learning, effectively improved their practice, and in such a way, constituted a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The members of common communities of practice engage in a set of relationships over time that lead to the development of proficiency. By working together, members develop resources, such as documents, routines, and vocabulary that improve individual practices and represent the accumulated knowledge of the collective members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). With such support, members willingly take on larger and more complex activities, thereby adding to their own and their colleagues’ knowledge base. Learning, according to this model, does not represent the accumulation of knowledge, but instead the co-participation in a community of practice that yields new experiences, more integrated understanding, and refined practice. It is not that learners build or acquire structures or models to understand their practice, but they participate in communities of practice that provide a framework with structure.
Novice teachers initially occupy a peripheral participant role in the learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). But through on-going engagement with other members, they begin to explore their common practice and use of resources, approaches, and tools; and, in time, refine their proficiency. Through their experiences and learning within a community of peers, novices are able to move from peripheral to full participation membership. Experts, on the other hand, are recognized as fully-participating members of the community who develop their expertise by mentoring others, conducting research, and writing about their experiences.

Tough (1979), too, found that adults actively engaged peers, family, and friends in different aspects of the learning project. Among his sample (N = 66), 40 adults conducted 40 learning projects with the aid and support of a total of 424 individuals. The average participant obtained help from 10 individuals, and a few from 20. Despite this support and assistance, the learning process remained under the learner’s own direction and responsibility, though it was clear that the learner did not plan, prepare, or operate in isolation; and instead, sought information, advice, and encouragement from a personal, trusted member of a supportive enclave.

*Trigger and activating events, catalysts, and organizing circumstances.* Several researchers (Eckert & Bell, 2006; Eraut, 2004; Spear & Mocker, 1984; Tough, 1979) described learning as a natural response to the changing workplace environment, wherein triggers, activating events, and catalysts, emerged that directly or indirectly initiated a process of articulation and questioning that led to personal development (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). For instance, in a national telephone survey, Aslanian and Brickell reported that 56% (representing an estimated 60 million adults) identified triggering
events at work as precipitating their learning. These triggering events and learning
catalysts, referred by Houle (1993) and Tough as critical incidents, contributed to a vague
sense of discomfort among adults that something was amiss between their knowledge and
skills and the changing workplace demands. This general sense of unease precipitated a
conscious planning phase that would ultimately lead to the development and
implementation of the learning project. More recently, Eckert and Bell (2006) found that
activating events, occurring naturally in the work environment, exposed discrepancies in
the adult’s mental model, a self-invented, mental map or set of propositions, beliefs, and
values about the work. These activating events led to the adult’s reflection and
articulation of the discrepancy, which sometimes resulted in the transformation of the
mental model and the adult’s domain-knowledge.

From the perspective of Spear and Mocker (1984), however, the organizing
circumstance, similar to the notion of the triggering event and catalyst, constituted a
subjective concept that provided meaning to the individual’s environment. The
organizing circumstance was seen as strongly deterministic; rather than merely initiating
a sense of need, the circumstance incorporated within it decisions about what to learn and
the strategies and resources to use. In their view, the instigation for learning emerged
from the environment, not from within the learner. Regardless of where the impetus for
learning rested, however, Spear and Mocker still acknowledged that adults employed a
definite order, deliberateness, and logic in their responsive planning actions.

Rose (2004) found that expert teachers, waitresses, hairdressers, cabinet makers,
and plumbers developed a sense of rightness about their performance over time that
reflected a keen understanding of the nature of their work and the relationship of the
physical environment, tools, and resources to the tasks associated with it. So finely tuned were the experts to their work-related tasks that they recognized flaws in their performances based on some telling trigger – something not looking, sounding, or feeling right. This sense of something amiss caused them to step back and, using their metacognitive skills, reflect on the challenge at hand, identify the root cause, and adjust their performance accordingly. The workers’ self-management of their metacognitive skills in the problem-solving and learning process was seen as key to the development of their proficiency. Finally, environmental factors, such as activating events that occur naturally in the process of performing one’s work, have the power to expose discrepancies in the adult’s mental models of work. Such events led to reflection, articulation, and sometimes revision and transformation of long held beliefs, values and understanding.

*Summary of Proposition 2.* In summary, Greeno et al. (1999) claimed that the adult’s construction of knowledge was embedded and inseparable from practical action, social networks, and the routines and catalysts associated with the work environment. This view linked adults to a community of learners, and cognitive work to social relationships, resulting in a more integrated system of relationships than traditional perspectives have conveyed (1999). To be proficient in one’s work necessitated that an adult possess a wide range of capabilities, including domain knowledge, tacit and implicit skills, and an understanding of the social relations and norms of engagement within the learning enclaves that are situated in the environment. With this notion of the development of proficiency, the authors proposed a more inclusive, integrated model of
learning, and interpreted the role of the environmental context in a new way, an ecological one, wherein all aspects were interconnected and symbiotic.

Research (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tough, 1979) uncovered and described a significant social component to the learning process and to the adult’s learning project. Social groups provided enclaves of support, embedded in - or connected to - the environment, which represented networks of family, friends, and colleagues that emerge naturally when adults initiate their learning projects. In many cases, the support of individuals, as well as communities of peers, was recognized as integral to the learning process and project. Researchers (Eckert, 2003; Rose, 2004; Spear & Mocker, 1984) described a work environment where triggers or catalysts led to learning projects. These triggers included specific incidents whereby adults experienced a sense of unease or discomfort about whether or not their knowledge and skills were up to par with changing workplace demands. This sense of unease provided adults with the impetus to initiate a learning project.

**Proposition 3: The learning project, from problem-identification to completion, unfolds through the metacognitive efforts of the learner.**

The final proposition reflects research that demonstrated that the intentional learning adults undertake in the workplace was, first and foremost, self-managed and self-regulated (Eckert, 2003; Eraut, 2004; Schraw, 1988). Self-management and self-regulation are recognized aspects of metacognition, described by Bandura (1997) as the personal knowledge used by the adult to organize, monitor, evaluate, and regulate the thinking process. Metacognition involves knowing what strategies to use, as well as
when, and how (Eraut, 2004), which is necessary for realizing effective learning outcomes.

Adults have been shown in research (Enos et al., 2003; Eraut, 2004; Scribner, 1986) to be effective, adaptive, strategic managers of their own learning, and demonstrate creativity, flexibility, and resourcefulness in developing their proficiency in the workplace (Scribner, 1986). The learning process has been described variously as personal, organic, messy, dynamic, multifaceted, and ecological (Greeno et al., 1999; Hoekstra, Beijaard, Brekelmans, & Korthagen, 2007; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). Sarason (2004) and Bandura (1997) saw the learning process as constituting a mutually transactional relationship between the learner and environment that occurs through a seamless interplay of cognitive content with motivational and attitudinal aspects. Taken together, these views denote a highly interactive process, whereby an integrated constellation of personal attributes, dispositions, knowledge bases, and multi- and meta-processes are metacognitively facilitated by the learner to achieve a desired outcome (Eraut, 2004).

The adult’s development of proficiency is a reflection of a dynamic and multidimensional model of metacognition, according to Schraw (1998). In his model, metacognition represented the adult’s knowledge, regulation, and conceptual bases, all of which are interrelated and interdependent. The knowledge, or cognition, base included the declarative (the what), procedural (the how), and conditional (the when) thinking that contributed to the adult’s performance mastery within a specific domain. The regulation cognition base represented the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one’s skills within a specific domain. This regulation cognition base was entwined with the reflective
capabilities of the individual: Any conscious use of the planning, monitoring, and evaluating processes had more to do with limitations in the adult’s ability to reflect than the ability to self-regulate. Lastly, the conceptual level consisted of the adult’s mental models of cognition and the associated work demands.

*Developing proficiency through intentional problem-solving actions and strategic thinking.* Researchers Eckert (2003), Enos et al. (2003), Rose (2004), Scribner (1986), and Eraut (2004) demonstrated that adults displayed the use of metacognitive skills in the adaptive, creative, strategic thinking, and problem-solving activities they intentionally managed to complete tasks in diverse environments - from farms, restaurants, beauty salons, woodworking shops, and dairy production plants, to insurance management offices, and classrooms. Rose and Scribner, for example, observed experts redefining problems in order to solve them, and using the context of the environment and its resources to fit solutions that demonstrated economy of effort, precision, and accuracy.

Eckert (2003) and Rose (2004) reported that adults relied on their domain-specific, or content knowledge; tacit knowledge; and metacognitive abilities to develop their proficiency. Eckert (2003) found that the farmers in her study were often deliberate in their learning efforts, committing time to developing and practicing skills, reaching out to others, attending workshops and conferences, and joining associations that would bring them in contact with potential learning resources. They self-organized their time to practice and refine their skills, and often used specific problems or concerns that emerged in their routine work as a catalyst for more learning. Throughout the farmers’ experiences building domain-specific knowledge and strengthening their repertoire of work and
problem solving skills, Eckert found that the self-management of their metacognitive skills was key.

Scribner’s (1986) study of the development of expertise in the workplace demonstrated that adults were adaptive, creative, and flexible problem solvers who used metacognitive skills to manage their performances. For example, product assemblers filled the same mixed case and unit orders in a variety of ways, depending on the condition of the nearest empty or partially filled cases. In every instance, using a least-effort criterion, workers calculated solutions that reduced the number of product transfers, required the least amount of physical effort, and yielded the most accurate results. Regardless of the position workers held at the plant - product assemblers, delivery drivers, inventory workers, and office clerks - their ability to solve the same problem differently reflected a high degree of specific content knowledge, involved cognitive manipulation of the environment and its resources, and demonstrated creative and flexible thinking. Their problem solving abilities also demonstrated their concern with the how of their work, and reflected higher-order, worker-evolved strategies that demonstrated adaptability and efficiency (1986).

Scribner (1986), like Rose (2004), reported that skilled problem-solving involved problem formation, flexibility, creativity, and resourceful manipulation of the task environment. Through her analysis, Scribner determined that instances of problem-solving, tied to the improvement of one’s performance and the development of skills, were far from simple, but instead were sophisticated and complex. Problem-solving represented an intricate, dynamic, practical thinking system, influenced by many factors, and facilitated by the metacognitive base. Again, moving toward the adoption of an
ecological metaphor to describe the learning environment, Scribner explained that workplace-related, practical thinking involved several factors, including the environment itself, in the process of developing skills and proficiency.

*Conceptualizations of metacognition.* Three conceptual representations of knowledge are reflected in Schraw’s (1998) metacognition model. One was a tacit knowledge base which represented an adult’s implicit understanding of how to conceptualize domain-related problems without necessarily being able to articulate, and therefore scrutinize, such understanding. A second conceptual representation was the informal one, reflecting an adult’s ability to partially access and articulate an understanding of domain-related problems sufficiently to allow for conscious introspection. In the third, formal conceptual representation of knowledge, the adult was able to explicitly describe the nature of the work or phenomenon in all its complexity, and provide sufficient detail to allow for conscious analysis.

Development of the adult’s metacognitive knowledge was described as an incremental by-product of practice and the continual refinement of domain-related expertise (Schraw, 1998). Work experience, continual practice, and direct and peer-related learning, all contributed to the development and refinement of metacognitive knowledge. During this extended period of growth and development, the various knowledge bases and components, including problem-solving capacity, became so highly integrated and automated in accomplished adults that their work performances appeared effortless, economical, and masterful (Rose, 2004). As these knowledge bases and components became increasingly automatic and fluent, workers became less conscious,
less aware of them, which resulted in their being unable to describe or explain the nature of the problems they addressed and the skills they used to resolve them.

Ertmer and Newby (1996) acknowledged that expert learners were “strategic strategy users” (p. 5), knowing when to step back, assess, and refine their performance, just as Penland (1977) and Tough (1979) had found as adults determined to undertake, develop and manage their intentional learning projects. This ability to be self-regulated in knowing what was important (declarative knowledge) and how (procedural knowledge), as well as when, where, and why (conditional knowledge) to apply appropriate knowledge and undertake suitable action, was an important feature of the intentional learning associated with the learning project construct. As to the question of how adults learn to coordinate their metacognitive knowledge and self-regulatory actions to achieve mastery in a specific domain, Ertmer and Newby (1996), Kolb (1984), and Penland (1979) all recognized that reflection was the critical link between thought and action. Through reflection, as Schraw (1998) also noted, adults tapped into their knowledge bases; studied and scrutinized a particular phenomenon associated with their performance; and identified, selected, and applied a particular strategy.

In the process of reflecting upon the use of a particular strategy, adults monitored their own performance and continued to adjust, adapt, and refine the strategy – or identify and try another (Penland, 1977). While continuing to reflect upon their skill in use, they gained knowledge about themselves as performers of skills and strategies, and increased their understanding of themselves as learners and performers. This process was captured in Eckert’s (2003) proficiency-development spirals, too; her study showed how adults continued to refine their knowledge and regulatory bases simultaneously in the act of
performing domain-related tasks. Work-related tasks included solving problems, applying
skills and strategies, and monitoring personal skill development reflectively. In her
schema of development, adults were actively engaged in their learning process, and
demonstrated strategic, adaptive, and resourceful use of their metacognitive and self-
regulatory abilities.

An example of how strategic and effective adults are in managing their own
learning skills was provided by Kornell and Metcalfe (2006), who conducted a series of
experiments to analyze the efficacy of college students in using their metacognitive skills
to guide their learning efforts. During their series of experiments, different variables were
eliminated, one by one, in an attempt to determine whether learners, given increasingly
greater control of their own learning, would select strategies supported by research as the
most effective to use. In each subsequent experiment, the conditions of the learning
situation became more challenging; for example, the amount of seconds participants were
allowed to study selected items was decreased and the difficulty of the specific
challenges increased.

The results of the last experiment in the series demonstrated that participants were
accurate in their judgments of learning, choosing to study the easiest items first. This
finding was confirmed by self-reports: 20 of the 24 participants reported studying the
easiest items first and moving toward increasingly difficult items as time allowed. The
four who had not elected to study the easiest items were determined to have the weakest
judgment of learning rates and performed the most poorly overall. Kornell and Metcalfe
(2006) concluded that when given greater control of their learning, most participants
chose to study the easiest items first, which was the strategy supported by the region of
proximal development construct; but a small number of participants did not, and as a result, appeared to learn less and perform poorly. Learners performed best when they were in control of their learning and could self-determine when and what study assistance was necessary for optimal performance. Also, when learners’ choices were honored, their performance was highly adaptive. The researchers concluded that metacognitively guided study was significant to effective learning outcomes.

Recognition that adults are adaptive learners, able to control, and determine the conditions for their learning, was shared among many researchers whose literature was reviewed in this section. The findings of work by Eraut (2004), for example, would not disagree with those of Kornell and Metcalfe (2006) or Enos et al. (2003). Metacognition, Eraut wrote, represented an awareness of what one is doing and what needs to be done. Adults use a meta-process to manage such metacognitive-related processes as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their performances, with the central feature of the meta-process being self-knowledge and self-management. This includes knowing how to manage one’s time and effort, selecting actions and strategies, managing activities, and maintaining a meta-framework for evaluation. As researchers (Eckert, 2003; Eraut, 2004; Kornell & Metcalfe, 2006) have shown, ABEL educators are apt to be strategic managers of their intentional learning projects and able to metacognitively manage such learning effectively, as adults in other environments have been shown to do.

Deliberate and conscious planning efforts. The degree to which adults are consciously aware of and deliberate in their planning actions was a common point of discussion in the research literature on learning projects. For example, Penland (1977) and Tough (1979) both reported that some adults responded to triggers and catalysts that
occurred in the work environment with a vague sense of discomfort, unease, or the sense that something was amiss between their skill performance and work demands. In response, they began their planning process in a random-like manner. With greater press, however, and as they clarified what it was they wanted to know or be able to do, adults became more focused, deliberate, and strategic in their planning efforts.

Tough (1979) found, in general, that the majority of adults were conscious, articulate, and thoughtful in their planning actions; some were not, however, appearing instead to jump right in “on the spur of the moment” (p. 64). Conversely, the more conscious planners pursued a variety of initiating steps in a somewhat controlled and sophisticated manner. Tough identified 22 steps in the planning process, including 66 different decision-making points, though no adult was seen as following the same pattern or taking all 22 action steps. Similar to Penland (1977) and Tough, Livingstone (2000) suggested that a continuum existed in regard to how consciously aware adults were about the planning phase. Some were unable to articulate how they went about planning their learning projects, whereas others provided a rich, descriptive, and sophisticated explanation of the steps taken and an accompanying rationality.

An alternative view on the consciousness of planning was provided through the work of Spear and Mocker (1984) and was discussed earlier. They suggested that little evidence was found to support the conscious planning efforts among adults in their study, though they acknowledged that their learning projects were logical and reflected a step-by-step process that was not linear, random, or irrational. This led the researchers to suggest that within the organizing circumstance lay the structure, limited offerings, and indications as to the methods, resources, and conditions for learning.
Spear and Mocker (1984) also reported that adults seldom considered a variety of alternatives in planning and determining their learning projects, and instead, typically focused on a single-most readily-available, fortuitous resource. Planning, they suggested, occurred partly by chance and partly with intentionality, depending on the organizing circumstances within the environment, and the knowledge and actions of the learner.

The work of other researchers, such Ertmer and Newby (1996), Schraw (1998), and Scribner (1986), however, would appear to disagree, though they were not investigating the learning project phenomenon or the intentional and deliberate learning adults undertake within the work environment. Instead, Ertmer, Newby, and Scribner studied the development of expertise in the workplace, including the problem-solving thinking system used by adults to develop their skills. Their findings, however, have application to adults in other work environments, including ABEL educators. For instance, Scribner found that adults were neither constrained nor limited by the resources within their environment, as Spear and Mocker (1984) had indicated. Instead, adults demonstrated genuine skillful and effective management of the resources they needed for solving proficiency problems. Given the restraints and resource issues associated with the ABEL workplace, the recognition that adult workers, in general, are able to be creative, adaptive, and strategic managers of resources is an important consideration.

Summary of proposition 3. Many adults find it difficult to talk about their own learning projects or to recognize their sustained, intentional efforts at improving their skills, solving problems, and meeting the responsibilities of their work as something substantial (Tough, 1979). Difficulties in describing one’s learning project, including the specific planning, implementing, and evaluating components, mean that adults have
insufficient opportunity to explore and understand the experience in a way that allows them to acknowledge, embrace, or improve upon it (Eraut, 2004). Difficulty in articulation, however, does not mean actions did not occur. Reber (1993), Eckert (2003), and Eraut (2004) all convey the implicit nature of the adult’s learning, resulting in much of the learning process being hidden and unrecognizable to the learner. The implicit nature of learning, however, is one challenge to its being accessible for articulation, reflection, and transformation. The messy, complicated, multi-layered interactions of the adult’s learning process itself, is another (Greeno et al., 1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). This complicated process, occurring within an ecological learning environment with its attendant social relationships, problems, systems and subsystems, and mediated through the adult’s psychological and emotional dispositions, is managed effectively by the adult’s metacognitive knowledge base (Eraut, 2004).

Many researchers (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Schraw, 1998; Eraut, 2004) have proposed conceptual models of the adult’s metacognition and demonstrated how it functions. All of the models attributed a systemic integrative role to the adult’s metacognitive knowledge base in the ongoing development of expertise. The adult’s metacognition, while the integrator of the learning process, improved incrementally as a by-product of practice and the continual refinement of proficiency. The notion that the integrator of the learning process was likewise integrated within and improved by it, reflects again an ecological perspective on the adult’s development of proficiency.

Research has established that adults are strategic, effective, and efficient learners on their own (Daley, 1999, 2000; Eckert, 2003; Eraut, 2004), and well able to initiate, implement, and evaluate their professional learning through the learning project.
construct. In both the laboratory (Kornell & Metcalfe, 2006) and the workplace (Rose, 2004), adults have been shown to use research-supported strategies and problem-solving skills that result in efficient, effective, and expert performances, and in the process, continually improve their metacognitive strengths, as well as their proficiency (Eckert, 2003).

**Summary**

The proposed conceptual framework was based on the research on the intentional use of learning projects by adults to develop their proficiency. Given the paucity of research about the use of learning projects by ABEL educators, however, foundational studies establishing the robust usage of this phenomenon by adults in other environments, including public schools and universities, were reviewed. Additional research (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Scribner, 1986; Schraw, 1998; and Spear & Mocker, 1984) about the expert, strategic, and adaptive thinking skills of adults, as developed and displayed in various work environments, and the informal learning efforts of adults in the workplace (Daley, 1999, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell, 2003; Grenier, 2009) also contributed to the framework. From the research literature, three propositions emerged that reflected common themes of development that could be applied to ABEL educators, just as they can be applied to other adults in other professions. While these three propositions were presented independently, they are, in effect, bound together in a seamless relationship.

The first proposition was based on research that established that adults engage in deliberate, sustained learning projects, held together by a similarity of intent for the purpose of developing skills and improving proficiency (Livingstone, 2000; Penland,
In the process of learning, adults used a complement of formal and informal learning opportunities, from professional development sessions and conferences, to reading professional journals, intentionally testing and trying out skills, and seeking out peers and co-workers for assistance. While adults were commonly described as independent learners who self-initiated and self-managed their own learning, it was also clear that there was a significant social component to the process. Adults frequently tapped into the naturally-embedded social networks that existed within their work environment for assistance and support in developing and implementing their learning projects, without, however, relinquishing control or responsibility for managing them (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; and Tough, 1979).

Most common to the research reviewed was the notion of intentional learning, with adults assessing their need for developing their skills, determining and seeking out opportunities, deliberately practicing skills, seeking feedback, reflecting upon their experiences, and collaborating with others, while making strategic use of the resources within their environment – planfully or serendipitously. Such consensus guided the propositions; this study was initiated, therefore, with the expectation that ABEL educators develop and use learning projects to develop their skills.

Literature reviewed regarding proposition two described the general nature of the work environment as an ecological one and highly suitable for learning. Several researchers viewed the relationship of the learner and the environment as more than merely interactive and interdependent. It was highly dynamic, consisting of actions and interactions, systems and subsystems, and the synergy between them – all activated in a mutually beneficial, symbiotic manner. Eraut (2004) posed that it was impossible and
unwise to talk about the adult’s internal processes that were engaged in the development of proficiency outside of the context in which that development occurs. He noted that the nature of performance was holistic and visible as a fluent, unfolding sequence of events, with the most remarkable feature being its representation as an integrated, adaptive display of many different kinds of knowledge and skill that operate cohesively (2004).

The third proposition that ABEL educators rely on a complex, metacognitive skill set to develop their proficiency, just as other adults do in other work environments, was substantiated in the research literature (Eckert, 2003; Enos et al., 2003; Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Schraw, 1998; Kornell & Metcalfe, 2006). Adults were seen as effective, adaptive, and strategic managers of their own learning (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Scribner, 1986; Kornell & Metcalfe, 2006), using optimal learning strategies with efficiency and success. Deliberate in their learning efforts, adults made strategic use of informal and formal learning opportunities, such as attending workshops and conferences, joining professional associations, conferring with colleagues, seeking out feedback, practicing skills, and other activities in the ongoing development of their proficiency.

Adult’s experience in developing proficiency in the workplace entails a highly engaged, interdependent relationship, involving the internal knowledge bases – implicit, explicit, domain-specific, metacognition, and self-regulation – and environmental features. Given the increasingly sophisticated, complex nature of today’s work, it is also clear that adults will need to be continually engaged in their own learning, adapting to new learning resources in the process. The learning project phenomenon represents a well-established vehicle for building and improving skills in various work environments, though it is not understood as a means for promoting, improving, and honoring the
intentional learning of ABEL educators. Benefits could be substantial for ABEL educators themselves, as well as the field’s administrators, leaders, policy-makers, and professional developers. For instance, gaining insight into the nature of the learning that ABEL teachers undertake on their own helps to clarify what they see as primary areas for program improvement – starting with their immediate classroom experience. Changes in practice, occurring within the classroom environment and involving the ABEL educator and student, is crucial to meeting the federal, state, and local program service expectations. Moreover, greater insight into the personal, professional learning efforts of ABEL educators may lead to more resourceful solutions and strategic deployment of training funds for addressing the diverse training and professional experience backgrounds and needs of the ABEL workforce.

**Research Questions**

This study was designed to obtain sufficient data, that when yielded to analysis, will help provide information and insight regarding the following questions.

1. What learning is being addressed by ABEL educators through their learning projects?
2. How are ABEL educators learning what they seek to know, do, or change?
3. What is the role of the environment in ABEL educators’ learning projects?
CHAPTER 2

Methodology

The intention of this study was to contribute to the understanding of how ABEL teachers use learning projects as a means of developing their professional proficiency. Little research has been conducted in the ABEL field about the intentional efforts of educators to develop their skills on their own and outside of traditional, formal professional development offerings. Earlier research (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979), however, established the widespread use of learning projects by adults in other work environments as a means of doing so. The prior research about the learning project construct typically involved personal interviews (Houle, 1993; Tough, 1979) and large surveys (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977), which led to criticism (Brookfield, 1995; Candy, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) concerning two primary issues.

The first issue concerned the tendency of researchers to create typographies to describe the experiences of adults in using learning projects, yielding, for example, a narrative of numbers: the average number of projects conducted in a year, the average number of hours spent on individual projects, and the average number of hours spent on a total number of projects in one year. The second criticism concerned the absence of the adult learner’s voice; researchers, rather than learners, described the phenomenon of the learning project, leaving the noise, messiness, and complexity of the process (Greeno, Eckert, Stucky, Sachs, & Wenger, 1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000) out of the narrative altogether. As one critic (Brookfield, 1995) indicated, for all we know about the learning project phenomenon, little has actually emerged about the nature and process of the learning that occurs within it.
In this light, the study represents a personal attempt to describe the essence of the learning project experience – the content, the process, and the impact of the environment – from the perspective of the participating ABEL educators. By centering the research on the actual experiences of ABEL teachers, in their own words and taking into account their diverse and individual perspectives, the narrative provides an initial understanding of what is being learned, why, and how (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). With this knowledge, ABEL field leaders, administrators, educators, and professional developers will be able to better acknowledge and support the personal learning efforts of educators, and redirect limited resources for professional development more strategically. This study, therefore, is an attempt to provide initial insights into the use of learning projects by ABEL teachers who work part-time in a fiscally unstable field. Their experiences speak to the intentional learning interests of marginalized educators who are charged with meeting rigorous performance goals, despite the absence of sufficient professional development resources (Chisman, 2011; Smith, 2006). To discover those insights, the following questions were pursued.

Research Questions

1. What learning is being addressed by ABEL teachers in their learning projects?
2. How are ABEL educators learning what they seek to know, do, or change?
3. What is the role of the environment in ABEL educators’ learning projects?

**Methods and Procedures**

The methods and procedures used in this study represent customary practices of traditional qualitative research. Specific methods, such as the use of a sustained interview strategy, audio-taping, and transcribing interview tapes, for instance, were first employed
and practiced in a pilot study, conducted as a component of graduate school coursework. The pilot study (December 2002) involved a small, volunteer group of ABEL professional developers (\( N = 4 \)), and was undertaken to discover whether adults, working in a marginalized and under-resourced field (Chisman, 2011; Smith, 2006), actively engaged in intentional learning activities on their own, and, if so, whether the phenomenon of the learning project was an accurate representation of their efforts.

Results of the pilot study indicated that all four participants engaged in complex learning projects that resulted in gains in knowledge and skills in targeted areas. All participants engaged their colleagues in their efforts, expressed enthusiasm and personal satisfaction with their learning projects, and recognized the effectiveness of their efforts in realizing self-identified goals. The results increased a desire to extend the pilot study and investigate deeper into both the learning project phenomenon and its use among part-time ABEL teachers. The methods and procedures used in this study, therefore, have their foundation in an earlier research project by which interview techniques, data generation, deductive reasoning, and analyses were first tested.

Overall, the use of sustained, extended, and reflective interviews as the primary research strategy served two purposes. First, interviews were intentionally designed to be semi-structured and open-ended in order to promote a more natural, dialogic process. The use of a dialogic process established a comfortable tone to the interview and helped ABEL teachers explore, describe, and claim their self-managed learning experiences as a vehicle for developing their proficiency. Second, the use of extended, personal interviews generated sufficient data, that when distilled and analyzed, yielded insight into the essence of the individual and collective experiences of ABEL educators in using learning
projects for their own purposes (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Sustained exploration and personal narration was seen as more likely than other methodologies, such as surveys, to lead to new insights about the learning project construct which would be significant given how little is known about this phenomenon in the ABEL field.

Listening to ABEL educators describe their experiences in managing their learning projects in their own words helped unpack the phenomenon and contributed new understanding for addressing the problem statement discussed in Chapter One. Because little research exists about this phenomenon in the ABEL field, this study yields new questions for future research about the intentional learning efforts of ABEL teachers and the use of learning projects as a means of developing and improving teaching proficiencies.

Participants

A sample of 12 ABEL teachers, 8 women and 4 men, working in adult education programs participated in this study. The factors that guided the recruitment and selection process included purpose, representation, and geography. I purposely recruited ABEL educators who were working in the field at the time of the investigation because they were best situated to generate the thick description and sufficient information-rich data necessary to provide insight relating to the research questions (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glesne, 1999). Current practitioners, after all, were in the best position to explore how their intentional, self-managed learning efforts impacted their classroom and program experiences. In the end, the 12 participants who volunteered and agreed to take part in the study represented the typical profile of the ABEL educator, white, female, and employed part-time (Smith & Hofer, 2003).
In selecting participants and program sites, I considered two additional criteria: part-time employment and geography. Part-time employment ensured that the participating ABEL educators shared at least one common circumstance across multiple and diverse program sites. While the participants taught in various adult learner classrooms and service models, worked with learners at assorted skill levels, and focused on different subject matter and content, they all worked part-time. The part-time nature of their work constituted another issue, one of motivation and extrinsic reward. Smith and Gillespie (2007) indicated that the part-time work status of ABEL educators constituted a unique kind of worst-case scenario: Working in an unstable environment with limited compensation or potential for job advancement, educators would resist committing personal time and expense for their professional learning, including professional development. Conversely, research on the motivation of public school teachers for participating in professional development identified such benefits as merit pay, enhanced job security, and career advancement as being key motivators for their investment in professional learning (Karabenick & Conley, 2011; Suslu, 2006).

Geography was another factor in recruiting participants. I work with a large organization that provides adult education and community services, and as a result, was concerned that my role had the potential to influence the responses of participants. The ABEL field is small and service networks overlap, which could result in my being familiar to potential participants and engaged with some in other, unrelated interactions. Therefore, to foster a greater level of comfort, trust, and openness among selected participants, I recruited from program sites that were at a sufficient distance (i.e., at least 40 miles) from my sphere of work (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Emerson, 2001).
reasoned that the geographic distance would increase privacy and protect participant anonymity.

Sampling. Access to research sites and recruitment occurred in two ways. As a former ABEL teacher, program director, and professional developer, I have worked with Connecticut’s ABEL leaders, program directors, and educators, including serving on the state’s first Reading and Language Arts Task Force for adult learners. As a result, I relied on a network of well-established relationships, appealing directly by telephone to program managers in central and southeastern Connecticut. After the initial telephone conversation, I sent outreach materials to both managers asking them to share the information with their ABEL educators (Appendix A Outreach Letter to Program Administrators; Appendix B Outreach Flyer). The outreach letter and flyer explained the general focus of the research project and participation expectations. This original letter yielded four participants; program managers provided me with their telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. I contacted these four ABEL part-time educators by telephone and arranged for a convenient time to meet for the first interview.

Due to changing managerial circumstances at one of the original program sites, however, I chose to extend my outreach efforts. I contacted an Adult Education Technical Consultant at the Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services, and Adult Education at the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and shared my research project focus and desire for reaching an additional eight ABEL educators who would be interested in participating in the study. I shared the same information, the original outreach letter and flyer, with the consultant, who, already familiar with my work as an ABEL professional developer, telephoned three program directors in the greater Hartford
area on my behalf. The consultant informed me in a follow-up telephone conversation that the program directors she contacted would be discussing the project with their teaching staff. In turn, interested educators were asked to contact the Adult Education Consultant directly. She had their approval to share their work telephone numbers and e-mail addresses with me, which she did, and informed the ABEL educators that I would be contacting them directly to provide more information about the study itself.

I followed-up with personal telephone calls to the 11 ABEL educators who expressed interest in the study to explain more about the project, including how much time would be involved and the general nature of the interview questions. All of them were interested in the opportunity to participate, though they each expressed personal doubt about whether their input would be helpful or valuable. At the close of each telephone conversation, I scheduled the first interview session at a time and place that was convenient and comfortable for each individual. All participating educators, however, chose their respective program sites for their interviews.

The following table provides limited details about the ABEL educators who volunteered to participate in the study. Because the ABEL field is a small one in Connecticut, I assigned fictitious names to the participants and offer only limited information about their backgrounds and experiences to protect their identities. It should be noted, too, that this study focused on the nature of the participants’ learning projects, and as a result, demographic and background information were not deemed by me to be critical factors for participation. Nonetheless, the background and experiences of participants typically conform with the general profile of the ABEL workforce and reflect the challenges for professional learning described in the problem statement.
Table 1

Description of ABEL Educators who Participated in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABEL Educator</th>
<th>Referral Source</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Background/Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ava           | Program Administrator in direct response to outreach by researcher | • External Degree Program  
• Family Literacy  
• GED** | • Elementary education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 10 years  
• No formal preparation in ABEL |
| Christopher   | Outreach by CSDE Adult Education Consultant | • Credit Diploma Program  
• GED | • Elementary, intermediate, and secondary education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 5 years  
• State Certification in Adult Education |
| Emma          | Outreach by CSDE Adult Education Consultant | • Credit Diploma Program  
• GED  
• Transition | • Public and business management experience  
• ABEL educator for 7 years  
• No formal preparation in ABEL |
| Grace         | Program Administrator in direct response to outreach by researcher | • GED  
• Reading | • Elementary and intermediate education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 2 years  
• No formal preparation in ABEL |
| Isabella      | Outreach by CSDE Adult Education Consultant | • Credit Diploma Program  
• GED | • Intermediate and secondary education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 5 years  
• No formal preparation in ABEL |
| James         | Program Administrator in response to researcher outreach letter | • Basic Skills  
• GED | • Intermediate level education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 2 years  
• No formal preparation in ABEL |
| Mia           | Outreach by CSDE Adult Education Consultant | • Basic Skills  
• GED | • Intermediate level education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 5 years  
• ESL*** Certification |
| Natalie       | Outreach by CSDE Adult Education Consultant | • Family Literacy  
• GED | • Early Childhood Education teaching experience  
• ABEL educator for 3 years  
• No formal preparation in ABEL |
I conducted two interviews with each participant. At the time of the first interview, I reviewed the nature of the study and my interest in knowing more about the personal and intentional efforts that ABEL educators engage in to develop their teaching practice and professional skills, and invited participants to ask me any questions they had about the study itself. I explained that the two interviews focused on different aspects of one’s personal learning; the first involved questions about challenges they may be facing or may have recently addressed through their own individual efforts outside of formal professional development, and the second, about the attributes of their work environment that helped or hindered their learning efforts.

At the time of the initial interview, I shared and reviewed the informed consent form (Appendix C Informed Consent) which had been approved by the Institutional...
Review Board at the University of Connecticut, and provided sufficient time for the participant to read through the form and ask any questions. All participants reviewed and voluntarily signed the form. At the beginning of the second interview session, I again reminded participants that their participation was voluntary, and I encouraged them to ask any questions about the process or the nature of the study. I asked, too, if they were still interested in proceeding, though we had corresponded by e-mail prior to the second interview to confirm the date, time, and location. All participants willingly continued with the study and had no questions to ask about the process or nature of the study.

Instrumentation

The researcher was the primary instrument in the data collection process and used sustained interviews as the principal means for generating and obtaining data (Creswell, 1994). I conducted two intensive interviews with 11 of the participants, and one lengthy, sustained interview with one participant, between December 2009 and June 2010. Both interview protocols, the initial (Appendix D Initial Interview Protocol) and second (Appendix E Second Interview Protocol) interview instruments, consisted of open-ended questions, and were designed to elicit as much in-depth detail in the participants’ own words as possible (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Both interview protocols were reviewed and approved by the University of Connecticut’s Institutional Review Board on November 24, 2009. Approval was renewed in November 2010, and again in November 2011.

The interview questions focused on the perceptions and experiences of the participating ABEL educators, inviting them to describe, explain, and make sense of their intentional efforts to develop their teaching practice and professional skills in their own words (Creswell, 1994). I piloted the use of both the initial and follow-up interviews with
two ABEL educators who had no other connection to the study; from these practice sessions, questions were refined and re-sequenced. Both interviews fostered a dialogue approach so that follow-up probes and new questions that emerged naturally during the conversation could be pursued. In this way, I maintained some latitude for probing more deeply into the personal narratives that participants shared in a natural, unforced manner.

In the first interview (Appendix D), I obtained general descriptive data about the ABEL educators’ current assignments, training and background, and experiences in teaching adults. Primarily, however, interview questions asked participants to identify and discuss challenges that led to their intentional learning efforts; subsequently, the data on their individual problem-identification, planning, implementing, and evaluating processes were gleaned from their personal narratives. Participants who reported that they were not currently conducting a learning project were asked to think back and reflect upon a previous experience, such as a new class assignment, a new resource, or the use of new technology, for example, that necessitated sustained and intentional learning, and what steps they may have taken. At the end of the first interview, participants were encouraged to continue to reflect on their use of learning projects to achieve their self-identified goals and to e-mail me about any questions they might have or to save their questions for the start of the second interview.

In the second interview (Appendix E), the focus was on the impact of the learning environment on the participants’ learning experiences, including which resources were most helpful and those that they wished were more readily available. Before I began the second interview, however, I asked participants if they had an opportunity to reflect on our initial conversation and if they had anything that they wanted to add, share, or clarify.
Six of 11 participants began the second interview by commenting on the process and adding information, as the following example illustrates.

Interviewer: This second interview is really about the environment. But I want to ask you, first, if anything struck you since our first conversation about your own learning that you want to add?

Olivia: (In this response, the use of ellipses does not represent verbal omissions but pauses in her speech.) Well, one thing is that . . . ahhhmm . . . I think I’m dyslexic . . . in high school I had no problems. When I went to college, I found it was very difficult. I had a really hard time . . . learning anything . . . so I went to the counselors and they’re like, ‘oh, you’re too old to get the free thing’ . . . to get the free testing. So then I was like okay . . . so . . . I have . . . so you know, like in class, if they give phone numbers, I’d get them confused or I’d really . . . or when I read stuff, I don’t really read stuff . . . and so . . . I kind of . . . figured what they were saying and ignore what’s not important. I think when I left I was just . . . probably a lot of how I teach. I try to get rid of the stuff that isn’t important because I want to condense everything to understand it. So that’s what I teach, I teach for them – get rid of all the nonsense. I try to teach them how to, like, read stuff and get through all the fluff that they don’t need and to only focus on what they need.

In general, the open-ended questions in the second interview protocol promoted exploration, reflection, and explanation about the features of the environment that were most critical to the teacher’s learning success. Overall, both interview protocols provided expansive narrative opportunities for participants; some described learning projects that were underway at the time, and others chose to describe those from their past, which mirrored the approach of previous researchers on the learning project construct (Houle, 1993; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979).

**Data Collection**

I audio-taped and transcribed each of the sustained, intensive interviews conducted for this study. All participants, but one, met with me twice; one individual, leaving the state for an extended stay, answered both the first and second interview protocols at one session that lasted 2 hours. A critical friend (peer to the researcher)
reviewed the transcripts, comparing them with the audio-taped interviews to insure accuracy. Program materials were reviewed to provide clarification or supporting evidence for the personally-shared narratives of the participants; for example, I reviewed program orientation handbooks, flyers and notices about regional training offerings, conference notices; and classroom documents, such as teacher-developed manuals, lesson units, student work samples, textbooks, and other resources. Some of the artifacts, such as participant-developed assessments, manuals, and student work samples, particularly, illustrated the outcomes of individually conducted learning projects. During the course of the interview, those ABEL educators who developed products self-selected the products they wished to show me, which I reviewed and then returned to them.

In addition, I recorded observations of individual interviews, produced field notes that described actual workplace environments, and provided periodic reflective memoranda to summarize the personal reflections gained from individual actions taken throughout the study. These sources generated sufficient descriptive data to yield insight about the learning projects used by adult educators in building their professional skills in the workplace (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). I also maintained an audit trail, illustrating personal reflections on various aspects of the project, key decision-making junctures, and decisions made during the study.

I complied with traditional qualitative research practices regarding the management and maintenance of correspondence and taped materials to ensure confidentiality and protection of the participants’ personal identities (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). For example, I assigned codes to protect the identities of the participants; the codes included two letters followed by two-digit numbers; letters and numbers were
selected randomly. No names or self-identifying data was recorded in the process of
audio-taping the interviews, and only codes were used on the transcribed materials. All
study records have been maintained in locked files. All electronic files containing
identifiable information have been password protected and cannot be accessed by any one
other than myself.

**Data Processing and Analysis**

The data analysis used in this study included reductive, inductive, and interpretive
reasoning (Creswell, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) as a means of making sense of
the personal narratives that participants shared about their learning project experiences. I
conducted 23 individual interview sessions for a total of 38.5 hours, with individual
interviews ranging from 2 to 4 hours. Transcriptions of the audio tapes yielded 286
single-spaced, typed pages of interview dialogue and 12,739 lines of text.

After generating substantial data, I used an ongoing, iterative and reductive
process of analysis to help identify common patterns and themes (Rossman & Rallis,
1998). The analytic process began in anticipation of the first interview and continued
simultaneously throughout the data generating, collecting, sorting, and coding activities. I
conducted and taped all of the interviews myself, produced field notes following each
session, transcribed each audio tape, and reflected upon each transcript with a critical
peer. These strategies allowed me to get as close to the data, and as focused on the
individual narrative of participants as possible (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). By transcribing
the interviews, reviewing field notes, and studying documents and artifacts as efficiently
as possible, I was able to use the emerging data to influence subsequent questions for
participants and to guide the direction of the study, as well.
Routine debriefing meetings with an experienced, knowledgeable ABEL program
director who fulfilled the role of a critical friend and who was otherwise unconnected
with the research, assisted me in the analytic process by providing an avenue for
thinking-out-loud as I sifted through the emerging data, considered themes, and explored
explanations (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The critical friend posed
probing, challenging questions that promoted deeper analysis and helped rule out
alternative explanations. I wrote summary memoranda for my critical review peer; these
short summaries aided our on-going, reflective, and sustained dialogue, and helped to
ensure that the analytic process remained rigorous throughout the analytical period
(1993). During the course of the interviews, I also conducted member checks to ensure
that the content, focus, and actions shared by the participant were adequately understood
(Rossman & Rallis, 1998), as these two examples from one transcription indicate. The
use of ellipses in the following is meant to indicate pauses in speaking and thinking, and
not the omission of words:

Interviewer: Would you say that you typically learn by generating – I don’t want
to put words in your mouth so please correct me – but it sounds like you assess
yourself for where you are in your understanding, knowledge, and skills, about
whatever the challenge is – then you go into a search process. You do an
investigative research kind of thing to understand what you don’t know, in effect .
.

Emma: Right.

Interviewer: You’re identifying a lack of confidence and a lack of understanding
of what you’re supposed to be doing and where to go with it. You generate a list
of questions; you investigate and research – you find and identify, it sounds like,
expert colleagues – not any colleague but someone – you’re bringing some
criteria to the process -

Emma: Yes; absolutely – because I wasn’t getting the right information from. .

Again later, in the same interview:
Interviewer: Summarizing from your point of view, your notion of your professional learning environment is a broad landscape – that extends well beyond your physical environment and your immediate program?

Emma: Absolutely. Looking for professionals who have a great deal more experience than I do – someone I can learn from – someone who’s gone through the work – someone who has a lot more experience than I do. Someone who is really seeped in the content – someone I can learn from. Like the folks at (named a large ABEL organization with national research expertise and located outside of Connecticut) who are engaged with the research, working with students in classrooms, reflecting on their work – writing about their experiences. . . .

As previously noted, I was continually analyzing the data as I was collecting, transcribing, reflecting upon, and discussing it with my critical colleague. Having a critical friend, familiar with the work of the ABEL field and well-informed about the research project, provided a weekly sounding board for sifting through, reflecting upon, and analyzing the data on an on-going basis. Creswell (1994) provided a systematic process that was useful for analyzing the data obtained from the interviews and other sources. As patterns and themes emerged through careful and multiple readings of the interview transcripts and field notes, they were coded strategically, using the literature review and research questions as a structural guide. This process of inductive analysis was undertaken to maintain focus on the meaning that participants attributed to their own experiences and to guide the researcher in looking for internal consistency among categories and ensuring that they were also distinct from one another (1994).

Following Creswell’s (1994) recommended approach, I first read through every transcript asking myself two basic questions: what was the participant saying in general about the learning project experience and what was the underlying meaning (1994). After each summary reading, I prepared a brief memorandum for each participant that focused on the two guiding questions. I next read through three randomly selected transcripts,
jotting notes and potential categories in the margins that aligned with the research on the learning project phenomenon and any theme that seemed unexpected, new, and idiosyncratic. From the reading of these first three transcripts, I selected an initial coding category that I then tried out by re-reading the same three transcriptions to see if the coding theme captured the data relating to the phenomenon under investigation. Next, I proceeded to read all of the interview transcripts using and refining the codes as new themes emerged and as relationships appeared to suggest a clustering and collapsing of themes into more graphic descriptive codes (Creswell 1994).

Creswell’s (1994) recommended use of this type of reductive analytic process constituted a de-contextualization and re-contextualization process, which I attempted to follow. The first step, for example, was the summary reading of the taped transcripts to determine a general sense of the essential substance of each participant’s personal narrative about the learning project experience. I noted topics in the margins as they emerged in the initial reading, and clustered some together on subsequent readings; I clarified major and idiosyncratic topics as insights became clearer through continual reading of transcripts and as I sorted through additional data. After recoding topics, I applied the new codes to corresponding data points during a subsequent re-reading of the transcripts. In general, additional readings led to revisions in the codes as suggested by emerging data.

I converted topics into descriptive categories and then clarified and reduced topics through an on-going, re-clustering process (Creswell, 1994). Final aspects of this analytic process included abbreviating and alphabetizing codes, and assembling the data points that belonged to each category in one place, before conducting the analysis of each group,
and recoding the data as necessary. Creswell’s (1994) analytic framework, incorporating reductive and inductive reasoning, offered an effective process for managing the data. Once theme or pattern saturation was achieved, using a process of constant comparison, data gathering ceased, and a culminating analysis was conducted in preparation of the final report.

**Limitations**

Consistent with qualitative research, there are potential threats to the trustworthiness of the study’s findings. The specific steps taken to address four potential threats, transferability, credibility, reliability, and confirmability follow (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

*Transferability.* The study’s results do not generalize beyond the particular subjects who participated in this study and their professional context (Emerson, 2001). This limitation is based on the uniqueness of each context and recognition that no two contexts are the same. As other researchers have noted, each learning environment reflects its own rich, ecological nature and consists of its own set of interrelated webs and interrelated actions (Eckert, 2003; Greeno et al., 1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). This complexity can both restrict and extend the applicability of the research, however, as noted by Erlandson et al. (1993). Readers can judge the applicability of the study’s findings by considering the richness of the narrative presented in Chapter Three and a discussion of those findings in Chapter Four. Sufficient evidence of the learning experiences of part-time ABEL educators, as experienced in multiple sites, will help the reader consider and assess where elements of this research study may also apply (Erlandson et al., 1993).
The sample size and characteristics relate to a narrow, marginalized field of work, and as such, likewise limit the transferability of the findings. Themes uncovered in the analysis of the data relate only to those who participated in the study and may have no broader applicability, as the sample may not be representative of the entire population of part-time ABEL educators, and certainly not to those who are employed on a full-time basis. Nonetheless, the part-time employment of the sample participants working in a marginalized field does represent a worse-case scenario variant that raises interesting questions about the kinds of learning projects being conducted in other environments.

_Credibility._ Continual alertness to one’s own biases, assumptions, and subjectivity about the phenomenon understudy is necessary to ensure greater credibility of the findings (Creswell, 1994). For instance, a researcher’s biases and subjectivity can undermine the degree to which the study measures what the researcher claims to have measured. To offset this potential threat I maintained a reflective, learning journal where I explored my own biases, assumptions, and personal connections to the participants, their work, and the learning project phenomenon. The learning journal constituted a type of thinking-through-writing process that allowed me to be continually alert to my own predispositions, assumptions, and biases; journal-writing activities helped me bracket my own predispositions about the phenomenon and my personal experiences in the field. Journaling also helped me remain continuously open-minded and curious, rather than prejudicial, while collecting, reviewing, and analyzing data. Additionally, as demonstrated earlier, I engaged in member checking with participants whenever I felt I needed greater clarification about particular aspects of the personal narratives shared by the participants.
In addition, I explored my personal biases, assumptions, and subjectivity in weekly meetings with a critical friend, which constituted peer debriefing sessions (Erlandson et al., 1993). My critical friend is a retired ABEL teacher and past director of an adult education and community services program who has over 20 years experience in the ABEL field. In our weekly meetings, we reviewed transcripts, discussed codes and emerging themes. Her thoughtful and probing questions forced me to think through preliminary interpretations, and pushed me to rule out possible premature explanations, and remain conscious of my own subjectivity regarding the phenomenon under study (Glesne, 1999). In this way, I was continually analyzing the data, sharing themes, ideas, questions, and sifting through possible explanations with my critical peer reviewer weekly, and keeping my own subjectivity issues clarified. In the process, emerging themes that were of interest but not specifically related to the phenomenon under study were identified and saved for future reference, which led to a more focused analysis of the phenomenon under study (Glesne, 1999).

Reliability. Thoughtful and dependable implementation of the study by the researcher is important for promoting the reliability of the findings. Traditionally, the triangulation of data is a key strategy for addressing the threat of reliability. In this light, while the primary research instrument involved sustained interviews, participants were selected from multiple sites (Glesne; 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). This use of multiple sites helped to establish that the common themes that emerged in one site held up across program boundaries, and therefore did not reflect other variables, such as different leadership and administrative approaches to the professional learning of the
ABEL staff at any specific site. Commonality of themes, despite program administration, contributed to the vitality of the findings (Glesne, 1999).

In addition, by conducting interviews within the participants’ classrooms, I was able to view examples of products that individual participants developed during their learning projects. These products confirmed the particulars of individual ABEL educator’s narratives about his or her use of learning projects to achieve a desired goal.

I also piloted and revised the interview instrument with two ABEL educators who were not otherwise involved with the study before using it with participants. This action helped to ensure that the questions were suitably open-ended, but flexible enough that participants would be able to control the flow of the conversation, and we would be able to cover new territory as it emerged naturally (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). As participants shared their narratives, there were many occasions to ask new questions and probe more deeply into particular aspects of their experiences, which led to richer data.

In addition, my critical friend compared the interview scripts to the original audio tapes to insure accuracy of the transcriptions.

**Confirmability.** Replicability is an inherent threat to the confirmable results of any qualitative study. As Merriam (1988) noted, any phenomenon being studied is assumed to be highly contextual, and as a result, in a state of flux. In particular, this study included a particular group of participants at one time in their professional lives; the participants were working in different program sites with adult students who will graduate and move on. Still, the threat to confirmability can be minimized by a clear, comprehensive explanation of the steps taken by the researcher throughout the study, including decisions that were made at critical junctures. In this light, I maintained a reflective journal, an
audit trail, and relied on the continual engagement of a critical friend, whose role was to ensure that the study was conducted in a thoughtful and dependable manner (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

The resulting narrative, representing a thick, rich, in-depth and detail-focused interpretation of participating ABEL teachers’ experiences in using learning projects constitutes a beginning, a first-step, on which future research can build. On-going critical self-reflection and rigorous, peer-interacted analyses support the validity of the study’s methods and outcomes, as other researchers attest (Glesne, 1999). Prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data, peer review and debriefing, member-checking, clarification of researcher bias, and the production of an external audit trail, are all traditional strategies recommended by others (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) to generate confidence in the study’s results.

Table 2 represents a summary of the actions taken to address potential threats to the trustworthiness of the study.

Table 2

*Methods to Enhance the Trustworthiness of the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Transferability</th>
<th>Credibility</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Confirmability</th>
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<td>Peer Debriefing</td>
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<td>Triangulation of Data</td>
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<td>Reflexive Journal</td>
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<td>Audit Trail</td>
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<td>Subjectivity Statement</td>
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Subjectivity Statement

Qualitative researchers need to pay particular attention to the potential impact of their personal biases, prejudices, expectations, and world view on the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Some researchers see objectivity, the goal of most traditional research, as largely illusionary (Erlandson et al., 1993); but subjectivity is a special concern in studies where the researcher is the primary instrument and is in a position to unduly influence the direction and exploration of the narratives that participants share. However, to minimize this potential influence and interference, Marshall and Rossman (1999) recommend that the researcher engage in a preliminary phase, *epoche*, of reflection and clarification. The practice of reflecting on the various ways the researcher’s beliefs, attitudes, general views of the world, and dispositions can impact decisions made throughout the study is an important aspect of building trustworthiness.

A process, rather than a phase, of self-examination that included my personal reflection and attempts to clarify and acknowledge, or bracket, my personal feelings, attitudes, and beliefs, occurred throughout the research process, from the development of the problem statement and purpose of the study, through data collection and analysis. Using a peer in all phases of this study provided frequent thinking-talking aloud sessions whereby personal attitudes, biases, prejudices, and preconditioned, anticipated expectations were presented and discussed, acknowledged, and then bracketed to minimize undue influence on the direction and findings of the study. In Appendix F Subjectivity Statement, I share a history of my personal journey as a means of explaining
the lens through which I have come to view my work experiences, and that has led to my motivation in undertaking this study.

Summary

This exploratory study builds on the work of previous research (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979) on the use of learning projects as a means of improving the proficiency of adult learners by extending the construct to a new work environment. Customary qualitative techniques, which I have followed, provided a means of getting as close to the essence of the individual learning experiences of participants as possible (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Critical components of the study, including the use of a professional and knowledgeable peer, member-checks, data obtained from multiple sources, reflexive journaling, and a peer’s comparison of typed transcripts with original taped cassettes, for example, all contribute to the trustworthiness of the findings. The study involved sufficient participants from the ABEL field to yield the necessary, quality data that, upon analysis, would provide insights for addressing the problem statement and the research questions. The open-ended, semi-structured interview protocols used to elicit data had been previously tested and refined. These methods and techniques are customary to qualitative research and, applied thoughtfully, promote confidence in the findings that will be discussed in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER 3

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the use of self-managed learning projects by ABEL educators as a means of developing their professional proficiency. As noted in the problem statement discussed in Chapter One, ABEL educators work in a marginalized, under-resourced field, and serve a learning population that presents unique instructional challenges. Traditional professional development is the primary source for improving proficiency among educators throughout the field. But the ABEL teaching workforce consists of educators with broadly diverse backgrounds in preparation, education, and adult teaching experience (Smith, 2010). Such diversity undermines the effectiveness of traditional professional development, regardless of its quality or intensity (Chisman, 2011; Fullan, 2007). However, alternative, non-traditional workplace learning models exist, such as the adult learning project first explored by Tough (1979) that complement traditional professional development and offer another means for addressing self-identified skill deficiencies and knowledge gaps.

Although the learning project phenomenon has been broadly studied among the general public and in some areas of education, such as public schools and higher education (Livingstone, 2000; Tough, 1979), little to no such investigation has occurred as to its utility in increasing educator proficiency in the ABEL field. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to uncover and describe the learning projects used by ABEL educators to develop their professional expertise.

In this chapter, the findings from the data analysis are presented. Common themes emerged, reflecting the information and insight gained about the learning projects of
ABEL participants. Three research questions guided the study and the data analysis process: RQ1: What is the nature of the learning being addressed by ABEL educators in their learning projects; RQ2: How are ABEL educators learning what they seek to know, do, or change; and RQ3: What is the role of the environment in ABEL educators’ learning projects?

Overall, the study supported the foundational research that established the robust use of learning projects by adults in various workplaces as a means of developing proficiency (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). Data also supported the original propositions of the study; specifically, participants’ learning projects represented intentional, sustained learning experiences that involved a series of related episodes tied together by a common theme. Primarily, data showed that the participants’ learning projects constituted a strategic response to challenges that arose in the workplace environment. Data also showed that the resources and support participants employed to address such challenges resided in the environment, alongside barriers that impacted the learning project experience as well. Lastly, evidence supported the proposition that ABEL educators metacognitively managed their learning projects from onset to completion. Findings from the data analysis that address the research questions follow.

Findings

Research Question 1: What is the learning being addressed by ABEL educators in their learning projects?

The development and improvement of proficiency in self-identified areas of professional practice was what participants chose to learn through their projects. Generally, participants used their learning projects to improve their proficiency in their
professional practice by deepening their content and background knowledge, developing instructional skills, and improving their instructional management of multi-level classrooms. Additionally, they used learning projects to understand how to develop and manage high quality programs.

**Deepening background content knowledge.** A common focus of participants’ learning projects was the improvement of their subject matter knowledge in particular academic domains and their background knowledge of various careers and fields of employment that aligned with student interests. Christopher and Isabella, for instance, conducted learning projects to increase their content knowledge in the social studies domain, and used their learning outcomes to create motivating and engaging learning units for their respective students. Both were certified educators, Christopher in adult education, history, and English; and Isabella, in English and French; both had high school teaching experience prior to working in their current positions. Still, both invested extensive time in developing their knowledge about specific aspects of American history.

Isabella, for instance, sought to understand as much about World War II and America’s engagement in it as she could, and used her new knowledge to develop a well-annotated, enriched, and extended learning unit for her instructional use. “I’m not knowledgeable about World War II,” she began, getting up and locating a series of dark blue binders and selecting one that she opened for me. “I wanted to learn – to learn, literally, everything.” Having initially introduced the topic of the Holocaust to students by assigning *The Diary of Anne Frank* for reading, Isabella explained her desire to deepen her subject matter knowledge:

> The Holocaust was a part of it, but I wanted to learn so much more. I looked up everything. I found names of battles, people, and whatever. Then I researched
online, created my text, looked up pictures. I had the important people, the causes – what started it. The whole thing from A to Z. I based it on the bones of what I had done previously – but this was beyond the beyond – many, many, many hours.

The purpose of one of Christopher’s recent learning projects was to deepen his background knowledge about American presidents, as they were featured in an instructional unit in his social studies course. He wanted to know about their personal backgrounds, rise to power, and the import of their individual presidencies. He discussed his learning project, consisting, in part, of sustained reading and visiting presidential homes and museums, saying: “I want to go out and explore (sites) on my own so that I can touch them, be there, and be a part of them.” He described a preference for this experiential aspect of his learning project in this way: “I know what I want to learn when I plan to visit. Like when I went to Teddy Roosevelt’s house, I knew what I wanted to learn about - his boyhood, his presidency, and his adulthood and his life after the presidency - and about his family.”

Some ABEL students entered participants’ classrooms with particular employment and career interests as their learning motivation. In response, participants developed their background knowledge and understanding of various careers, workplaces, and fields of employment that aligned with the specific interests of individual students. Such learning tended to include information and general knowledge about the academic preparation and training a student would need, as well as entrance level skill expectations, and personal assets associated with advancement. Participants used this knowledge to create customized curricula, including lesson plans and extended learning units that incorporated career-related realia, often re-written and edited by the participant to reflect student reading levels. Ava, for instance, was a frequent user of
learning projects as a means of building background knowledge about her students’ different employment interests:

I talk to others – someone who’s not in education at all – my neighbors, employers, those working in different jobs – and ask, well, you’re with (a large company), what do you think? Do students ever need something like this in your field of work? So I first have to learn about different entrance level skills in the student’s job or career interest and start from there.

Robert, on the other hand, went so far as to take a position on a limited-time basis to develop his understanding of the math skills and tasks his students would most likely need to be able to perform in places where they were most likely to be employed. He explained this aspect of his learning project as follows:

That’s why I took the job at (one company). It’s a type of job that many of our students would actually do - run a cash register and manage in a store. It was very interesting to do something that would be similar to what I could expect my students to do. I never ran a cash register before so it was a new thing to take on. It is interesting because it allows you to learn something you ordinarily don’t do and really don’t even know anything about. It’s a lot more than one might think.

Similarly, expanding her knowledge about and understanding of the general skills students need for employment in a changing world was the focus of one of Mia’s learning projects. The impetus for developing her background knowledge about “mega-skills and the work of Dorothy Rich” was the result of “a group of (colleagues) getting together” and having “(an ABEL consultant) come in and discuss (Rich’s) book.” Through sustained reading and on-going conversations with her colleagues, Mia began to make “comparisons with the 21st Century skills to see how these mega-skills related, and actually found they were the same thing, and (thought about) how to use that with students.” Mia continued, saying she found the group’s emerging “enthusiasm for mega skills” motivating, as they continued to work “collaboratively to create a workshop” highlighting the connection of both skill sets with the workplace and job skills training.
efforts of adult educators. “We basically learned to take the job skills and match them with mega-skills, as these mega-skills also relate to the 21st Century skills and to skills that had to do with jobs – specific jobs,” she concluded.

Another example of how participants developed their knowledge base relating to their students’ academic and career-related interests was provided by Emma. In one of her learning projects, she initially “immersed” herself in “two months” of study to better understand the “attributes that help nontraditional adult learners succeed” in post-secondary education. In the process, she interviewed “admission officers and students at the region’s community colleges” about what students “needed to know and be able to do” to successfully complete their studies. Emma used this background knowledge in developing a curriculum for a “new transitions program” to prepare students to move successfully from the ABEL program environment to institutions of higher education.

In general, the frequency with which participants engaged in learning projects to build their background knowledge in areas of academic content and various career and employment fields related to a highly personalized instructional approach adopted in their workplaces: “It was always individual, since I’ve been working with adults,” Ava said of her 10-year adult education teaching experience, as we sat at a work table in her classroom where the walls and bookshelves were cluttered with employment-related materials. “It wasn’t a group thing – it was more an individual program for each. I don’t think you can take five adult learners and say this is what we’re going to do today and not have it very individualized.” Paul, too, one of the few participants with significant ABEL teaching experience and certification in the field, explained his personalized approach to instruction as follows:
I have a pretty full class and most of them are 16, 17, and 18, and we don’t just all do the same thing. Everybody has their own thing going on. I have to keep a folder on everybody, and I might have (one student) doing math and I might have the girl next to him doing science, and the guy over there (he points to an empty student chair) just started maybe last week, so he’s taking some practice tests so I could make a decision about what weakness we should be working on, and then I have other students doing a lot of math work or writing skills. I have somebody working on an essay. But my point is, each one (has) an individual plan.

As a result of the personalized approach taken by participants, the range of content matter addressed in their learning projects was understandably broad, ranging from Isabella’s focus on “World War II” and Christopher’s on American presidents, to James’ and Robert’s on “basic mathematics” and “estimation skills,” respectively. “English language acquisition” served as the content matter of one of Mia’s learning projects, just as “essay writing” did for one of Natalie’s. Likewise, participants developed their general and specific content knowledge relating to various careers and fields of employment that aligned with students’ identified interests, as Ava and Mia related.

The range of content matter that individual participants studied through their learning projects was found to vary as well. For example, the content matter of some of Emma’s learning projects included her study of the personal attributes relating to student retention and successful completion of post-secondary academic studies, “international education and what’s going on in adult education in different countries,” and the “organizational culture” of an agency she was about to serve, which included a new learning group consisting of “union reps and strikers,” among other subject topics.

**Developing instructional skills.** Teaching reading comprehension strategies in specific domains to adults with basic skill levels was the focus of several learning projects. For instance, Christopher used one learning project to improve his skill in teaching non-fiction “reading comprehension and reading process strategies to students
preparing for their GED social studies test;” and Grace, in her second year teaching adults, and following 35 years of teaching various grade levels in public schools, improved her instructional approach to teaching “reading comprehension strategies” and “content knowledge in American History” among “low-level readers.” “I realized,” Grace began, “that a lot of (my students) do not know what the terminology means.” She continued to explain what she needed to learn to do:

It’s not that they couldn’t read. They don’t know the basic history of events in American history and basic social studies skills. That was the one thing that I thought, well, how am I going to learn to get these students to comprehend what they read if they don’t have background knowledge?

Through her learning project, Grace reflected upon her past experiences and drew, initially, upon the “things that I learned in the public school.” But during the past year, she began to improve her instructional strategies by learning “what I needed to know to make sure my students were really successful readers. I reviewed a variety of different reading programs and focused on particular strategies, like reading ahead, looking at headings, things like that.”

Mia, too, used a learning project to develop her “reading and writing instruction skills for a beginning ESL language group.” In preparing to take on a new teaching assignment, Mia explained how an early project opened up “a whole new realm of learning for me” and determined that “being able to teach even a couple of strategies would really make a difference.” Mia became competent in using a few selected strategies over the course of two years through her self-managed learning efforts. Specific instructional strategies she developed included having a “structured conversation and writing activity” ready for students as they entered class, using “journal writing more
effectively,” and incorporating “functional writing assessment” within her practice as a means of improving her students’ writing outcomes.

Paul, on the other hand, sought to develop his competency in applying an instructional strategy he termed the “mini-project” in his work with GED level students. “I wanted each (student) to find a particular area of interest, whether it be social studies or science, mathematics - just a slice of that subject and learn as much as (they could) about it.” First introduced to the mini-project strategy in a professional development workshop, Paul improved his understanding by reading about it, talking it over with peers, and trying out an adapted version in a staff meeting: “Everyone was required to plan something that we were doing in our classroom and share it,” he explained, “it was very successful.” After various “unsuccessful” trials in his own classroom, however, Paul ultimately gained greater confidence in using the targeted strategy:

Since I had this training, I wanted my students to try this out - to have an opportunity to teach something to the class. I called it a mini-project. I wanted to do this,” he said emphatically. “Two years ago, I might have, when they started moaning and groaning, said, okay, we won’t do it - but not this time. We did it. It was me. It was about leadership and getting to the point where I felt able to put it into practice.

Managing multi-level classrooms. Besides the previously discussed tendency to personalize instruction, participants noted another commonality, the assignment of multi-level classrooms, as a source of unique challenges. Particularly, participants noted that teaching multi-level classrooms of English language (ESL) and basic literacy skill acquisition required special management skills, which they chose to develop through their learning projects. Group work appeared to be favored by participants teaching ESL and beginning reading classes because it allowed them to contextualize grammar development through facilitated conversational language experiences, as Mia explained:
“We needed to provide a context, conversation, as a means of teaching grammar – rather than teaching it in isolation. This was something we had to work on.” She chose to develop her skill in managing her multi-level ESL class by initially engaging a peer. Through co-teaching, Mia explained she was able to “try out different strategies” and obtain timely “feedback” as she explored different techniques that she would not have been able to do otherwise:

I wanted to use (contextualizing grammar) as a stand-out theory – something to base our teaching on. I like the whole-team teaching aspect. We were able to really target the needs of students - we could do small groups with the non-speakers; conversation group with the really high level students; and for the writing, we could do different types of things with our small groups in our class.

During the interview, Mia reflected on what she had learned about managing and working with multi-level ESL classes through her learning project: “Students are always at different levels,” she began, but “everyone benefits” from “greater use of small group work” as it increased “opportunities for conversations that were less grammar focused” and also yielded “more time for functional writing.”

Whether participants were experienced adult educators, such as Paul, a certified Adult Educator with over 15 years of classroom experience, or relatively new, like Grace and James, with just two years of experience, learning to effectively manage a multi-level adult classroom emerged as a genuine concern and required particular skill, as Mia demonstrated above. Isabella and Grace provided additional examples of this finding. Despite 30 years experience teaching in public schools and five in her current ABEL position, Isabella reported feeling “inadequately prepared” for managing the multi-level ESL classroom assigned to her this year. In an explanatory tone, she prefaced her narrative about her challenges saying, “I have not had a lot of professional development
instruction at all in just purely (she stressed) teaching adults, as opposed to just teaching.”
Subsequently, she struggled with her teaching practice in this one class throughout the year, despite undertaking a learning project to improve her instructional knowledge pertaining to ESL learners. Noting that she intended to continue her learning project “over the summer break,” Isabella expressed only disappointment about her year’s performance:

Here I was with this group, and I’ll admit I am the least satisfied with what I have done this year with this class. Suddenly I was assigned to what I called my ESL group. In that one class we had everything from someone who was fairly (she stressed vocally) proficient and bright and someone who wouldn’t even repeat after me in English. I can handle things pretty easily when the whole class is at the same level mostly. But, oh my gosh, this was horrendous. That’s what I need the most help in – how to teach a class where it’s all different levels.

Grace, too, despite significant public school teaching experience, struggled to develop her competence in managing her multi-level adult beginning reading classroom. “In my first year, in one class,” she said, “I had three people from the South who picked cotton their whole lives and didn’t have any education; they couldn’t read at all,” while others in the same class she described as “pretty decent readers who had difficulty breaking down long words and figuring out pronunciation.” After initial set-backs, Grace embraced a new strategy for managing the class. Through her learning project, she explored using students to support the reading skills of one another: “I did a lot of research and the best learning comes from heterogeneous grouping – because some of the lower level (readers) can learn from the efficient readers about the strategies they use, and efficient readers improve when they teach.”

In a broader sense, Grace also wanted to improve her effectiveness in using contextual relevancy when teaching basic reading skills with her multi-level class.
Specifically, she wanted to learn to use context more effectively, rather than teaching discrete “reading skill drills,” a practice she reported she used with her “elementary level students.” Learning to use context for teaching basic reading skills in a multi-level adult classroom necessitated a shift in Grace’s instructional practice:

Knowledge is the key to being a proficient reader - formal knowledge is necessary. That’s what I worry about with these students, that they don’t have the background knowledge to be successful readers. So no matter how many basic reading skills I teach, without the knowledge that they need - it’s hard to be successful.

She proceeded to explain how she adopted social studies as an instructional lens and began to introduce articles “at appropriate reading levels for the different groups,” which she “often re-wrote,” about topical issues to help generate “general group discussions.” “All students benefitted,” she explained, “from our whole-group discussions of meaningful topics.” In the process, she was able to strengthen her “students’ reading comprehension skills” and improve “their background knowledge.”

With globes on every work table and colorful maps covering her classroom walls, Grace discussed her emerging skill in managing her multi-level class:

Students aren’t just learning reading skills. They’re developing reading skills while they learn about things that are relevant. Now students are more personally invested. We talk about social studies – about history; we talk about current events. These kids are teaching each other - they’re really a group.

**Establishing and managing new programs and services.** The subject matter of participants’ learning projects also concerned program-related challenges, such as the development of new programs and services, like Family Literacy and Transition to Post-secondary Education, which represented the work of Natalie and Emma, respectively; or the implementation of changes to existing national models, such as the National External Diploma Program, which spurred the learning projects of Ava and James. In such
instances, participants’ learning involved developing and improving their ability to establish and manage new programs and services, as well as changing and mastering new instructional practices associated with mandated reforms of existing programs.

Individual participants at specific program sites were singularly responsible for developing and managing programs or services about which they had neither familiarity nor previous experience. Emma, for example, possessing “no education or experience in adult ed what so ever,” inherited a fledgling Transition to Post-secondary Education program that was “on the verge of losing its funding.” Without having a colleague on-site familiar with the new transition service model, she embarked on an intensive, multi-year, self-managed learning project that resulted in her mastering the knowledge and skill necessary to meet “every single indicator and outcome result” outlined by “the funder,” which led to the transition serving receiving “renewed funding.”

Natalie, too, working independently, “totally re-changed” her agency’s newly instituted Family Literacy program by “combining and applying everything” she had learned in her project. For instance, through her project, she learned to effectively “manage the four components of the service model” and determined and implemented strategies for overcoming barriers that inhibited families from accessing the service, such as addressing questions of “location and transportation.” Her learning efforts yielded “improved enrollment and retention” rates. Natalie described the nature of her learning project as “a work in progress,” saying that she was continuing her efforts and was not yet satisfied with the results: “I think my next year’s plan will be to learn how to improve networking between the four program components. That’s my goal for next year.”
Summary. What participants chose to learn through their learning projects included a range of content knowledge and specific instructional skills that related to various aspects of their professional practice. For instance, participants deepened their content knowledge, as well as their instructional skills, in the domains of the English language arts, mathematics, and social studies. Some improved their instructional practice by learning new methods for teaching reading comprehension skills with fiction and non-fiction materials, and others in making greater use of contextualization as a means of developing English language acquisition and literacy skills. Still, others developed their understanding and implementation of national reforms relating to a particular service, and in the process, refined their instructional practice, changed targeted instructional and assessment-related behaviors, and provided quality feedback to federal-level program administrators.

Participants also developed their background content knowledge in different areas of employment and careers, such as entrance level skills and behaviors associated with successful advancement in fields relating to student interests. Participants used their content and background knowledge to create personalized curricula. Some also improved their knowledge and understanding of general employment skills that students will need in today’s changing workplace.

Two challenges emerged in participant data relating to their work with adult learners; one represented participants’ attempts to personalize their instructional practice to meet students’ goals, needs, readiness, skill levels, and interests; and the other, to effectively manage multi-level classrooms. Because of such challenges, the learning matter addressed by participants through learning projects was understandably broad and
diverse. For example, participants developed individualized curricula and enriched learning resources in specific academic domains. They also developed targeted instructional skills, such as using small learning clusters to promote language acquisition more effectively; engaging students as learning-peers to better develop reading and writing skills; and making greater use of group discussion of timely topics to build background knowledge, thus contextualizing reading skills in a more meaningful way.

Lastly, besides deepening content and improving instructional and classroom management skills, participants also learned to develop and manage new program and service models. In such instances, they developed a richly integrated knowledge base, including managerial skill sets that were associated with specific models, like Family Literacy and Transition to Post-Secondary Education.

**Research Question 2: How are ABEL educators learning what they seek to know, do, or change through their learning projects?**

When implementing their projects, participants demonstrated a common learning process, which consisted of three sequential episodes, each involving a strategic set of actions. The first episode was one of problem identification and clarification; the second episode concerned the selection and implementation of a solution; and the third, saturation and closure. The episodes were connected by a common theme, typically representing the impetus that prompted the learning project in the first place.

As managed by participants, the learning process was interactive, integrated, and progressive, with each episode consisting of a seemingly logical set of strategic actions, including, in some instances, a subordinated, secondary episode that addressed a discreet skill or knowledge gap. In general, as Candy (1991) suggested, participants initiated and
managed their learning projects independently, though they did not typically learn alone. Instead, participants engaged their colleagues in the learning process to assist in various ways, such as providing information and constructive feedback; sharing resources; and serving as coaches, mentors, and collaborators. Likewise, participants were robust users of both technology and data, each of which played a keen role throughout the learning process.

The robust use of data by participants was so consistent and apparent in the three learning project episodes that it warrants particular attention. Data appeared to serve multiple purposes throughout the learning project. For instance, test outcome data served variously as a learning project catalyst in the initial episode; a monitoring measure on the utility of a particular strategy or progress in skill development, as well as an indicator of the need for refinement or adjustment in the implementation episode; and as a summative metric in the closure episode, indicating to the participant that a specific learning goal had been achieved. Most particularly, participants referred to “student grades and GED test outcomes,” as Isabella said, as indicators of the need for a learning project and as a measure of a successful outcome at its closure.

**Identifying the learning challenge.** The initial episode was one of problem identification and clarification, which constituted a seemingly natural response to problems or challenges that emerged within the context of participants’ professional practice. Such problems and challenges were explained by Spear and Mocker (1984) as environmental triggers or catalysts. In the ABEL environment, such triggers were typically either of a student- or program-related nature. “The student would definitely be the starter,” Robert said as he began to outline his learning project. “What we do,” he
continued, is that “we see students and their reactions to us and that they’re having difficulty with a particular skill or strategy. Once I knew what the problem was, I could then go and start doing research to find out how I could solve it.” Referring to his students’ general understanding of basic math principles, for example, Robert said:

A major challenge I found among my adult learners in very basic math is the ability to know whether in fact you have arrived at a correct solution. I took on the task of studying this to find out if there wasn’t a rather quick way of doing this.

An example of a program-related challenge was that of Ava who sought to understand the changes being promoted in a national mandate relating to her program model. She expressed the trigger for her learning project this way:

My problem is trying to find out what’s being changed and should be changed, and having input into that - because as I’m working with a student, I’m finding that (a particular mandated strategy) isn’t working like it was intended.

Some environmental triggers and challenges appeared to be relatively straightforward, in that the essential problem was readily identifiable and easily determined by the participant. An example of this was that of Sophia, who attended a professional development activity where she was introduced to the usefulness of a graphing calculator for enhancing students’ mathematical understanding of essential constructs covered in the GED examination. She described the triggering event and her subsequent determination to develop her own skillful use of the tool as follows:

(The presenter) was talking about graphing and how you could do more graphing to help your students on the GED test - like creating a graph and how it’s created and how to draw information from it. It was new to me. I’ve used regular calculators but the graphing one was showing graphs on this little screen and you had to set the dimensions of your axis and this and that, and you could do so many things. There wasn’t the time to learn all of (the functions). So the graphing calculator workshop was a good starting point - but to be able to put it to use, you needed a lot of practice.
Other environmental triggers and challenges, however, seemed more complex, requiring investigative-type action before participants could articulate what they wanted to address through their learning projects. For instance, Olivia, noting that one group of ABE students struggled throughout the year, described, initially in the interview, a broad sense of unease about her instructional performance: “I don’t think there’s one thing I’m concerned with - I think there’s several problems.” Among her concerns were student behavior, “they get on each other; they pick on each other; they hide and seek;” and her ability to motivate them, “they don’t see it. They don’t see the value in it.”

Olivia proceeded to explain a series of actions she facilitated to clarify for herself what she initially wanted to address through her learning project. For example, she “asked a lot of questions of other teachers to see how others are doing things, asked students what would be more helpful,” and “identified and reviewed a lot of books.” Ultimately, Olivia determined that the first problem she would address was that of mastery: Students “hadn’t sufficiently mastered basic math functions, like decimals and fractions.”

As previously noted, the key to the initial episode of problem identification was the general use of data by participants to help clarify the actual nature of a presenting challenge. “Our numbers were low and tied to our funding. Because the numbers were low, we couldn’t have PAC (parent and child activity) time – and it was an adult work program,” Natalie explained during an initial conversation, “we had to re-assess the program.” As the interview proceeded, it became clear that Natalie used learning projects very strategically and frequently to address program- and student-related problems that emerged over the course of the year. For instance, talking not about her administrative
responsibilities, but those relating to her instructional practice, Natalie continued in a thoughtful, serious manner, sharing how she used data to confirm an individual challenge:

I felt that I needed to enhance my students’ writing. I didn’t focus enough time on it, and felt there was definite room for growth for me and for my students. I didn’t have enough of a check system, and instead, just sort of progressed page by page through the text. But in the results on the state practice tests I was giving them, I wasn’t seeing enough growth. So I started to think that I really should spend more time on writing.

Once clearly identified in episode one, the problem or challenge appeared to serve as an organizing theme, naturally lending itself to certain subsequent learning actions, which resembled Spear and Mocker’s (1984) notion of the environmental trigger’s inherent organizing property.

**Determining and implementing solutions.** The work in episode two was bifurcated as participants both chose and implemented their solutions, based on the nature of the problem identified in the first episode. Subsequent but different strategic actions clustered around each of the two aspects. The first cluster of actions, for instance, concerned determining an appropriate solution; and the second set, on its implementation. Like the first episode, wherein participants undertook a set of investigative activities to determine and clarify the nature of messier problems or challenges, the second episode also began with a set of investigative actions but with the intention of determining an appropriate solution. For instance, Mia determined in episode one that her students’ “writing scores weren’t improving so that’s what I happened to take on to improve my practice – functional writing and assessment.” Having clarified the instructional challenge she wanted to address, Mia discussed the actions she undertook at the outset of episode two to determine a possible solution:
I don’t remember anybody offering PD in this at the time. But I needed to get as much information as I could, so I looked online, and contacted a colleague who I met with – a previous adult ed teacher. I watched videos about teaching writing – that type of thing. If there wasn’t the Internet, what would I do? I think I’d start with conversations with others and finding resources and go from there.

Ava offered another example; as noted previously, she identified nationally-mandated changes to her program as creating a rippling effect on her instructional practice. She determined in episode one to deepen her understanding regarding the implications of the new reforms on her instructional practice. But as she moved into the implementation episode, she was uncertain of what she needed to know and be able to do: “So I go to a meeting and I listen to (those) who have been doing a workshop about the changes. I came back and decided to use some of their ideas.” As she began to explore the changes within her classroom practice, she “spot checked my manual,” while also “taking notes as to how their changes are working.” She continued to “read background material” to understand the rationale behind the reforms. But while implementing the changes, Ava determined that she was “finding this is something that isn’t good for the student – and it’s not good for the program.”

After this initial investigation at the outset of her implementation episode, Ava convened a “meeting of my colleagues and we set aside time to go through each of the changes, one by one, and discuss them” and determined what did and did not appear to be working. “We had consensus,” she explained about individual reform targets that should “be implemented or eliminated.” Ava followed up this meeting by going back to her classroom and experimenting with the instructional changes again. This time, she and her colleagues decided to collaboratively “collect data from their work” regarding the changes. Finally, she and her colleagues decided they would ask “to meet with the people
in charge of the NEDP (National External Diploma Program) in two months,” at which
time, they would present their data regarding their experiences in implementing the new reforms. Ava summed up her group’s sense about the national program representatives: “they are not in the day-to-day work with people who are trying to get their high school diplomas, and so they don’t know what is a good or valuable change.”

Whether participants used specific criteria in selecting their respective solutions, or decided upon the first one that made sense in light of the nature of their respective challenges, was unclear from the data. But given the time participants reported they dedicated to searching for possible solutions, such as Isabella, noting that she referred to “a 100 books at least,” it seems likely that decisions were strategic and based on some criteria that served to eliminate or reduce options. Natalie, for instance, who determined in episode one that she wanted to improve her organization’s new Family Literacy program, starting with the establishment of the four basic service components, chose to search out and visit exemplary program models, interview successful program managers, and attend professional development activities in episode two, as a means of determining particular solutions and possible strategies. But while describing the series of actions she engaged in, she also talked about being selective in determining which recommended, suggested, or observed strategy to test out:

It’s important just to know that there are other people who understand my work and can share something that works or doesn’t work for them. Because sometimes you go to a place and you think, oh, this is great, but it can’t work where I am because of this or of money or whatever. I think that just because something’s great doesn’t mean it can be replicated or could work for somebody else.

In the end, one of the strategies Natalie employed was the relocation of the program to a convenient site “on a local bus line” in order to serve more families:
We made a change to the YMCA where we were able to serve more families because of the child care funding and everything else. We’re there five days a week, three hours a day, as opposed to four, and now offer it to ESL participants, not just the GED or credit diploma students. We revamped a lot of things making it easier for parents to participate with their children.

The decision to relocate the program required sustained study and effort on her part, as well as great deal of “collaboration.” As Natalie explained:

I’ve gone to meetings; I’ve read things sent by the state’s family literacy coordinator. Whenever she’s had workshops or anything, I’ve made sure I went to them, and I’ve talked to people. I went online and did a lot of different things. The location though was just a big thing for us, that was half the problem.

For the most part, individual problems and challenges identified in the first episode appeared to lend themselves to particular and somewhat obvious solutions, which participants clarified or confirmed through the investigative process of the implementation episode. Christopher, for example, wanted his students to develop their reading comprehension skills in dealing with non-fiction prose in preparation for the GED exam. “Motivating them,” he determined, based on research he conducted online that confirmed what his own teaching experience suggested, as well as conversations with peers, required “finding stimulating, relevant materials, appropriate for their reading levels.” “I look at my computer as necessary in my learning – I need access to unlimited information,” Christopher said over his shoulder as he went to a file cabinet at the back of the room to locate the learning unit he developed: “I researched a lot of this online and then I asked other teachers” for resource leads, he said as he pulled out sample items. “Some of my colleagues actually used this before I did; and after trying it out, they said you might need to do a little tweaking with this, and so I got good feedback from them.”

Sophia, on the other hand, attended a traditional professional development conference, a math institute for adult educators, where she was introduced to a graphing
calculator and its usefulness to students in preparing for the GED examination: “I wasn’t familiar at all with a graphing calculator,” she said, despite 13 years teaching in adult education and possessing a certificate in secondary math education. “It was new to me, so I knew I had to spend time researching how to use it myself so I could use it in my classroom. When I’m looking to do or know something, I see research as the first step. I have so many resources here,” she said, waving her arm in the general direction of the back wall, lined with bookcases and file cabinets that nearly hid the large blackboard. “If I can’t find (what I’m looking for) in hard copy, in a book – or on the Internet, I can always ask a colleague. There’s always an answer. It might take a little time to pursue, but there’s always an answer. I take whatever time it takes to get it.” Asked whether she intended to develop her skill in using the graphing calculator, Sophia nodded, saying:

I already asked my kids to help me because they’ve been introduced to it in their school, and I asked some of my students, too, because I know they’ve used it. Now I’m practicing using it by completing assignments I’ve taken from some of my GED textbooks. Once I can complete all the exercises competently and without error, I’ll feel better about using it with my next year’s student group.

Participants’ learning actions within the implementation phase were consistently logical and sequential, though not necessarily linear. While this was a common finding, one of Robert’s learning projects served as a particularly good example of this. He described his implementation episode plans, which included his intent to identify a solution, test it out, and use feedback to refine it, as follows:

So, the first thing you notice is the problem. Second thing is you plan. How are you going to attack the problem? So you start thinking about it. If you have enough experience, you try different techniques. In order to try different techniques you have to use the Internet, use the library, or the College – put them all together and build from there. Putting the resources together you have your solution. You start testing it out with students; how do they react? Do they actually produce a better score? If it does, you have solved it. If not, you have to
tweak your plan. All these things play a part in it. It took months to work this project out.

Participants consistently used qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources, such as colleagues, students, and field-related research literature, in the process of testing and trying out selected strategies and solutions during the implementation episode. “Students’ grades, students’ attendance, students’ comments all along the way,” Isabella responded, when asked how she determined the quality and effectiveness of the enriched learning resource she developed on building student content knowledge in American history. Ava, too, explained her use of qualitative data during the implementation episode of her learning project in the following way: “First of all, I’d work one-on-one with the student. I find talking to them about their backgrounds, their families, lack of family, and having them feel comfortable talking to me – then I can begin to develop a curriculum.” The development of individual curricula constituted the theme of several of her learning projects.

During his implementation episode, Christopher conducted research on motivational reading strategies for resistant students before developing his own learning resource. In the process of developing the resource, he engaged his colleagues and drew upon student feedback: “I kind of adjusted what was going into (the learning resource) based on my students’ responses, and so I added a few things – and I’ve added a few more things, and continued to research other ideas. I’ve asked other teachers to assist with some of the packets I’ve made, and I’ve collaborated with another teacher in the school. So I keep modifying (the material) as I’ve been using it.”

Some participants described a subset of actions they facilitated during the implementation episode, which constituted a type of episode within an episode and
contributed to the broader learning goal. This kind of interconnected, integrated episode within an episode aspect of individual learning projects resulted in a rich knowledge base in targeted areas. For instance, in Emma’s example, she developed her knowledge and understanding of a new service model designed to help students graduate and transition from the adult education program to post-secondary education. To build her knowledge base, she conducted the usual series of three learning episodes, but included various subset episodes to address different challenges uncovered during the broader implementation phase. Taken together, this networked series of multi-layered episodes contributed to a deep, well-integrated knowledge base, which was her overall learning project goal. For instance, after establishing the transitional service model and while monitoring emerging data, Emma found herself looking closely at student participation rates when she “discovered that certain (students) didn’t appear to be a good fit for the program. They were dropping out.” She continued:

I worked through my recruitment list. The first core of students I recruited showed that they had to have stability, economic stability in their background. I recognized that without this they wouldn’t be able to successfully exit the program. It was interesting, as I went through my data, that I’m noticing that more students were dropping out after three-weeks. So that’s a new problem.

To identify and clarify the emerging problem (episode one in this embedded and secondary learning project), Emma initiated a series of initial learning activities that included “contacting professional peers and talking with a national technical advisor.” During the subordinated (secondary) implementation episode, she found “15 research articles online” that identified key variables that impacted retention among participants of this particular service model. The strategy she selected and “tested out” during this implementation phase was a revamped “intake and assessment process.” “I need to look
for a core of individuals that are going to be successful,” she concluded, as she looked forward to the next year’s potential cohort. Overall, this deepening understanding about her service population, uncovered during an episode that nested within the implementation episode of her ongoing learning project, contributed to Emma’s rich knowledge base about transitional services.

Besides a robust use of data, participants also incorporated the use of feedback, reflection, and deliberate practice during the implementation episode. For example, Grace, possessing a master’s degree in Special Education and significant elementary school teaching experience, was relatively new to adult education. While in her second year teaching adults, Grace’s students were not achieving established reading outcome indicators. In the midst of conducting a year-long learning project aimed at improving her reading instructional competency, Grace said:

I’ve got colleagues – and when I wanted to develop this approach (using realia to motivate students, develop vocabulary, and improve common knowledge), I know an excellent teacher who I highly regard, and we talked at length about the problem and what to do. I read through several reading programs, and I practiced using some of the new material I developed, copied, or brought in – that’s what I have to do, try-out and hone in on a particular skill. (This teacher) was wonderful and a very positive influence on me. Her suggestions and feedback got me really thinking differently. She was going to come in, observe, and review my curriculum (before the end of the school year).

Another example was Sophia, who used deliberate practice on a routine basis to develop her competence and confidence in using various teaching strategies she developed through a series of learning projects. In a quiet, confident tone, she talked about her “common approach” to conducting her learning projects:

When I teach something that I haven’t done in a very long time, I research it. I’d read the textbook, spend time working on problems till I understood it so that I could then teach it. I wouldn’t stop practicing until I felt comfortable and confident in my abilities to explain it to somebody else. I might ask someone,
possibly (the program administrator), to find a teacher in my program to observe me and provide feedback. I’d ask (another peer), who is a fellow adult ed teacher in (another town), who might model a particular strategy, approach, or knew the material well and would provide feedback.

**Reaching learning saturation and determining closure.** Lastly, the culminating episode of participants’ learning projects was one of saturation and closure. The single most common action that emerged to distinguish this episode was participants’ collection, analysis, and use of culminating student and program data, as well as perceptual data, to indicate when individual learning goals were achieved and the project complete. Participants’ explanations of the data they drew upon, and how they determined precisely that individual learning goals had been met sufficiently to conclude their projects, however, ranged from specific to oblique. Sophia, for example, responding to the question about how she determined that she had met her learning project goal sufficiently to move on to other areas of interest or need, said that she used “the database stuff, daily class work, and test results.” Later in the interview, however, she elaborated on the connection between her individual learning efforts, her experience as an educator, and improved student performance data as significant to knowing when her learning goal was sufficiently met and her project ready for closure:

I knew I was ready to move on because I took such time and effort to look things up – this was not a quick learning experience – so that by the end, I’d be surprised, truly, if I left anything major out that I would want and didn’t know about. I was pretty thorough. I have to trust – it’s a feeling. You’re experienced enough to realize when you still don’t know it, but you do know if you know it. Do I feel like I learned what I set out to know or do? You get to know yourself enough to know whether you learned it or not. Some of my students moved up 7 points, which is a huge jump, and my supervisor acknowledged the improvement in my instructional outcomes. So I’m confident in my outcome.
On the other hand, Ava struggled to explain how she assessed when her learning project was completed, and when the learning resource, an individualized curriculum was in its final form. During the implementation stage, she had noted that “working with (students) and trying (her curriculum) out – watching how the student learns” yielded insight about its effectiveness. “Student feedback” was again obtained in the final episode to help determine that no additional changes were warranted, and her new curriculum was “finally ready to be filed in the binder.” She explained, albeit imprecisely, how she assessed when an individualized curriculum she developed was finished and required no further revisions:

I don’t think I’m happy till I get the right answer. I think I know the right answer when I get to it – and I keep trying till I get it. My comfort level lets me know.

Isabella also struggled to articulate how she determined when her learning project goal had been effectively achieved: “This is hard to articulate, but I recognize that when kids are interested and excited – when they love (the new learning resource), you just know.” Christopher, on the other hand, was clear about incorporating summative feedback from colleagues and students when determining whether he had achieved his learning project goal or needed to continue his learning efforts: “I need feedback,” he said emphatically. “If I want to know if I’m successful - I really need outside observations and feedback (about the quality of his learning resource). Someone has to help me with that.”

Robert spoke about using both specific “student testing and test results” and personal perceptual data to indicate the degree to which his learning project goal was realized and his project concluded. “How do (students) react? Do they actually produce a better score? Are they happier with their progress? Are you happier with their progress?
All these things play a part in,” he noted in determining his learning effectiveness and project closure.

Interestingly, several participants referred to their history of teaching experience as an explanatory factor for recognizing when their learning projects were done and assessing the utility of their outcomes in addressing the initial challenges. Both Robert and Isabella, for instance, individually reported that their “extensive teaching experience” contributed to their general confidence in “just knowing” when their projects were effectively completed. In response to interview questions about how she knew when her learning project was completed, Isabella ascribed her longevity as an educator as significant to recognizing when she achieved learning saturation: “I’ve been an educator for 40 years. So trust me. I know I achieve highly when I create things and do things. I’ve been exemplary in my own learning. You’ve got to have that background to understand that maybe we shouldn’t trust data - maybe we should just trust our gut.”

Robert, too, on being asked how he determined when a personal learning project was complete and how he assessed its usefulness for his practice, provided a surprisingly broad perspective. Learning projects, he indicated, were an aspect of his continual drive “to be an effective educator” and that his “teaching and intentional learning” experiences were well-integrated toward that end: “I’ve been an educator since 1961. I’ve been doing it a long time and I think I’m pretty good at it. Everyone here has had a lot of experience. I don’t think there’s a teacher in this adult program that’s working with less than 25 years. So, you can pretty well be assured that they have a particular facility” for assessing and monitoring their own learning.
Self-managing the learning project and all of its episodes. Participants self-managed all aspects of their learning projects from onset to closure, including the actions undertaken during each of the episodes described above. Ample evidence throughout participants’ narratives pointed to their preference for directing and managing their learning projects independently:

I was asked to teach something that I had never taught before and which was never really my strong field. So I found myself doing a lot of research to try to bring my knowledge on that particular subject up to par. I went through a lot of reading, just in general, and doing a lot of research to prepare myself.

Some participants were direct, and others, oblique, in describing their self-managing actions; nonetheless, all conveyed a sense of personal initiative and self-agency: “I see something’s not working and I have the option and the ability to correct it, maybe go back and say this isn’t really the way I wanted this to work – let me tweak it a little bit and try this this time,” Christopher explained, about using and refining the products he developed (enriched learning units designed to boost his struggling readers’ comprehension skills) through his learning project. “I never felt during the process,” he continued with frankness, “like I was never in control of my own learning.” Emma, too, quite consciously described herself as a “self-directed learner” who “typically devoted 75% of (her) time understanding the problem and 25% furthering the research.” In a confident voice, she pointed to indicators on a flowchart drawn on her office whiteboard relating to specific actions she had taken while managing in her learning project:

I approached this project like I approached project management (in her previous job). Number one, you have to understand the work. Then I backward designed the project – I went to the end and said, Okay, what are the deliverables? What is the product that I’m supposed to create? I generated a list of questions and created a spread sheet. I’m good at managing and monitoring my time – really good at being able to see the big picture and to identify and research the problem. I tend to operate on my own and can create and operate my own structure.
After sharing her nearly-two year learning project experience, Emma shook her head and smiled somewhat ruefully, saying: “I want to be able to choose what I spend my time on – on what I determine is valuable to me in sense of my own learning. I want to manage my own learning and control the decisions about that.”

There was a range among participants’ responses, however, about the degree to which they were consciously aware of their self-managing actions, particularly those associated with planning, as others have found (Livingstone, 2000; Spear & Mocker, 1984; Tough, 1979). For example, Mia, while noting that “everyone has the ability to reflect – that’s one of the things it takes time to learn,” struggled to articulate her planning actions: “I don’t know how much I really do think about it. It’s just what I do. I can’t really describe it or really put a finger on it.” Olivia, in response to the question about how she managed various aspects of her projects, explained that she “just jumped in and did it - like jumping off a boat.” James said merely: “I just did it on my own.” On the other end of the continuum, Isabella, like Emma, described a conscious, strategic approach to managing her learning project, the theme of which was the development of her own background knowledge in a particular content area, World War II:

I was trying to think about the things I had done where I had to teach myself, just seek out more knowledge to continue what I wanted to do to improve my practice. First, I try not to re-invent the wheel. I find out what’s already known or what others have done. I decide the goal, my overall goal, and determine how complex or not to make it. I use feedback to refine my efforts. In this case, I researched material until nothing new was coming up. I thought that I had exhausted all that I wanted to find - there’s a place to stop and I knew it.

**Summary.** Data suggested that participants followed a similar self-managed learning process when conducting their individual projects. The learning process consisted of three episodes: an initial, problem-identification episode; an implementation
episode; and the final one of saturation and closure. The episodes where coherently tied
together by a responsive theme, representing a particular learning problem or challenge
that emerged in the context of their work. Episodes consisted of a series of actions that
appeared to be practical, strategic, logical and sequential, whether participants were able
to consciously articulate specific plans for their projects or not. Deliberate practice,
feedback, and reflection were important aspects of participants’ learning projects, as was
the frequent use of student and program-related data as an instigator for learning and a
gauge for monitoring learning progress and assessing and determining outcomes.

Colleagues and technology were key attributes to the learning process, which will be
discussed in response to the final research question on the impact of the environment on
participants’ learning projects.

Research Question 3: What is the role of the environment in the learning project?

Collective data yielded only partial and limited insight regarding the role of the
environment in participants’ learning projects. Essentially, participants identified five
features associated with the environment – rather than the environment itself – as playing
significant roles in their learning projects. The five environmentally-related features
included: triggers, colleagues, technology, textbooks and ancillary resources, and
barriers.

Environmental triggers as a spur for learning. Environmental triggers as
catalysts for participants’ learning projects were discussed in response to earlier research
questions. Data regarding the role of triggers as a significant aspect of the environment,
however, follows. Primarily, the impetus for learning had its locus in the nature of the
work conducted by participants in various workplace environments, or as Robert noted,
“students present the problems you go off looking to solve - that’s where you would start.” Isabella, too, identified her work assignment, improving students’ reading comprehension skills, as the impetus for designing and developing a new instructional resource through her learning project:

But (students) haven’t really learned to read closely. So I created this way of interacting with reading because when we’re going over just some basic things that I would think anybody might know - they’ve never heard of it. I just want to give them this cultural knowledge I’m passing on to them. They’re in this world, and yet they know so little of it.

Christopher and James, too, noted that challenges to their proficiency was an elemental aspect of their work: “Different students enroll every year (with) different needs and different backgrounds.” This work challenge, Christopher continued, warranted “continual learning. I’m always learning, and what I learn I’m able to apply in my teaching work.” The population, as James concluded, was rife with needs:

This is adult basic education! In many cases, I’m dealing with people who are at 2nd and 3rd grade math class levels. They’ve had a very difficult time and a lot of them became very discouraged even if they did go to high school – and the little math they did have, they’ve never really grasped - and some haven’t been in school in years.

Other environmental triggers took the form of program-related challenges, like the nationally-mandated reform initiative that necessitated changes in Ava’s instructional practice. Other participants, such as Grace, Isabella, and James, struggled to succeed in classroom teaching assignments with particular learner groups for which they lacked sufficient training and experience: “I have no formal training in adult education,” Isabella said matter-of-factly, adding, “but I’m a smart lady. I have degrees in English and French. But to tell the truth I don’t know a lot about ESL learners; this was a first for me.”
As noted previously, the environmental challenges, once identified and clarified, served as the content theme for individual learning projects, such as the need for Emma and Natalie to establish and improve new programs and services, which they were assigned with little to no preparation or guidance, or as Emma noted “with no mentoring, nothing, no training.” Robert, too, identifying the need among his math learners for better “estimation skills,” invested more than a year in researching, developing, and refining “a new math curriculum.” Once participants determined the content theme, based on the environmental trigger, they proceeded to conduct their projects within their workplace environments.

**Colleagues satisfied multiple learning needs.** “I always brought in my colleagues, always,” Ava said in response to a query about the resources she drew upon when determining and implementing her learning projects. Data indicated that workplace colleagues played a significant role in participants’ learning projects, often serving multiple purposes. Primarily, colleagues provided information, textbooks, sample curricula, learning materials, and other supplemental resources: “Talking to other people,” Sophia said with a smile, “as they can be wonderful resources to find information. We’re constantly trading information and any kind of resource.”

Colleagues, however, were applied to not only for identifying and sharing specific information and resources, but to take an active role in individual learning projects, as well, such as that of mentor and coach. James, for example, when developing a learning resource for his math group, went to “a gentleman (a math teaching colleague) here – he was very, very helpful. He taught math and did help me out. He had a lot of materials that he passed on to me. He was kind of like a coach – very willing to help me.” Mia, too,
found colleagues she could connect with, in-person and electronically, to engage in her learning project, which was designed to improve her writing instructional skills: “(A colleague) and I actually connected a lot; we did some team-teaching together, as well. I think that would be the best situation for me to learn.”

Participants also opted to visit and observe colleagues practicing particular skills whenever they had the occasion to, as Grace indicated: “I learned so much from going into other classrooms and making observations” of colleagues who were recommended by her supervisor as an aspect of developing her instructional pedagogy in the area of social studies. “That was the best form of teacher training. I would find someone who is experienced in the skill area I wanted to develop, first of all,” she continued as we spoke in the late afternoon in her quiet, empty classroom filled with various globes and maps. “I would ask them where I should go to do some research, and I’d probably do that research – at least start there.” Natalie, too, started to gain a good sense of what the four components of her family literacy program should entail after visiting an exemplary program site and speaking with its program coordinator: “They opened the door and said come, you’d be welcome. It’s a nice relationship. I changed a lot of things, and I don’t know if it wasn’t because of (this visit).”

Participants also sought feedback from colleagues about various learning materials and instructional skills they were developing, as Grace illustrated in one of her learning projects. Trying to understand an initial problem she was experiencing with her assigned classroom, Grace first “talked with (the lead teacher), that’s where I started,” in order to understand what about her pedagogical practice was not meeting program standards and could be improved upon, after having been “reprimanded.” “I talked with
her about finding a resource that was very specific.” But as she began to try out a
recommended strategy involving the use of realia-type reading materials aligned to her
learners’ interests and needs, Grace approached another colleague for feedback while she
was trying out her skills: “What do you think? Am I on the right track? We talked about
what I had done and she gave me some suggestions, which was pretty much what I was
doing. But I was happy for the feedback.”

Participants tapped their colleagues for feedback most often during the
implementation and summation episodes of their learning projects. Christopher, for
example, illustrated earlier how he sustained engagement with his colleagues over time
by asking for their ongoing feedback while he continued to develop and revise his various
learning resources, noting that he would “frequently discuss or mull over with colleagues
to get ideas of how best to implement the knowledge I’ve just gained and put it to use, to
try it out with my students.” Others also valued the opportunity to test out their ideas and
gain various perspectives from their colleagues, which led to improved instructional
knowledge, confidence, and skills. For example, Mia talked about how she engaged her
colleagues and used their feedback to increase her background knowledge in relation to a
presentation she was planning for other adult educators:

I enjoy sitting in discussions and working with colleagues. It’s somebody else to
bounce ideas off of. We weren’t holding on to our own ideas and saying this had
to be or forcing an idea onto somebody else, or getting in the way of the other
person’s thought process. So I liked to do that and I liked to hear, oh, I like that
idea, and well, don’t you think this should happen? So that conversation, that
feedback, I enjoy.

Natalie, too, used her colleagues for affirmation and conformation of her progress in
developing specific skills. She explained her use of colleagues in this way:
The collaboration and networking are big, big for me. I think sometimes it’s just to get the okay about what you are doing, or if it’s okay because there’s nothing else to be done, or I’m a step ahead of the game.

In short, there was a strong social component to the learning project phenomenon, as others have also found (Houle, 1993; Tough, 1979; Livingstone, 2000). “I think I’m a social learner,” Mia said. “The social aspect means a lot to me – seeing other people get excited about something – when I was working with (a colleague to develop this workshop), it was just electric. It was better to do with another person, because we could talk about (what would) work – you can share and get their feedback.”

But while participants identified their colleagues as the single most important feature associated with their workplace environment for aiding their learning projects, apparently not all colleagues were valued equally. Instead, participants used three criteria when selecting a colleague to apply to for specific kinds of help. Criteria included: 1) expertise in a particular content domain, 2) expertise in teaching that domain with a particular learner group, and 3) explanatory style. “I go to the pros” Olivia stated succinctly, and then clarified her selection criteria stating that she approached those in her environment who possessed “experience teaching the same subject matter and teaching the same students as me.” The ability of colleagues to explain a possible strategy, intervention, or approach in a manner that was understandable to the participant was another common criterion. Olivia, again, explained this need most pointedly:

There’s two math teachers here. One gets things very quickly and writes everything down very fast and goes “see, see, see.” And then we have another one who goes step-by-step, how it works, and shows you, and explains. I (went) to that one first because that’s how I want to understand it better. I would go to the one that more explains the way I want to learn.
Technology as an essential learning resource and environmental asset.

Technology, particularly the Internet, was another feature of the workplace environment that was consistently referenced by participants as useful to their projects: “I look at my computer as necessary in my learning. I need access to unlimited information,” Christopher said. All participants were voracious seekers of information, as Emma illustrated: “You should see my Google’s Favorites Bar,” she said laughingly; “I’m looking for journal articles, something to help my next cohort; I’ve read research and found material. The research helped me understand that this is what I needed to be doing.”

Every project included an aspect of research that was conducted online, from identifying basic math instructional programs and non-fiction reading strategies to obtaining career pathway and college readiness information. In addition, participants frequently referred to technology for its usefulness when developing specific learning tools, customizing curricula, and creating enriched learning resources, like Robert’s math curriculum, Christopher’s social studies learning unit, and James’ self-survey learner profile tool. “I typed (the learning unit) up and created it on a computer,” Christopher explained, talking about how computers made the creation of targeted materials easy to do. “I didn’t really require a lot of external resources – other than the use of the computer,” he concluded.

Participants also incorporated technology as a learning tool within their learning projects; Mia, for example, while developing her ESL background knowledge, enrolled in an online course as one aspect of her larger learning project: “It was actually an ESL course I did online – through the computer. You had to post questions and write answers,
and do it that way, but that’s how I got my ESL certification.” Relating the usefulness of technology to her learning project effectiveness, Mia elaborated:

Technology (is the best resource) because it’s made it so much easier. I’m doing a lot of learning based on what I find. I don’t have to be part of the writing online discussion with (national listserv), but I’m a participant - a lurker. I read everybody else’s posts and I think about it, and I react in my own way, or I forward it to someone – like (two colleagues) – or whoever else and say, what do you think about this? So I think the Internet is a fantastic resource and one that you can get really caught up and lost in if you’re not careful. You still have to read the sources and you still have to make some sense out of it.

Besides being a source of information and learning opportunities, the Internet broke down geographic barriers among participants who were solely responsible for serving a unique group of students or managing a program service at their workplace and educators doing similar work in other organizations. Emma and Natalie are the best examples of this, as both were the sole providers of their respective program models, Transition to Postsecondary and Family Literacy, at their respective organizations. Both sought information from colleagues working in similar models in other organizations, locally, regionally, and nationally. Emma connected with an online professional learning community of other New England providers of transitional services. Talking about how she engaged the learning community to improve her knowledge base, she described a conference call she conducted after finding a new trend in her program-related data:

I saw a finding in the data for the first time – (indicating) that we had a problem. I put the message out there – ‘Is there anyone who’s had a similar experience that can help me?’ And two colleagues, one from (one state) and one in (another) spoke up and said, Wow, so did we! Can we get together in June to talk about it?

Books and ancillary learning support resources. Participants ascribed a primary role in their learning projects to onsite resources, such as textbooks, teachers’ guides, collections of curricula, etc. All participants referenced their bookcases, book
shelves, and cabinets, as evidence of accessible learning materials for themselves and their students: “I like to be surrounded by books. I feel like they’re comforting - homey. Books and old technology,” Christopher said, were second only to “the computer.”

Participants also identified libraries, onsite and their local public and university ones, as important sources of knowledge and information, though as Ava noted, “this is probably my age. My daughter was going into teaching and had to take a math test and went right to YouTube where she’s finding professors who are teaching her how to do it.” Still, participants discussed their use of onsite and local libraries and bookstores as sources of useful learning project materials. Robert and Natalie both sought “everywhere” for texts that would assist them in their respective learning projects.

Natalie explained her efforts this way:

First I went online – unfortunately, no matter how many sites I visited, they either cost money or didn’t have what I was looking for, as far as writing went. So I went to the bookstore. I wanted to find the right book on how to write an essay suitable for what my students needed.

Robert, too, recalled his library and bookstore crawl looking for the appropriate resource: “I used a number of libraries,” he recollected, “I used not only my own public one – I think I probably started there first, and then I went to (a local university’s) library, which is much better – more detailed. Actually, the final book I think I got at (another university). I know darn well that’s where I got it.”

Environmental barriers impact on learning projects. As the discussion above shows, participants regularly integrated features associated with the environment into their learning projects. But just as colleagues, technology, and learning resources played significant roles in participants’ learning projects, so did barriers that are generally associated with the ABEL workplace environment. Primarily, participants identified the
part-time nature of their work, and the inability of their administrators to provide funding support for their planning and personal learning activities, as constraining features of the workplace environment. For instance, Mia, like others, referred to the fact that because her colleagues had other jobs, collaboration was difficult to facilitate: “I’m in the door,” she said, shaking her head as she described her frustration:

   I need to teach. I need to get out of here cause it’s not full-time. I have another responsibility that I need to take care of. The planning time is not there; the meeting time is not there. It’s even difficult to get the whole staff together because everybody has full-time jobs, especially the night program people. Every single one of them has a full-time job somewhere else or they work in several other adult ed programs.

James shared this frustration too, noting that besides working part-time, the physical layout of his worksite also contributed to his difficulty in collaborating with colleagues as often as he might wish:

   Everybody is kind of separated as far as the physical environment is concerned. I don’t see the GED group at all. We don’t have lunch or real breaks together. And I’m part-time so it’s difficult to get together.

   Besides the challenge of the part-time work structure associated with the ABEL field, the general inability of programs to compensate for planning and collaborating activities, struck a common chord among the study’s participants. Mia explained her personal frustration this way: “The time factor! I’m not somebody sitting at home saying, you’re working how many hours, and you’re spending how many hours getting ready for those many hours? And you’re not getting paid for it?” While Sophia compared her organization’s inability to compensate for professional learning opportunities with that of another organization that did:

   They have more funding for professional development. Being that I’m a part-time teacher, I basically get paid for the hours I stand up in front of a class. When I do research on my own learning, it would be nice to get paid for it every once in a
while. Maybe that’s what’s missing in adult ed – we don’t get paid for prep time; we don’t get paid for correcting GED essays – it’s on my own time. But it would be nice to be compensated for it. When you’re not on contracted hours – no work is no pay.

Paul, on the other hand, shared his frustration in trying to address the academic needs of his ESL GED group in the time allotted, while managing competing personal responsibilities, and initiating efforts to improve his instructional expertise:

It’s not a perfect world. With my level students, who not only have to learn how to read, but they have to learn history that they might not have learned in their (native) countries. They’re going to be learning science – and I’m doing the STAR program (a formal professional development series)! I work two nights a week, and I put in all I can do, and then I’m raising a little one at home, and he needs my time, too. I used to have a lot of time, and now I manage my time as it’s very important to me.

**Summary.** Data illustrated that specific features associated with the environment played essential roles in participants’ learning projects. Such features included the nature of the work itself, which served as the source of challenges that prompted participants’ learning projects; colleagues; technology, as both a learning resource and for reducing the isolation of individual participants at specific sites; and books and ancillary learning resources. Additionally, two environment-related barriers impacted participants’ use of learning projects. These barriers included the part-time nature of the work and a lack of funding to support participants’ planning efforts, as well as their participation in traditional and self-managed professional learning activities.

Taken collectively, the challenges participants identified as the impetus for their learning projects, along with resources used to implement them, and the barriers that could constrain them, shared a common locus: the workplace environment. As such, the environment acted upon the learning projects being conducted within it. As participants
conducted their learning projects, their outcomes impacted their proficiency and, by
developing and refining curricula and enriched learning materials, contributed to the
collective resources of the workplace. In a basic sense, the environment gained learning
resources that were tested and refined with a local student population, and participants
continually improved their responsiveness to the individualized needs of students, which
in turn, improved the quality of the instructional practice within the workplace. This
mutually beneficial set of relationships can be seen as systemic in nature, not unlike the
findings of others (Eckert, 2003; Greeno et al., 1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000).

Summary of Findings

In summarizing the findings presented in this chapter, sufficient data emerged in
the narratives of participants to provide initial insight into the use of learning projects as a
means of developing proficiency within the ABEL workplace. Principally, participants
provided sufficient data to begin to address the three research questions of the study:
what learning was being addressed in learning projects; how participants were learning
what they sought to know, do, or change through their learning projects; and the role the
environment played. Principally, participants self-identified the knowledge, pedagogical
skills, and learning resources they sought to develop to improve their professional
practice in response to challenges that emerged within the context of their work. For
instance, participants chose to develop their content background knowledge in such
disciplines as social studies and mathematics; some, too, chose to develop their reading
instruction skills; and many developed customized curricula that related to both academic
and career interests. A common learning process emerged, consisting of three episodes
connected by a common theme.
Data, however, was insufficient to understand the broad role the environment played in participants’ learning projects. On the other hand, participant data did uncover features associated with the environment that played important roles in the learning project construct. These features included environmental triggers, colleagues, technology, textbooks and ancillary learning resources, and such barriers as the part-time nature of the work, and insufficient funding to adequately support actions relating to professional learning. Taken together, these features imply that the role of the environment in the learning project phenomenon is complex.

Participant data also supported the initial propositions of the study; namely, learning projects constituted an intentional, sustained experience, consisting of a series of related episodes, tied together by a theme, and focused on the development and application of knowledge and skills that improved participant proficiency. Data, while insufficient to support the second proposition, nonetheless indicated that the role of the environment on the learning project was complex and systemic. Lastly, data showed that participants effectively self-managed their learning projects from onset to closure, thereby supporting the final proposition concerning the role of metacognition.
CHAPTER 4

Limitations, Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

A discussion of the research project’s conclusions is the focus of this final chapter. The chapter begins, however, with a brief re-articulation of the original problem that prompted the study, and the limitations associated with the research undertaken, as well as a summary of the data, findings, and conclusions. The chapter also includes implications for the practice of professional learning and future research on the intentional learning efforts of ABEL educators.

Restatement of the Problem

Adult educators working in the ABEL field, like their K – 12 public school counterparts, face heightened scrutiny of their professional proficiency, connected as it is to student performance outcomes. Outside of formal teaching preparation and training programs, professional development has long been, and remains, a primary means of developing educators’ expertise in the workplace (Smith, 2010). But insufficient funding for professional development, in light of increasing scrutiny of educator performance, has jobs and programs at risk (Chisman, 2011; Smith, 2010). Funding issues aside, however, the broad diversity in educator preparedness and the nature of the learner population conspire against the suitability of traditional professional development as the sole means of addressing the professional learning needs of the ABEL workforce.

Some researchers, such as Fullan (2007), question the usefulness of the traditional professional development model, fully funded or otherwise. Instead, Fullan suggested that new, radical, and more personalized alternatives may better serve the professional learning needs of today’s educators. Others, such as Livingstone (2000) and Kim,
Hagedorn et al. (2004), however, have suggested that an alternative may already exist. These authors demonstrated that adults self-manage their own professional learning to a more significant degree than is broadly recognized, understood, or valued. Greater insight into the professional learning that educators do on their own, Livingstone suggested, would serve the educational field’s leadership well (2000).

In fact, a history of research (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979) on the use of learning projects to develop one’s proficiency underscores Livingstone’s (2000) contention, and provides a suitable lens for thinking about professional development differently. Chisman (2011) acknowledged that ABEL educators are avid consumers of professional development, often seeking more than is typically available. But scant data exists about whether ABEL educators also use learning projects as an alternative means of developing their proficiency, and if they do, what such learning entails.

The purpose of the study, therefore, was to learn more about the use of learning projects as a means of developing proficiency from the perspectives of ABEL educators themselves. A qualitative approach was employed to ensure that the experiences of the study’s participants would be understood in their own words (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Three research questions guided this study: What learning is addressed by ABEL educators through their learning projects; how are ABEL educators learning what they seek to know, do, or change, through their learning projects; and what is the role of the environment in ABEL educators’ learning projects.

Limitations

The trustworthiness of a qualitative research project is assessed according to its conformation to standards of acceptable, competent, and ethical practice (Rossman &
The researcher implemented a plan of study, approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Connecticut, with integrity, as attested to by the weekly review of an objective, critical peer who was familiar with the ABEL field, adult learning principles, and research practices. Threats to the trustworthiness of the study existed, nonetheless, and customary strategies used to minimize their potential effect were presented in the Methodology section (See Chapter Two, Table 2). For purposes of this summary, however, specific strategies are revisited, as they represent the standards associated with qualitative research, and taken collectively, offer assurances to the findings. These strategies included peer debriefing, member checking, triangulating data, maintaining a comprehensive audit trail and reflexive journal, and the ongoing articulation and clarification of the researcher’s biases, prejudices, and assumptions.

A primary strategy was the sustained use of a peer, a critical friend, throughout the research project. The critical friend, a retired, 20-year experienced professional adult educator and ABEL administrator, provided an objective perspective on the actions taken by the researcher. In weekly meetings, the research plan of study served to focus our conversations, provided a backdrop for weighing decisions and actions, and ensured that Creswell’s (1994) analytical process was faithfully implemented. These meetings helped ensure the credibility of the study’s findings in two ways. First, they constituted a sustained dialogue throughout the research process wherein judicious questions about the process, specific actions, and emerging data were continually reviewed. These conversations, always challenging in that they necessitated objective, data-substantiated responses, represented a keen aspect of an iterative, analytical process that led to a richer, deeper familiarity and understanding of the data. Secondly, the conversations allowed the
researcher to think-out-loud and, in effect, bracket personal biases, prejudices, and assumptions relating to the phenomenon under study.

In addition, member checks with participants during the interview process helped minimize potential ambiguity and clarified misunderstandings that might otherwise arise when analyzing individual transcriptions. The use of probing, follow-up questions throughout the interviews led to deeper explanations and clarifications of experiences. Member checks were also critical to understanding, maintaining, and accurately presenting participants’ personal experiences (Erlandson et al., 1993). Members had opportunities to review their interview transcripts, which were transcribed word-for-word from their taped interviews and corroborated by review of the critical friend.

Triangulation of data contributed to the creditability of the findings (Rossman & Rallis, 1998), as well. Specifically, engaging individuals from four different program sites established the prevalence of the learning project phenomenon despite differences in administrative leadership, management, and funding. Twelve, part-time ABEL educators participated in sustained interview sessions. The open-ended nature of the two interview protocols provided sufficient flexibility for participants to narrate their learning project experiences in their own words. The researcher’s field notes, prepared immediately following each interview, and including descriptions of the participants’ work environments, constituted another data source. The field notes included commentary about the content, tone, and nature of the individual interviews, as well as ideas for follow-up questions. Sample materials developed by participants and offered as evidence of their learning projects substantiated individual learning outcomes.
Threats regarding the transferability of findings to settings other than those specifically involved in a qualitative study are common to the approach. However, the ABEL study yielded sufficient data and thick narration for readers to assess for themselves the degree to which findings transfer to other environments. Along with thick descriptive data, the researcher maintained a comprehensive audit trail and reflexive journal, detailing procedures, practices, and decisions undertaken during the study, which can be referenced in confirming the rigor and transferability of the findings. Still, this study captures only a snapshot of a sample of ABEL educators working with a particular population of students at one point in time. The learning projects of participants were responsive to authentic problems situated within a particular context that is continually in flux. Subsequent attempts to transfer the findings or replicate the study will naturally yield different learning project narratives, reflecting different adult learners addressing different challenges at another point in time. Nonetheless, sufficient research exists to anticipate that as future problems emerge, adults will continue to use learning projects to address them (Houle, 1993; Kett, 1994; Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979).

Still, the narratives obtained through this study offer sufficient descriptive data to aid readers in determining the degree to which the findings relate to other adults in other workplaces. Readers can gauge for themselves the quality and caliber of the participants’ learning projects, and consider the usefulness of this phenomenon as a means of understanding the professional learning that may already be occurring in the workplace. **Conclusions**

Data obtained and analyzed from this study yielded insight and beginning knowledge about the use of learning projects by ABEL educators to build and improve
their proficiency. Prior studies substantiated the wide-spread usage of learning projects as a means of improving professional proficiency among workers in various employments, but not among those working in the ABEL field. Furthermore, little of the earlier research represented the experience of using the learning project phenomenon from the personal perspective and voice of the adult learner. Three questions framed the research: what learning was being addressed in the learning project; how were adults learning what they sought to know, do, or change through their learning projects; and what role did the environment play in the learning projects of ABEL educators. The research project yielded sufficient data to begin to address these questions.

Primarily, data showed that all of the ABEL participants used learning projects to improve their proficiency in intentional, specific, self-identified ways, and applied that learning to their practice. This finding supports the foundational research of Houle (1993), Penland (1977) and Tough (1979), as well as more recent studies by Kim, Hagedorn et al. (2004), and Livingstone (2000), which established that adults, in a variety of careers and workplaces, were robust users of learning projects as a means of building knowledge and gaining skills. Also, similar to earlier research findings (1977, 1979, 2000), the ABEL participants’ learning projects varied in intensity, duration, and focus, with some individual projects lasting more than an entire school year. Despite such diversity, however, all learning projects shared a common attribute of intentional utility.

Research Question 1: What learning is being addressed by ABEL educators through their learning projects?

Individual memorandums demonstrating a sampling of what participants learned through their individual projects, including specific content, are provided in the
Appendixes (H – S). In general, however, participants used learning projects to intentionally improve their skill and expertise in self-identified areas of their professional practice, with the result being that they learned what they individually set out to know, be able to do, or change about their performance, as earlier research has shown (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). In all cases, environmental triggers, as defined by Spear and Mocker (1984), served as the catalysts in determining what participants learned. Triggers reflected the authentic challenges and problems relating to the nature of participants’ work, including their instructional practice, teaching-related tasks, and assignments. In effect, environmental triggers related to student and program needs; sample triggers included inadequate learner performance outcomes on national examinations, teaching assignments with new learner groups, insufficient strategies for managing multi-level classrooms, high attrition rates, national mandates impacting classroom practice, and the creation of new service models. Prompted by such triggers, participants experienced a sense of disquiet or unease, and after reflecting on specific aspects of their practice, clarified and determined the nature of their individual challenges, and responded strategically and independently by undertaking a self-managed learning project. Essentially, ABEL participants undertook learning projects to learn what they needed to know, do, or change to improve their professional competency – a finding well-supported in the research of others (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979).

A sampling of what participants chose to learn included content knowledge in specified domains, i.e., American history, social studies, and basic mathematics; domain-related instructional skills in the non-fiction genre, such as new strategies for motivating and improving students’ reading comprehension skills; and competence in using learning
resources, like the graphing calculator and Smartboard technology, to improve instructional practice; among others. Participants also used learning projects to develop enriched learning resources to supplement standard textbooks and appeal to student interests, and to create customized curricula, most particularly in organizations where open enrollment policies allowed students to begin classes at anytime throughout the year. As a result of the open enrollment practice particularly, participants tended to conduct short-term learning projects to gain sufficient knowledge in areas of student-identified interests, including work, career, and education goals, to inform their curricular and learning resource development efforts.

Research Question 2: How ABEL educators learn what they seek to know, do, or change through their learning projects

Distilling the data about how participants learned what they sought to know, do, or change through their learning projects yielded a common, deceptively simple and relatively straightforward process. This common learning process, initiated in response to environmental triggers, consisted of three episodes connected by a common theme and facilitated by the adult learner. Each episode consisted of a set of actions. The following diagram depicts the broad outline of the basic learning model uncovered in the participant data obtained in this study.
Episode one. As the diagram illustrates, environmental triggers, representing various data relating to performance, initiated the learning project’s first episode (one). Data was both qualitative and quantitative, and often included student examination outcomes, observation insights, attendance and retention rates, new work assignments, field-related research promoting new strategies and resources, state and national reform mandates, and others. Some triggers appeared to be clear and straightforward, necessitating little examination by participants in identifying the root of the presenting problem. Other triggers, however, were more suggestive than definitive, necessitating sustained examination by participants to determine the genuine nature and root cause of the problem.

In sum, the overarching action in episode one was that of identification, determination, and clarification of the presenting problem as indicated by the environmental trigger. To do so, participants undertook various action steps such as conducting online searches, conversing with colleagues, reviewing on-site resources, and observing exemplary ABEL educators in their classrooms and program sites, as well as other actions. Once clarified and understood, the essential nature of the problem or
challenge became the common, connective theme for the subsequent learning episodes. As participants thus determined the content of their individual learning projects, they seamlessly moved into episode two.

Episode two. Episode two began with a period of research by which participants investigated possible solutions to the problem or challenge identified and clarified in episode one. Solution-focused research activities, again, took similar forms as in episode one, such as searching online for relevant articles; conversing with colleagues about possible strategies, approaches, and resources; observing exemplary teachers in practice; visiting successful programs; reviewing onsite and recommended learning resources; attending traditional professional development; and more.

Following this period of research, a determination was made and a specific solution chosen, such as a participant’s decision to create a new curriculum for a student, develop a new learning resource, deepen background knowledge in a particular domain, develop a domain-related pedagogical strategy, or understand the purpose, goals, and components of a new service model. Solutions represented a strategic, practical response to the initiating trigger.

With solutions determined, participants identified and managed a cluster of actions during this episode that would help them achieve their learning goals. Their clusters of actions were iterative in nature, as participants continued to enact specific actions until they determined that a satisfactory level of mastery or competence had been achieved. Actions typically included testing and trying out a new skill or resource; obtaining and reflecting upon feedback from various sources; using feedback to improve
and refine the skill or resource; and re-testing the refinement. This process was managed by the individual participant until a self-determined level of sufficiency was met.

In some instances where learning projects were particularly complicated, participants reported that they enacted a subsequent, secondary learning project that was focused on a discrete knowledge and skill. This secondary-level learning project, which included its own three episodes, was connected to and conducted within the second episode of the originating learning project. In the course of conducting the primary, or originating, learning project, for example, data emerged during episode two that triggered a second learning project, the focus of which was to learn something specific that would contribute to the broader, initial learning goal. The outcome of the secondary learning project was complementary in nature and not presented as separate and distinct from the original learning intent.

*Episode three.* In general, throughout participants’ learning projects, the learning action steps were of an iterative, progressive manner, not unlike the spirals of development reported by Eckert (2003). However, as Tough (1979) also found, the ABEL study participants represented their learning projects as occurring within a specifiable time frame that included beginning and end points. All participants could identify what caused them to initiate a learning project and why, and, also, when their learning project was completed. In practice, all participants maintained an iterative, progressive learning process until the point of project saturation. Closure and saturation were the focus of episode three.

Again, in episode three, participants used quantitative and qualitative data to determine that – and when – their original learning goal had been achieved. Student- and
program-related data served to indicate the degree to which participants had learned what they set out to know, do, or change about their professional practice. Improvement and increases in such student data as standardized and national examination outcomes, work samples, participation in class, and attendance, were referenced by participants as indicators that they had sufficiently met their learning project goal. Program-related data, such as increases in enrollment, improved attrition and retention rates, increased percentages of students completing classes, increased percentages of those taking examinations and achieving passing scores, for example, also indicated to participants that particular learning goals were met and their learning project completed.

Others, though, had a general sense of having accomplished their goal, noting, for example, that they “just knew” they had reached a point of saturation when no new resources of greater merit emerged, or when they observed positive changes in student behavior, and witnessed students being more engaged and enthusiastic in their classroom work. In either case, whether based on reliable or sensory data, participants offered to bring students in to meet with the interviewer to provide testament about changes in classroom practices as evidence of successful implementation of individual learning projects.

Research Question Three: What is the role of the environment in the learning projects of ABEL educators?

The role the environment played in ABEL participants’ learning projects was complex, as others have found (Eraut, 2004; Scribner, 1986). Essentially, the environment provided the source, and afforded the opportunity, resources, and conditions, for learning. For instance, co-existing within the environment were the
triggers that served to launch individual learning projects, the resources used by participants to implement and manage them, and barriers to be overcome in the process.

The nature of the instructional and managerial work conducted in the ABEL environment provided participants with opportunities to learn, develop, and improve their professional competence. Opportunities to learn came in the form of environmental triggers, which took many forms and represented authentic problems and challenges relating to the participants’ professional practice. Triggers sparked the participants’ attention, initiating reflecting and analyzing processes, which yielded insight about the nature of troubling issues. Through this process, participants clarified what needed to be learned and how to go about learning.

All participants drew upon two primary resources to achieve their self-determined learning goals: professional colleagues and technology. Professional colleagues served multiple purposes in participants’ learning projects. For instance, participants applied to their colleagues for various kinds of technical assistance, such as basic and general information; materials and resources, including curricula, textbooks, and lesson units, suitable for particular learner groups; and links to online resources. In such instances, the assistance professional colleagues supplied, basically sharing information, knowledge, and expertise, was relatively static. But in others, the technical assistance was sustained and interactive. For example, colleagues observed participants in their practice, provided constructive feedback, and continued the actions iteratively until sufficient competency was attained. Regardless of the level of engagement, however, such relationships focused on common work and were conducted within the workplace environment.
Technology was the second most significant resource in the environment and also served multiple purposes in individual learning projects. Primarily, participants used technology to access basic information; research-related articles introducing new strategies, approaches, and best practices; and professional colleagues, near and far, for example. In addition, participants reported that technology eased their ability to create and produce customized learning resources for instructional use; in fact, the creation of new learning resources was the learning focus of many participants’ projects when they could not access appropriate resources at their respective workplaces.

Some participants worked in an isolated manner at their individual workplaces. At their respective ABEL organizations, some were, for example, the sole instructors teaching a particular discipline, or the only teacher working with a unique student group, or singularly responsible for creating a new service model. In these instances, participants relied upon - and engaged - their onsite colleagues within their learning projects for more general camaraderie and support in mastering common skills, such as help in developing proficiency in using a particular multi-level class management strategy. But on-site colleagues did not always have knowledge, experience, and expertise in the singular area some participants were working in. In these instances, participants used technology to expand their network of peers and connect with off-site colleagues who did have similar work assignments and offered the necessary support. In this way, technology reduced participants’ sense of isolation and connected them to experts who contributed the particular knowledge, skill, and expertise that was not otherwise available, but nonetheless necessary to the success of individual learning projects.
The environment posed complicating conditions for the enactment of learning projects, as it simultaneously afforded opportunities for learning and constraints to impede the efforts of participants. Barriers impacting participants’ learning projects constituted two main conditions: the part-time nature of their work assignments and the isolation with which some worked. As noted above, participants used technology in their learning projects as a means of reducing their sense of isolation and connecting them to individuals for the assistance they needed. The part-time nature of their work, on the other hand, meant that participants managed dual work assignments or second jobs, which impacted their ability to meet, collaborate with, and engage their peers in their learning projects to all desired degrees.

Regardless of the nature of the barrier, however, participants were creative and innovative in trying to overcome them, as Scribner (1986) foreshadowed. In narrating their experiences, participants spoke about actions they took to mitigate the impact of the environmental barriers on their individual learning projects. For instance, some participants took advantage of regularly scheduled staff meetings to demonstrate an instructional strategy or approach they were trying to master or shared their curricula and enriched learning resources to obtain constructive feedback, which they used to reform their skill or materials. Others scheduled regular and convenient on- and off-site lunch sessions with peers that focused on their learning project goals. Some chose to co-teach by merging classes for a determined length of time as a means of developing an identified instructional skill or classroom management strategy. By co-teaching, participants engaged a colleague, recognized for a specific expertise, in the learning project in an immediate and sustained manner.
In summary, this study showed that educators, working in the ABEL field, invested in developing their professional expertise and used learning projects to do so. The nature of teaching is inherently challenging (Eraut, 2004), and working with the ABEL population, even more so. Nonetheless, the study’s participants were avid consumers of learning projects for resolving authentic problems that emerged in their environment and improving their professional proficiency in self-determined ways. All participants’ learning projects met the definition originally outlined by Tough (1979), in that they represented a series of episodes, tied together by a common focus that was determined by specific environmental triggers. Moreover, learning projects resulted in the improved proficiency of ABEL participants in self-determined and evidentiary ways.

Discussion

An overriding intent of this study was to gain insight on how ABEL educators meet increasing demands on their proficiency during a period of increased accountability, particularly as formal professional development, long considered the best strategy for doing so may no longer suffice (Chisman, 2011; Fullan, 2007). At the outset of this study, three propositions were proposed about the use of learning projects among ABEL educators that were based on earlier research. Data addressing these propositions are discussed in this section. Three questions were applied to findings relative to the propositions: Did they confirm, extend, or refute knowledge and insight gained from previous studies?

Various conceptual models are emerging in recent research literature to add to our collective understanding of how proficiency develops in the workplace, and indicating that a broadened understanding of what constitutes effective professional learning is
warranted (Cairns & Malloch, 2013). The ABEL study’s findings concur. The learning project model, while surely not new, draws attention to the intentionality of adult’s self-directed efforts to improve their knowledge, skills, and behaviors. In this light, a broadened view of professional learning should incorporate the learning projects of adults as a viable means for improving proficiency in the workplace, given the robustness and rigor associated with such efforts. The study’s findings suggest recommendations for enhancing the use of the learning project model within the workplace, as well.

_Learning projects as a proficiency development model._ Data confirmed the first proposition, namely that the learning project model represents an intentional, sustained experience, consisting of a series of related episodes, including informal and formal actions, connected by a common theme, and undertaken by the adult learner to improve professional practice in a self-identified way. Themes reflected individual challenges and problems that adult learners identified and transformed into learning trajectories with beginning and ending points. In all instances, adults maintained primary responsibility for managing the various aspects of the learning project model.

The learning project model uncovered in this study re-affirms Tough’s (1979) original work. Many commonalities exist between his model and those of the ABEL participants, including the central role of episodes, which represent clusters of strategic actions that serve a particular purpose within the connected sequence of events. These purposes are: identification and assessment of challenges or problems (episode one), decisions about and implementation of solutions (episode two), and summation and closure (episode three). Eraut (2013) represented this same series of episodes in his
development of practice model: assessing the situation, decision-making, taking overt actions, and self-monitoring individual progress.

Superficially, all three models reflect a seemingly straightforward sequence of linked episodes. In performance, however, they represent something more complex and sophisticated. When enacted, the models represent a blended, simultaneous engagement of multiple processes, and tap the adult’s emotions, background experiences, knowledge, and other variables. Likewise, individual episodes represent instances of hypothesis-making, testing and trying out strategies, deliberate practice, seeking feedback, reflection, and others actions that are metacognitively managed by the adult (Eraut, 2013).

Elemental to this sophisticated performance is the implicit nature of much of such learning (Reber, 1993), which has the effect of undermining the adult’s ability to articulate how they develop proficiency in the workplace (Eraut, 2004; Tough, 1979), as the ABEL study findings confirm. Proficiency develops overtime as adults perform their work, tackle increasingly challenging tasks, and access the expertise of supportive colleagues. Much of the process, however, is only semi-consciously recognized (Eraut, 2004). Learning from experience in general, Eraut (2004) contended, is a confusing notion, as it tends to convey a singular event. Rather, learning accrues through a series of workplace-based episodes, as has been shown, and is influenced by many factors, such as the norms, values, and perspectives of the local workplace culture - all of which are adopted semi-consciously by adults through their on-going engagement with peers. Nonetheless, episodes can be accessed by adults when prompted to do so (2004).

Specifically, when asked to focus their attention and reflection on discrete episodes, adults do recognize and can articulate what they learn and how. In a series of
studies, Eraut’s (2013) research team observed many instances of learning that participants neither recognized nor articulated until their attention was drawn to specific changes in their workplace performance. In essence, the changes in the adults’ capabilities overtime served as indicators that learning had occurred.

Results from the ABEL study concur. ABEL educators typically struggled to see their intentional learning projects for what they were. Instead, they accessed the content and process of their projects after having their attention drawn to problems or challenges that they described as emerging in their practice and asking how, in hindsight, they addressed them. Participants readily identified problems and challenges associated with their work and the subsequent changes in their practice as a culminating result, such as the development of curricula and enriched learning resources, and their improved application of particular knowledge and skills. Typically, however, participants did not initially recognize their efforts to improve their practice as intentional and sustained professional learning, which they equated with formal education and training. Instead, they reported their learning experiences in terms of meeting the demands associated with their jobs and accepting responsibility for the instruction of others, as Eraut (2004) found.

The ABEL study’s outcomes contribute to the broader conversation about workplace learning in two ways. First, formal and informal learning have long been dichotomized in the research literature (Billett, 2013), with the latter seemingly inferior, second-rate, and unsophisticated (Cairns, 2013). But emerging research suggests that a broader view be adopted. Ellström (2013), for instance, wrote that formal and informal learning together are essential for developing work-related competencies. Intentional learning projects illustrate how such blending plays out, as adults incorporate both within
a larger integrated experience aimed at improving proficiency. The learning project model, however, is underrepresented in current literature (Hager, 2013), despite its illustrative power. For example, as evidenced in the participants’ learning projects, instances of adaptive and developmental learning, as described by Ellström (2013), occur organically, strategically, and responsively in the workplace.

Illustratively, learning projects appear as adaptive when educators employ them to improve performance of routine tasks relating to instruction and classroom management, and developmental when undertaken collectively to reform and align practices with national mandates, for instance. Learning projects, after all, reflect the individual learner’s determination of what to learn, which can be adaptive or developmental, and how, formally and informally, as needs warrant. Directing agency rests with the adult, and as research has shown, they are capable, strategic and effective in such efforts (Allix, 2013; Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Scribner, 1986). The learning project model acts as a microcosm for understanding what a blended, broadened view of professional learning in the workplace entails when put into practice.

A second contribution to the conversation of workplace learning, which represents an unanticipated outcome, is recognition of the rigorous learning exhibited in some participants’ learning projects. Similarities exist between high quality formal professional development and the ABEL participants’ learning projects. Six features are known to denote high quality professional development (Garet et al., 2001), including the sustained, active, and supported engagement of the learner; and a sustained focus on content, content-related pedagogy, and understanding of the learner population. Other
quality indicators include coherence between professional development and other organizationally-planned growth actions, and sustained dialogue among colleagues.

The same high quality features that apply to effective professional development appear in the learning projects of the ABEL participants. Structurally, learning projects represent a reformed (and preferred) variant of professional development, in so much as they represent a connected series of episodes that consist of active, sustained learning, with embedded opportunities for reflection and deliberate feedback, and are undertaken within an enclave of peers who offer expertise and experience. Also, adults’ learning projects are not undertaken as isolated events; instead, they appear as one instance of learning among other professional development events, which are locally and regionally sponsored.

Additionally, improved proficiency is the outcome of all learning projects, whether such improvement is defined variously by the individual learner as increased knowledge in content, improved content-related pedagogies, and enhanced understanding of student populations and their associated needs. The fact that individual learning projects represent a strategic response to authentic problems self-identified by educators within the context of their practice also contributes a new dynamic to the issue of learning transference. Seen through such a comparative lens, the learning project model represents a high quality experience that serves the proficiency development needs of adult workers and, as such helps broaden the notion of what constitutes effective professional learning in the workplace.

_Learning projects as an integrative model of learner, process, and environment._

The study’s findings infer but do not confirm the second proposition, namely, that an
ecological metaphor of learning holds (Greeno et al., 1999; Sheckley & Keeton, 2000). Primarily, the findings confirm that the learning project represents an integrative experience involving the learner, learning process, and environment in the development of professional practice. The findings also show that the learning project model is a natural response to occurrences in the environment, where resolution involves the strategic use of human and non-human resources (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979).

The ecological metaphor, as explained by Sheckley and Keeton (2000), captures the essence of the symbiotic relationship existing between the environment, the learner, and the learning process, which is at the center of the learning project model. As seen in the study’s findings, the environment is dynamic and impactful, much like that described by Cairns (2013), who dissuades any representation of the workplace environment as static and container-like, and learning as an unfolding sequence of events within it. Instead, a symbiotic relationship exists, whereby learning promotes growth and change in workers as well as in the organizations that employ them. Examples of this exist in participants’ narratives, where ABEL educators demonstrate how, as a result of their own growth in knowledge and skills, their workplace environments improved as well, whether through establishing new services, relocating services for greater student accessibility, and examining the impact of mandated reforms on classroom practices with the intention of influencing national policy and practices.

In sum, today’s workplaces constitute something more than a static environment where individuals are employed and learning occurs as a discrete activity or event. The environment represents an integration of the work to be done and its naturally embedded affordances, including opportunities for learning and access to resources, as well as
barriers that impact the adults' efforts to build and improve their skills. Simultaneously and seamlessly, the learning opportunities that emerge tap into previous experiences, knowledge bases, thinking processes, and emotions as adults bring agency and decision-making to the learning process (Cairns & Malloch, 2013).

Increasingly, researchers blend work, learning, and place, as an integrated construct, i.e., workplace learning, implying that learning occurs in the seamless performance of – and not apart from – work. Time out from work to learn is presented as essentially unnecessary, when learning is perceived as existing at the veritable heart of productive work (Cairns & Malloch, 2013). This view, however, pertains particularly to informal learning in the workplace and not necessarily that of intentional learning, as demonstrated by the ABEL participants. Intentionality shapes and shifts the learning project model differently than unintentional learning, as participants integrate their learning actions within and outside their work performance, and within and outside their work environment.

For instance, data shows ABEL educators taking the initiative to attend conferences and professional development when opportunities arise, visit exemplary programs, conduct research-type activities, meet with various experts, collaborate with colleagues, and other actions inside and outside their workplace environment. Likewise, participants conduct learning activities before, during and after work, and often without compensation. Such actions become blended in the learning project model as adults use their professional practice to test, try out, and refine the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they elect to develop and change in some self-determined way. Usability is at the crux of such efforts, and personal agency and decision-making, elemental, as participants decide
where to learn, when, how, and what resources to employ for particular intent (Scribner, 1986). In practice, as Ellström (2013) notes, learning in the workplace is a matter of design, and the environment can be simultaneously organized to improve the delivery of services and the conditions for workplace learning, as well.

The significance of the social aspect of workplace learning is likewise well addressed in the research (Marsick, Watkins, O’Connor, 2013) and upheld in the ABEL study. Learning is presented as largely social and relationship oriented in an article by Marsick, Watkins, and O’Connor (2013), who summarized interview data obtained from presenters at the 2009 Americas’ Academy for Human Resource Development. ABEL study data support this to some extent, given the significance colleagues play in the promotion and conduction of learning within the learning project model.

Learning projects, however, are more typically results and outcome-oriented, with a primary focus on improving self-identified aspects of performance. Moreover, some participants appear more social in their approach to learning than others, as various narratives illustrated. Still, ABEL participants identify their work colleagues – near and far – as the most significant asset for learning in their environment. But the elemental focus and orientation of adult learning projects is the development of aspects of the individual’s practice, and as such, adults do not undertake them as a means of being more connected with peers. This view of the motivation for undertaking learning projects does not appear to support at least one of Houle’s (1993) typology, where social engagement is seen as a principal motivator for adults engaging in learning activities. On the other hand, the ABEL study represents the narratives of 12 educators; a larger sample size may demonstrate that Houle’s full typology applies.
Significant discussion occurs in the literature about the primacy of communities of practice as a particular and highly social aspect associated with learning in the workplace. Conceptual criticism (Cairns, 2013) of the community of practice concept primarily concerns the definition of community, confusion about what is learned, and the role of individual agency. Little in the literature, however, addresses the issue of selectivity in the development of such communities. Both the community of practice concept, however, and Houle’s (1993) original notion of the emergence of naturally embedded enclaves, of colleagues, friends, and kin, that emerge to support the learning activities of adults, fail to capture the agency with which such support is determined and facilitated by ABEL educators.

Communities for practice are broadly (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, February) promoted in today’s public school education reform initiatives as a means of improving educators’ practice. Such communities are typically orchestrated, and sometimes imposed, by administrators. As such, communities of practice serve a bureaucratic means by which colleagues are brought together with the expressed purpose of collaborating on the collective improvement of instructional practices. Much benefit is derived as a result, and educators are afforded greater opportunity to learn together through focused dialogue about their common practice (2012).

Yet, ABEL data suggest that colleagues apply criteria about whom they want to tap as co-agents in their learning projects and the roles they assign to them, whether to provide feedback, co-teach, mentor, or coach. The study’s participants all acknowledged the support they received in general from their colleagues – support that was well-appreciated and necessary for breaking down the isolation with which many work. On the
other hand, when learning is intentional, criteria is applied in determining who has the right kind of expertise, background, knowledge, and explanatory style to serve a particular purpose. Not anyone will do. Recognizing that specific criteria are in play offsets a general notion that when workers learn from one another, they are just as likely to become misinformed as informed, confused as clarified, and more ineffectual than effectual, when colleagues lack requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, and information. When discussing informal learning, it is not unusual to hear that learners don’t know what they don’t know, and as a result, are unable to judge what gets passed around as practical knowledge and wisdom.

The ABEL study’s evidence shows the contrary; workers learn with and from one another to a significant degree, but do so with selectivity. Technology, too, broadens the sphere in which adults can tap into the knowledge and expertise of professional colleagues on a regional and national level. Adults are not limited to local expertise, but refer to national field-related platforms and listservs, as well; data shows too that such information gets reviewed with colleagues as an aspect of triangulation for greater reliability. In sum, when adults perceive there is insufficient expertise among on-site colleagues, they seek further afield. This finding is not unlike that of Cairns and Malloch (2013) who noted that technology broadens our notion of community and increases access to work-related expertise and support.

*Learning projects as metacognitively facilitated experiences of the learner’s intent and design.* Data supported the study’s last proposition, namely that participants were likely to be strategic, effective learners (Eraut, 2004; Daley, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Rose, 2004; Scribner, 1986); and second, that they would metacognitively manage their
learning projects (Bandura, 1997; Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Sarason, 2004; Schraw, 1998). In general, the study’s findings are neither new nor revelatory, as how students learn in the workplace has been well-established in the literature (Daley, 1999; Eckert & Bell, 2006; Grenier, 2009; Rose, 2004; Scribner, 1986; Sheckley, 2002). The usefulness of the learning project construct for gaining knowledge, skill, and improving one’s abilities was likewise well-established (Livingstone, 2000; Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979). Findings also concur with a reported history of adults initiating and managing their learning efforts in difficult environments and under less than optimal circumstances (Candy, 1991; Enos, Kehrhaun, & Bell, 2003; Kett, 1994).

Earlier data, however, failed to explicate the nature of the learning that occurs within the learning project construct itself, as Brookfield (1988) noted. Earlier studies (Penland, 1977; Tough, 1979) were largely categorical in nature, delineating the number, type, focus, duration, etc., of learning projects undertaken by adults. Such studies lacked the narrative voice of those using learning projects to develop their professional competency, and particularly in an environment well-recognized for its embedded challenges (Chisman, 2011). This study, therefore, offers an initial narrative based on the perspectives of adults as to how they sought to develop their proficiency in an environment well-recognized for its challenging conditions. Deeper exploration than this study is needed, however, to address Brookfield’s basic complaint.

Findings do show that ABEL participants determine what and how to learn in response to environmental triggers that emerge when conducting their work, as others have shown (Spear & Mocker, 1984). Participants identify and determine the nature of problems that emerge within the context of conducting work, as well as the resolutions,
and the strategies to apply. As previously discussed, the study’s data did not clarify whether participants select the best solution and strategies from among many or apply the first that suffice. Nonetheless, that effective strategies and solutions are indeed enacted by participants is well supported. For instance, participants consistently express satisfaction with their learning project outcomes, while substantiating their success with specific supportive data. In several instances, learning projects were still in play at the time of the interview, as participants felt their original intent was unmet, a determination, which again, was based on monitoring data.

In this period of increasing accountability and scrutiny of the teaching profession, it is perhaps unsurprising that data features so strongly in the learning project model. Participants use data from multiple sources to aid in identifying and defining learning challenges, monitoring and gauging progress during implementation, and determining and assessing outcomes. Such varying use of data is only one indication of the presence of metacognitive skills in the management of the participants’ learning projects.

Overall, findings that show adults as able managers and implementers of their own professional learning in the workplace are hardly surprising. Just as Ertmer and Newby (1996) indicated, ABEL educators displayed strategic, self-regulating, and reflective strengths throughout the conducting of their learning projects. For instance, they drew upon personal insights about their individual learning strengths and weaknesses in determining compensatory actions, such as knowing why and when to tap colleagues, and in determining the kind of support they would need. Throughout their projects, adults likewise demonstrated both metacognitive knowledge and control in enacting their learning projects. In fact, in the most simplistic way, the learning project
episodes represent Ertmer’s and Newby’s basic plan—monitor—evaluate model of self-regulation.

In some ways, too, the ABEL study’s learning project model aligns with the expansive learning cycle of Engeström (2013), which, in turn, shares similarities with both Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model and Eckert and Bell’s (2006) learning spirals. Engeström’s expansive model consists of seven actions, progressing from an abstracted understanding of the nature of presenting problems to the concrete consolidation of new or improved practices. More particularly, the expansive learning process begins with a metacognitive examining or questioning of some troubling (contradictory) aspect of one’s performance or situation, not unlike episode one of the learning project. This leads seamlessly to the second action, that of analysis, as the adult attempts to determine the “why” of the situation, considering, for example, its origins and evolution, as participants demonstrate at the outset of episode two. The third action involves the adult’s public representation of the mentally designed and constructed solution model.

During the fourth and fifth actions, the adult metacognitively examines the model through public display and experimentation, as its dynamics, potentials, and limitations are assessed. While the model resolution is being implemented, feedback is sought and used iteratively and reflectively to improve, enrich, and extend its features, as needed (Engeström, 2013). Similar actions occur in the second episode of the learning project. In the last two actions, the adult reflects upon and evaluates the entire process and consolidates outcomes into a new stable form of practice, similar to the final learning project episode. Surely, seen thus, the impact of metacognition as an overarching and
mediating agent in the learning project model and proficiency development process is

demonstrably significant.

Recommendations for practice

The study’s results suggest several implications for practice. Following are

recommendations relative to the impact of the findings on ABEL educators,

administrators, policy-makers, and professional staff developers.

For ABEL educators:

- Seek and secure opportunities for dialoging with trusted colleagues about
  intentional learning efforts (attempt to make the implicit explicit and articulate
  aspects of learning that are often unpacked, unattended, and unrecognized until
  prompted to reflect upon and describe such actions aloud); maintain a sustained
  conversation about professional practice, including its affordances for learning.
  By bringing learning experiences into the open, others can provide insight and
  feedback that may strengthen future efforts and contribute to beneficial changes in
  the workplace environment that will support individual and collective efforts.

- Improve the learning efforts of students by articulating and modeling the
  educators’ own experiences in managing and conducting learning projects as a
  means of developing proficiency; educators’ students are likewise engaged in
  developing their proficiency in various workplaces and would benefit from open
  dialogue where various strategies and approaches to such learning can be shared.

- Cultivate the workplace environment, priming it for more effective learning
  outcomes, by engaging in discussions during staff meetings with administrators,
  specialists, and colleagues present, about intentional learning efforts that are
presently underway; highlight recent learning projects, articulate the kinds of learning resources that are – and would be – beneficial, such as access to suitable technology, exemplary practitioners, and a rich supply of adaptable resources.

- Advocate for equitable compensation for intentional efforts at professional learning in a manner commensurate with that apportioned for traditional professional development.

- Advocate for greater flexibility in determining how to develop proficiency, including allowances and compensation for integrating formal and informal activities in a self-determined manner; documentation as to what was learned and how should be negotiated in a manner that respects the educator’s ownership of the learning project.

For ABEL administrators:

- Seek to understand, recognize, and value the intentional learning projects of educational staff; better understanding of what educators choose to know, do, and change in relation to their practice will yield insight about what is happening in programs through a different lens. With such knowledge, decisions about how the workplace environment can become more learning-friendly can result and yield more suitable resources to make such learning easier, efficient, and effective.

- Recognize that educators are self-initiating structural adaptations, such as joining classes and co-teaching, as well as mentoring one another, as an aspect of developing their professional practice; adopt greater flexibility in overall program design to accommodate a more collaborative approach to teaching, learning, and service delivery.
• Be more strategic in determining how limited professional development dollars are spent to promote improved professional practices at program sites. Consider how educators are currently learning in the workplace and experiment with new models of remuneration; unremunerated professional development is viewed as lacking value. Conversely, educators feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the completion of their learning projects - though their projects are typically unrecognized and undervalued for what they represent in the ABEL workplace by administrators. Compensation for intentional, professional learning undertaken by ABEL educators, however, should be considered in light of what the learning project study’s findings suggest.

• Increase opportunities for educators to collaborate and conduct their own research-type activities focused on improving professional practice; in part-time programs such opportunities are difficult to facilitate, but the social aspect of the learning project model cannot be minimized. Opportunities to engage in sustained conversations about instructional practices are essential for promoting both adaptive and developmental types of professional learning.

For policy-makers:

• Take the lead in shifting the national focus on professional development to include and embrace professional learning in its broader sense, and learning projects and other intentional and informal learning models as equitable, reliable, and systemically valuable.

• Dedicate funding to intentional professional learning efforts, as well as traditional professional development, thereby denoting equitable value, encouraging flexible
approaches, and embracing a more personalized approach to proficiency development.

- Promote, dedicate, and support funds for research to better understand the intentional, self-directed learning model as a proficiency development model, which will help to uncover much that remains to be learned.

For professional staff developers:

- Recognize that professional learning is likely being conducted and facilitated by educators, albeit under their own management and discretion, and focused on self-identified areas of need; seek to understand what educators are already invested in knowing, doing, and changing about their practice. Common themes can exist between what educators are already engaged in and the promoted or mandated training and development agendas of local organizations, state, or federal education entities.

- Improve knowledge about professional learning variants that extend beyond the traditional professional development model, including self-directed learning projects.

- Reconsider the role of a professional staff developer, such as that of a learning facilitator who can aid the professional learning efforts of educators; annotated learning curricula around common issues and topics relating to specific aspects of the ABEL educator’s work can be developed; registers for linking and connecting ABEL educators to sources of technical assistance and support; facilitating connections among educators across program sites who share a common learning goal; providing lists of exemplary educators able and willing to serve as mentors
and online coaches, for instance.

Recommendations for future research

This ABEL study offers only initial insight into the use of learning projects by 12 adult educators working in a marginalized, under-resourced environment. The fact that the profile of the participants represents the typical ABEL field educator implies that the study may have broad impact. Until more is known about the rigor by which adults conduct their learning projects, however, little value is likely to be applied to such efforts. Additional research leading to deeper knowledge and understanding about the value of the construct as a model of professional learning and as a complement to formal professional development is suggested by the findings. Valuing the learning project for its ability to improve the expertise of ABEL educators, in effect, acknowledges the ability of adults to manage their own professional development in rigorous, robust, and effective ways. In essence, the construct locates the ownership, control, and management of learning with the adult learner, as others (Candy, 1991; Tough, 1979) claim it is and should be.

At this time in the ABEL field, greater resources are dedicated to studying the impact of formal professional development, with little to no attention given to the value of individual, self-managed learning efforts, such as the learning project represents. Still, initial findings suggest that the rigor adults apply to their own learning projects relates positively to that of formal professional development. More work on the rigor applied by adults to their learning projects, as well as assessment studies of the value of the outcomes, is necessary, however, before the ABEL field administrators are likely to broaden their view as to what constitutes suitable professional learning in the workplace.
Some questions remain unanswered, such as the degree to which adults consciously plan their learning projects; how specific strategies are determined; and whether adults are using learned strategies in their projects that may be less suitable in today’s highly changeable environment. Research that focuses on whether and how adult learners change their learning strategies overtime would yield helpful information for learners themselves, as well as professional developers, and administrators.

Primarily, however, Brookfield’s (1988) basic criticism concerning the actual learning that occurs in the learning project construct, deserves more attention. One of the challenges for addressing his concerns rests in the fact that this study, consistent with earlier research, used interview questions that asked participants to explore existing, or recollect the most recent challenges that caused them to invest in their own professional learning as a way of getting to the learning project construct. Such questioning, Brookfield suggested, has the affect of influencing participants’ answers, leading them, in a sense, to please the interviewer, which is not an uncommon concern in the qualitative approach (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

But as Eraut (2004) reported, open-ended questioning that invites adults to recollect and explore their learning experiences is consistent with the realization that individual learning efforts are typically unrecognized for what they are. Instead, adult learners typically equate learning with traditional professional development and formal opportunities provided by education-related institutions. Basically, what is not codified as learning in the traditional sense is not recognized by adults and others as professional learning. Therefore, Eraut wrote, researchers need to get to aspects of implicit learning
through problem-solving conversations and probes that invite adults to explore consciously what is more typically experienced as relatively inscrutable.

In effect, because adults are asked to explore current or recent experiences that led them to undertake professional learning efforts, their narratives are recollected, and as such, susceptible to inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and omissions. Future research, conducted over the course of an academic year, for example, that includes frequent interview sessions with participants would yield data that gets closer to the heart of Brookfield’s (1988) criticism. Building a collegial, critical friend-type relationship with participants, sustained over the course of the year, would provide insight into different critical moments and decision-junctures, thereby shedding light on what considerations were weighed in the learning process that led to particular actions. In such a way, research conducted in-action, rather than the reflected-upon-action manner of this ABEL study, may yield the data necessary to address Brookfield’s challenge more substantially.

In-action research would likely increase the awareness of the learner about their self-managed, intentional learning, and allow them, in the process, to provide greater detail about the specific decisions and determinations they make at different junctures. Such knowledge will provide a more robust understanding of the learning that occurs within the construct, including its effectiveness as well as the depth of the learning. The opportunity to reflect upon and explore personal learning through the learning project construct elicited genuine cooperation, thoughtful conversation, and enthusiasm, indicating that such opportunities in the future would be welcome and likely to lead to deeper insights for participants and researchers alike.
References


Daley, B. J. (2003, October). *Learning in teacher professional development*. Refereed paper presented at the meeting of the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.


Appendix A

Sample Outreach Letter to Program Administrator

August 13, 2009

Program Director:

Thank you for your support of my research project, and particularly your willingness to allow me to talk to your teachers about their willingness to volunteer as participants in my study. I am attaching a basic description of the research project that I would like you to share with your teachers. As I indicated to you, I will want to meet with each volunteer teacher twice for a total of about two to four hours. I will be audio-taping the interviews and will ask volunteers where it would be most convenient and comfortable for them to meet. I appreciate your willingness to let us use your space at your site, if your teachers find that most convenient and comfortable - so thank you for allowing me to intrude on your space and your staff’s time.

I am happy to speak with any of your staff who express an interest in participating in the study, so please share my home phone number (XXX) XXX-XXXX, my work telephone number (XXX) XXX-XXXX, which is a direct line to my office, and encourage them to contact me. If anyone prefers to e-mail me, please either use my home e-mail address, (xxxxxxxxxx), or my work e-mail address, (xxxxxxxxx), and I will follow-up with a personal phone call to those who contact me.

Let me know if you have any questions; and I’m happy to come out and talk about the research project with individual teachers or a group in person, if that will help in the outreach efforts.

I appreciate your efforts in my behalf. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Maureen K. Crowley

Enclosure
Appendix B

Recruitment Program Flyer

August 10, 2009

Research Project: The Learning Projects of Adult Basic Education and Literacy Educators

The Learning Projects of Adult Basic Education and Literacy (ABEL) Educators is a research project that focuses on the intentional, professional learning interests and actions that educators take on their own to improve their individual classroom practice. I would like to interview 12 part-time ABEL educators to ask them a series of open-ended questions about how they determine whether they need to develop any particular skill, and if they do, what kinds of steps they might take to do so, and what kinds of learning actions they undertake to meet their self-identified goals.

My basic premise, based on a history of foundational research, is that ABEL educators engage in their own adult learning to a considerable degree, but that they do not necessarily see their actions as examples of adult or professional learning. It would be helpful, however, for program directors, administrators, and teachers, to understand the individual efforts taken to develop and improve classroom practices and how such efforts might be supported.

My research is a qualitative study, and I will use sustained, personal interviews as the primary approach to obtaining data. The interview questions are open-ended and represent an opportunity for a dialogue between the teacher and the researcher about personal, professional learning efforts. All interviews will be audio taped, but the identities of participating teachers will be maintained confidentially. I would like to meet with interested teachers twice, each time for a period of an hour to an hour-and-a-half, and I am happy to arrange interviews at the convenience of each teacher.

Please call me at my home (phone number) or my office (phone number). If you prefer, you can contact me by e-mail at (home and work e-mail addresses). I appreciate your time and hope that you will consider calling me for further information about this study.

Thanking you in advance.

Maureen K. Crowley
Appendix C

Consent for Participation in Research Study

University of Connecticut

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent for Participation in a Research Study
University of Connecticut

Principal Investigator: Marijke T. Kehrlihn, Ph.D.
Student Researcher: Maureen K. Crowley
Study Title: The Learning Projects of Adult Basic Education Teachers

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study to better understand the kinds of professional learning Adult Basic Education (ABE) teachers undertake on their own to improve their workplace skills. You are being asked to participate because as an adult basic education teacher, your description of your own learning experiences will generate data that will help me answer questions I have about adult learning. I would like to know more about what learning is being addressed through personal efforts and what those efforts include. I am also interested in learning from you about the role of the environment on your learning. You are being asked to volunteer in this study, but if you do not wish to participate, there will be no impact on your work or benefits that you are entitled to. In addition, should you agree to voluntarily participate, you may still choose to withdraw at any time, and you chose not to answer any particular question I might ask.

Why is this study being done?

This study is being done because there is little understanding in the ABE field about whether educators are engaged in any professional learning of their own; and if they are so engaged, what are the kinds of things they want to learn and how do they go about learning them. By knowing more about the phenomenon of self-managed learning activities, we will have a better understanding of how program leaders can support those efforts. A new, blended model of professional learning might emerge that includes both the learning educators do on their own and the professional development that is provided. Also, with this knowledge, the field's leaders, teachers, and professional developers would better understand what learning resources should be made available to complement rather than compete with educators' personal learning efforts.

What are the procedures of the study? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to talk about your own personal learning experiences. I would like to meet with you twice, each time for an hour and a half to two hours, for a total of three to four hours, and schedule the second interview within four weeks of the initial one. We can talk at a location that is convenient for you, either your program site or another of your choice. It will be important that you select a site where you will be comfortable in speaking with me about your personal learning experiences.

I have a series of questions that I will ask to help me understand the kinds of learning actions you might plan and undertake. The kinds of questions I will ask in the first...
Appendix C
Consent for Participation in Research Study

University of Connecticut

Appendix C: Consent Form

Interview are about your current work assignment and your background training and preparation. I will also ask about your experience in learning new things or improving your work-related skills, and the way you think about your own learning efforts. For the second and last interview, I would like to ask you some questions about the learning resources you might use, and the role, if any, the environment plays in your learning efforts.

I will audio tape our conversations so that I can make sure that I understand as much as I can about your learning experiences. You and all data connected to you will be kept confidential, so that your name cannot be associated with the data. I will keep the audio tapes in a locked box for the length of three years, at which time they will be destroyed. Also, I will provide you with a written summary of what I learn from our two interviews, giving you an opportunity to provide any clarifications that you feel are necessary.

What are the risks or inconveniences of this study?

The focus of the research is on your self-managed learning and the study is not an evaluation of your worksite performance. As such, we believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, we recognize the possible inconvenience of our intrusion on your time. We will make accommodations to the interview schedule that are respectful of your time and commitments.

What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research, though it may help you to understand and clarify for yourself the actions you take to build your own professional expertise. However, we hope that your participation in the study may lead to greater understanding and appreciation of the kinds of learning adults undertake on their own, something that is not typically understood or valued in the same way as formal professional development. Such knowledge may help us expand the notion of professional development to recognize alternative pathways. Potential results of this study may also help ABE administrators and professional developers understand the kinds of resources that, incorporated in the learning environment, might improve the efforts adults undertake on their own behalf.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs associated with this and you will not be paid to participate.

How will my personal information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your data. The researchers will keep all study records, including any codes to your data, locked in a secure location. Research records will be labeled with a three-digit code determined by the researcher to assure confidentiality. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed after three years. All electronic files containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users.
Appendix C

Consent for Participation in Research Study

University of Connecticut

Appendix C: Consent Form

Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. Data that will be shared with others will be coded as described above to help protect your identity. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

You should know that the University of Connecticut's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Research Compliance may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. During the study, you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Marijke T. Kehr, Ph.D., (860) 486-0248. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (860) 486-8802.

Documentation of Consent:

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature ______________________________ Print Name ___________________________ Date ________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent ______________________________ Print Name ___________________________ Date ________

UCONN IRB
Approved On ________
Approved Until ________
Approved By ________
Appendix D

Initial Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project for my doctoral studies at the University of Connecticut. I am interested in the professional learning of ABE educators, having been one myself. I am also interested in understanding the kinds of learning that ABE educators undertake on their own to address the professional demands of their work – teaching adults. In 1979, Allen Tough described the professional learning that adults undertake on their own as ‘learning projects’. He described a learning project as the sustained, focused attention on a learning goal that an individual maintains for a minimum of seven hours. For example, I might want to learn a new strategy for a particular student who seems to be struggling in class. I might talk with colleagues, go online and find an approach that I think might work, observe a colleague who I learn is already using the same approach and ask for her help, and finally try it out myself. Together, the determination that personal learning was warranted, as well as any planning, implementation, and assessment activities would constitute the learning project.

I’d like to understand if you have had a learning project experience, and if so, how you determined what your needs were, how you planned your own learning, and the actions you undertook.

I’m going to ask you some open-ended questions. There are no right or wrong answers. I hope, instead, that the questions promote a conversation between the two of us, so that I can understand your experience in meeting your own learning goals. While I understand that you are most likely to take advantage of the professional development opportunities that are provided to you, I’m more interested at this time in the kinds of learning you do on your own.

Will you allow me to tape record our conversation? I will keep all information about you confidential, and will safeguard my tapes and transcriptions in a locked file. In keeping with professional research standards, I will not share these tapes or transcripts with anyone without your written permission – and will take every precaution so that anyone reading the findings, as reported in my dissertation, will not be able to connect the data to you. Also, I will present you with a written summary of our transcribed conversation for your review.

I’d like to interview you twice – today, and then again in four weeks. Both interviews will take about one and a half hours. Today, I’d like to learn about your thoughts as to how you determine that you have a need for professional learning, and how you plan what you are going to do – and then the actual steps you take. I’d like to know about your own learning process in as much detail as possible. And lastly, I’d like to understand how you determine that your learning has been successful and that you have met what you set out to know or be able to do.
In the second interview, I’d like to focus on the impact of your work environment on your own professional learning.

So before we begin, do you have any questions?

**Part A: For the researcher to complete:**

1. Participant Identifier:
2. Date of Interview:
3. Location of Interview:
4. Start Time:
5. Finish Time:

**Part B: For the participant to respond:**

6. Please describe your current work assignment:
7. And your background education, training, and experience for this work:
8. In what ways has your education, training, and preparation prepared you for your current work assignment?
9. Is there anything about your current assignment that has been problematic or challenging for you? (If no, have you ever had a student that was particularly challenging for you?)
10. How did you know that you needed to learn something new or improve something about your teaching?
11. Did anyone or anything help you in determining this?
12. What did you do as a result? Were your actions deliberate or more serendipitous?
13. At any place along the line, did you have a plan in mind?
14. Were there specific learning actions that you took?
15. Who and what helped you in carrying out your own learning plans?
16. How would you evaluate what you did to meet your needs?
17. How would you explain to others your experience in identifying and addressing your own professional skills?

18. You’ve shared with me how you identify, plan, and solve your own professional needs. Is there anything you wish to add?

19. Has this conversation led you to think about your own professional learning in a different way? If so, in what way?

**Part C: For the Researcher to complete:**

*Field Notes and Observations:*
Appendix E

Second Interview Protocol

Part A: For the researcher to complete:

1. Participant Identifier:
2. Date of Interview:
3. Location of Interview:
4. Time at the beginning of the interview:
5. Time at the end of the interview:

Part B: For the Participant to address:

6. Since our last interview, has anything come to mind that you would like to share about your own learning experiences?

7. Is there a formal professional development process in your organization/agency (i.e., an individual professional development plan process, or a schedule of professional development activities planned by others)?

8. Describe your current workplace in terms of the professional learning resources that are available to you?

9. What of these resources, if any, are helpful to you in your own learning? In what ways?

10. If your current worksite lacked adequate professional learning resources, what would you do?

11. What resources, if any, beyond your immediate workplace are you most likely to use?

12. What about your learning environment strikes you as particularly helpful? Detrimental or constraining?

13. What is the most important aspect of your work environment for promoting your own learning?

14. How would you define or explain what constitutes your professional learning environment? And what impact has been its impact on your learning?
15. Is there anything you want to add or say to help me understand what you think contributes to a rich professional learning experience?

Part C: For the researcher to complete:

Field Notes/Observations:
Appendix F

Subjectivity Statement

As an experienced ABEL teacher, program creator, director, and professional developer, I was able to observe, first hand, the learning efforts of peers to address teaching challenges for over 20 years. I was among a small core of ABEL educators to develop a group of satellite programs to serve adult learners on Cape Cod and the Islands, and worked collaboratively with my peers on professional learning activities to increase our effectiveness. My successful management of this program model led me to the Adult Community Service Cluster at the Massachusetts Department of Education, where I had the opportunity to represent the New England Partnership for Learning Disabilities in a project funded by the National Institute for Literacy, (NIFL). NIFL, in conjunction with the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, (NALLD), represented a collaboration that included the Academy for Educational Development and the University of Kansas Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities.

Serving as the New England Coordinator for this project, I worked closely with the University of Kansas researchers and a small core of practitioners to create *Bridges to Practice: A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities* (National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, 1999). *Bridges to Practice* is a compilation of five guidebooks designed as a professional learning tool, and as such, serves as a curriculum for a traditional, formal professional development workshop series. Originally, our national team consisted of 16 practitioners from the field who collaborated in the development of these guidebooks and became
certified as the first group of trainers-of-trainers and deliverers of the workshop series (Appendix G Bridges to Practice National Trainer Certification).

Throughout these experiences, however, I was struck by the stories that colleagues shared about their personal efforts to develop and improve their skills on their own and outside of traditional professional development programs. Much of my own development as an ABEL teacher and program administrator was based on my direct experience, reflecting on what was working and not working, and talking with peers about innovative approaches and strategies that I was testing and trying out in classrooms and at program sites. There was little research associated with the ABEL field, so as practitioners, we were accustomed to feeling our way, trying things out, and sharing our insights with peers. In our conversations, however, it seemed to me at the time that we did not see ourselves as independent, intentional learners; instead, we talked about trying to meet the responsibilities associated with our work assignments, and accepted and believed our self-managed efforts were simply necessary for getting the work done. These thoughts aside, in time, I became increasingly compelled to deepen my knowledge about the adult learner from a more theoretical and foundational perspective.

I returned to the University, therefore, to develop a better understanding of the theoretical and research foundations, including principles and practices, of adult learning. I wanted to gain a more masterful, well-organized understanding of adult learning in general, and to make greater sense of my own particular experiences as an ABEL educator. My intention for developing this knowledge base was to minimize – and mitigate – a strong reliance on a trial and error approach that dominated my managerial practice, despite operating a program that was widely acknowledged for its effectiveness.
I wanted to understand why things worked as they did, and why strategies, approaches, and practices that I thought were sure to work, sometimes failed to achieve desired ends. My graduate studies helped me develop a critical lens on which I reviewed and reflected on my past experiences and practices, and challenged me to think more keenly and critically about the kinds of learning efforts that I and my colleagues undertook to develop our knowledge and skills, and to change our practices, when necessary. Through course readings and class discussions, I found my way to the construct of the learning project (Tough, 1979), which resonated strongly with my personal experience. The learning project construct helped focus my interest in looking more deeply into the intentional learning efforts of ABEL practitioners. With this in mind, however, I wanted to explore the phenomenon of self-managed learning projects as a means of improving proficiency in a field where the concept was not well known or understood and where sufficient resources for professional development were unlikely to materialize – and not merely to satisfy my personal curiosity.

Finally, I selected to use a traditional, qualitative approach to this study, though I recognize the earlier criticism concerning the tendency of researchers to use probing questions that influence and lead participants to respond in particular ways (Cross, 1981). In an attempt to mitigate undue influence in prompting participants to think about their learning projects in any directed way, I piloted the interview protocols with experienced ABEL educators and refined both the first and follow-up interviews based on their feedback. I used additional strategies to minimize my personal biases, to the extent possible, such as regular meetings with a qualified peer, who through an on-going process of thinking-aloud, challenged me to provide the evidence to substantiate
propositions, emerging themes, patterns, and findings. Personal biases aside, I recognize that not all ABEL teachers need to invest in their own learning at particular times and for various reasons; and by keeping an open mind, the door ajar, so to speak, I tried to suspend my personal predilection about the need to be so engaged. In this way, I attempted to be watchful and cognizant of my own perspective on this phenomenon, and kept it under reasonable guidance.
Appendix G

Bridges to Practice National Training Certificate

Maureen K. Crowley

has been certified by the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center as a Master Trainer on Bridges to Practice.

December 12, 1998

Appendix G: Bridges to Practice National Trainer Certificate
Appendix H

Memorandum: Ava

Ava

What is it about?

Ava is a very experienced teacher who seems to be still passionate about the work – she had a comfort level in talking about her experiences – seemed to be competent and comfortable but still learning – and she was on the verge of retiring again! She was 70 years old and had been teaching since 1966 – sometimes adult education, family literacy, etc. She retired from public school teaching in 1990! Always preferred to work with students who were under-performing.

I was struck by how collaborative she was by nature – frequently spoke about engaging everyone – colleagues, neighbors, parents, and the students themselves in the process – and community and business people. Seeking information that would help her gear materials and her presentations to students needs – but reflective as to what adult learners will need to be able to do in the work world.

Ava didn’t really talk about learning projects – again, a lot of learning episodes bubbled up and under her narrative – talking a lot about bringing other people into her learning activities. Curriculum development was key – and her narrative spoke about different times she worked on changing and adapting curriculum to meet her students’ needs. . . She spoke about her school adopting a whole language approach to reading that was inappropriate for the students she was working with – but they had to use the assigned textbook, which was too difficult for students. She went back and studied other methods from her training and background preparation – and used other methods than the one adopted by the school. She relied on student feedback to determine what was working – kept curricula for years and kept adapting and going back to different resources. She took the feedback from students, their parents, and colleagues and continued to adapt the reading curriculum she was using versus the school designated one. . .

The only learning project she actually described – though I think her adopting a reading curriculum in place of the school’s designed one also constituted a learning project in her past. But currently, the National External Degree Program (NEDP) has developed a new manual and increased the rigor of the program. Ava’s program site teaches the EDP program and so they received the new manual. They went to workshops from the NEDP development team about the changes and using the new manual, but the program staff are struggling in trying to understand what has actually been changed and what hasn’t been changed (problem identification). Ava’s been going to meetings and the workshops to get a better handle on the new program’s expectations, structure, approaches, etc. As she started to use the new manual, she was going thru it and using some of the ideas and comparing the new procedures and materials with her class book – spot-checking her work with the manual – and taking notes as she’s trying things out to see how the
changes are working. She’s gaining insight into the changes by trying them out in the classroom and cross checking her work with her class book – a kind of triangulation of data approach.

While trying out some of the program’s changes and working with a student, she found that something wasn’t right – something wasn’t right with the student or the program. So she started to take notes (observations?) about her experiences – and then called a meeting with her colleagues. They set aside time and went through the manual – noting each change – one by one – as compared with the old program. The group discussed each change – and offered data as to which aspects were working and which were not. They discussed the program and changes until they came to consensus about the individual changes and made group decisions about what to keep and what should be eliminated from the program.

She then went back to her classroom and worked with students again –

And then asked to meet with the NEDP representatives – and set up another meeting.

She brought all her notes with her to the next meeting with the NEDP folks. She reasoned that the NEDP people ‘aren’t in the day-to-day – working with people who are trying to get their high school diplomas through this program, and in finding out what is a good, valuable change” and which isn’t.

This change initiative – converting the old EDP program with the new national standards and reformed model – Ava says will take a year or two . . . but the idea is to meet with people who are making the changes –

She is still trying the new changes out in the classroom and the revisions her colleagues have agreed to (consensus) – continue to make changes, dialogue – and meet with the national team. She is respecting the fact that the national team spent time investigating the older version and have reasons why the changes make sense – but she and her colleagues are trying to understand those changes for themselves in terms of how the changes actually translate in classroom practices and the experiences of adult learners as they engage with the new program.

Asked about her own planning – “I’m sure I would take it into my car and think about it – get home and do some research on it. I might even involve someone who is in the program and ask someone – ‘what do you think? Is this something that is needed for an adult student trying to get their high school diploma? Do you have another idea?’ She asked her neighbors . . . an IBM administrator – and others.

What is the underlying meaning?

Indicative of a lot of reflective practice – outreach to others, research – involving a wide network of people in terms of data-gathering, research-type activities. She uses her
students as sources of feedback and involves them in the process of helping guide the practice – is it working? Let’s try something different. . .

There’s a lot of starting with the given kind of thing going on – she starts with the manual she’s being given and starts to use it in the classroom – then relies on student response as triggers to determine if or what may need to be changed and adapted. She asks her colleagues, too, about their experiences with the same materials.

The geographic landscape really breaks down in this narrative – asked about her planning – “I’m sure I’d take it into my car and think about it” – and talking with neighbors, community folks. . .She also likes to gain a certain agreement among her professional colleagues so that she has conformation for her thinking.

This is active learning – some quick episodes – and then her notion of systemically changing a model and requiring a year to two of effort to perfect the local service approach. She too talked about differentiating learning – and curriculum development seemed key.
Appendix I

Memorandum: Christopher

Christopher

What is it about?

In terms of his learning project, Chris watches, observes students – reads their body language to recognize whether something’s working or not – or that the material is appropriate. He also uses student work – practice tests, for example – to give him insight on how well students are doing and what their problems might be.

For his learning project, he found his students were having a difficult time with historical novels and decided to develop a packet of materials that would get them interested, motivated – while at the same time providing historical content that they would be responsible for (tested on/GED). He started his project with research – determined that he would develop a packet of learning materials, developed at student readiness and interest levels. He started developing his packet – asked other teachers to assist with some of the packets. He collaborated with another teacher in the school – though he prefers to work “independently”. In time, tried materials out with students, refined and adjusted what he was doing, materials he was using. Added a few things – kept modifying the packet structure and content. He’s still using and refining it – his colleagues, too, tried out some of the materials in their classes (actually before Chris tried them out), and got feedback and ideas for tweaking the packet.

In Christopher’s narrative you can see the notion of episodes – he discussed several different episodes where he developed specific things in response to student needs – he talked about learning from his students – watching for signs that some of the activities were working/not working – needed adjustments, tweaking.

Research and colleagues play a significant role in this learning.

Christopher is an enthusiastic, independent learner – asked to describe an environment that would represent an ideal professional learning environment for him, he replied:

“It wouldn’t be too dissimilar to this room (he looked around and put his arms out to his side, motioning the walls and bulletin boards) to see how I like to learn this way – I like to be surrounded by books. I like . . . pens and paper, and the ability to write stuff down – scribble – scribble notes. . . I like having information at my fingertips. I like in some ways – I like nature. . I like to fix. . . ahhh. . . solitude. . I like historical artifacts around me – a comfy char. Sometimes I have music on. . .”

At another point he re-iterated that statement – “ I like a lot of visuals – I like things hanging up. I like to be surrounded by books. I have to feel like they’re comforting and soft – and they’re homey. I don’t know. I look at my computer as necessary for my
learning – I need access to unlimited information. I think I need a nice combination between books and old technology and – like – up to date stuff, like computers and television.’

His personal planning approach, he described as involving a lot of writing (‘write, write, write), but that he worked in spurts – getting up and moving around; percolating his thinking – processing a bit and then getting back to it and writing, writing, writing. He also talked about getting things done – he may move around, write, reflect, and think and write some more – but he indicated that at the end of the day, he wanted to have his goal met – design a lesson for example.

Christopher reminded me of Barbara Chellis in that he talked about using the summers as a means of refreshing his enthusiasm for teaching – for soaking himself in some new learning idea – visiting National Parks, visiting Presidents’ homes, going to Greece to dig among antiquities – and coming back excited to be working with students again. These things he talked about as the need to kind of get his ‘hands dirty’ (my words).

A few times in the interview aspects of the problem statement, stresses associated with the ABE field, came up in the discussion:

- While he really values the his colleagues and relies on them a lot – one of the most and reaching out more to them (still working on this – and moving out of being so independent)

- No administrative expectation that he should be reflective in his practice – “I haven’t been asked to reflect in my position as a GED teacher really. Probably because of my position being hourly and not-contractual. I think it’s just like – ‘here, you’re a part-time, hourly teacher, you know; we’re glad you’re hear. Which is kind of less work for me, but I need to do – I’m not acting that way. I’m here six hours a day every day and teaching the same students every day, so I still have to know what’s successful and what’s not.

- He talked about the ever-changing nature of the environment (implications that learning challenges continually occur?): “I also have different students every year – I don’t have the same little robots. It’s a different group every year – and students have different needs. I have students with different backgrounds. My interests have changed – usually again because of something I’ve done over the summer or as the result of something I’m doing right then. So I want to teach what I’m enthusiastic about.”

What is the underlying meaning?

Creative aspects of the work are important - like curriculum development – Christopher seemed to be always looking to differentiate learning for his students by developing materials. He liked being the manager of his own and his students’ learning space – and enjoyed and valued his colleagues, research, and delving into new enthusiasms. His
episodes of learning seemed to be rather continual, short bursts of activity that always resulted in a product he could use – a manual, thematic packets – with students. He learned from students and used their feedback and that of colleagues to continually refine his products. The question of whether he would spend more time in individual episodes – if he were full time might be interesting to consider – but he surely didn’t seem to find his environment constraining – though he brought up issues of the ABE field (problem statement) such as part-time teachers aren’t expected to be reflective?? Being paid hourly, part-time, etc. He indicated that he didn’t respond to the limited hours and work that way – but was more dedicated than the part-time nature of his work would indicate. All of his learning episodes, however, appeared to be directed at developing materials for students that were at the appropriate level – and were developed because other materials were not successful. Listening to Chris, it sounded like he was continually engaged in short episodes that occurred throughout the year – but together may be seen as a larger goal of providing motivating, enriching learning activities to students that met their interests, readiness, and a kind of multiple-intelligence-type approach. Lots of small episodes of learning – but with an overarching design to improve instructional materials to meet the individual needs of students.
Appendix J

Memorandum: Emma

Emma

What is it about?

Emma knows what she’s about – is reflecting on her work, her role, her interactions with others, and likes to be able to manage and control her own learning. She is an interesting combination of “the lone wolf” and the team-player.

Emma described a very straightforward, kind of linear learning process that she seems to apply generally in solving work-related problems and in conducting her own learning.

Emma described a learning project that occurred when she was asked to take on the position of managing the Transition Program Grant at her adult ed program. She had no background or training in adult education or public school education, but had training in the judiciary process and worked as a victim’s advocate and a courtroom administrator. She also developed a product to assist translation services (24 hours, 7 days a week) for courtrooms which she developed as a product with A.T. & T. She was first hired for an after-school coordinator for a 21st Century After-School Program position when no other suitable candidate applied (she was initially turned down for the job). But she enjoyed the “small, part-time work that was right around the corner from her home,” and the director recommended she speak with the personnel officer to see about additional work in the program. Replying that she could write – grants, etc., - she was hired to manage the Transition Program.

No one at the program site, not the director, or program staff knew anything about the Transitions Program – but she was handed the grant and given free reign to set-up and manage the program. She said that she “applied my corporate management skills, while the other coordinators were educators, and I think there’s a big difference between educating and managing a project.” She understood the product-deliverable-timeline constraints associated with the grant and felt that she and the work were a “good fit”.

“I approached this just like I approached project management for AT&T. Number one, you have to understand the work. So I took the grant and all of the files associated with it at Adult Ed – they had a file called “Transitions Program”. So I read from the RFP, to the award letter, and the grant. I read the entire grant and said ‘okay, what are the deliverables? What is the product that I’m supposed to create?’ She identified key people from the grant who were knowledgeable about the program model, the research, and the grant and got on the phone over the weekend and started calling people – to answer a list of questions she had pulled out from the grant and the file. “I made a list of people to call. I didn’t get any help whatsoever in Adult Ed because no one knew about it. No one had a clue.” “I approached everything methodologically.”
She spent a month reviewing the grant, conducting research, developing questions, and tracking down and speaking with experts on transition services and the transition model. She visited the ABE transitions site – done some research and some practices on the site. She created a spreadsheet (and still had aspects of her plan on her board in her office, which she pointed out to me – the list of things she needed to do and when). She created a project plan – and went to the community college and met with the Transitions Department staff and established a good professional relationship with them for recruitment and resource sharing. “So through my questions, and knocking on doors, and just saying, ‘Hi, I’m Emma and I don’t know what I’m doing so I need some help’, people were very responsive – outside of my own Adult Ed community, people were very responsive to me.’

She described other aspects of her project – not only getting a good handle on what the service model was supposed to be, but in redefining the population she would seek that better aligned with the purpose of the grant. This program, unlike all the other services at Adult Ed, were focused on individuals who had a high school diploma. All other Adult Ed services addressed students who had not graduated from high school – as a result, her local colleagues were unprepared to be of much help to her. In fact, Emma claimed that program materials, such as the intake form, were based on their other services and weren’t suitable for the Transitions Program. So she had to redesign and develop many of her own materials.

It was clear that she defined her learning environment broadly and found little in her immediate program location to help her. She uses a criteria for the people she involves in her own learning – that they are ‘experts’ with a lot of experience in the work that she does (“looking for professionals who have a great deal more experience than I do – someone I can learn from – someone’s who gone through the work. Someone who is really seeped in the content – Like the folks at World Ed who are engaged in the research, working with students in classrooms, reflecting on their work – writing about their experiences”).

Emma also talked about the political and broader adult ed field’s impact on her work – “The sad thing about this job is that I never know from year-to-year where it’s going to go, when it’s going to end, and what’s – what’s ultimately – what’s also challenging for me is – is – like now, in education, adult education, people are always talking about credentials, not what you can do, but about credentials. The first question someone always asks me is ‘what’s your ed credential?’ And I’d wish that they’d ask what have you done lately, what have you delivered lately? What have you done – and what are your accomplishments? Well, when I say I don’t have an ed credential, the conversation stops, you know, and that’s frustrating.”

She also spoke about her being able to manage and control her own learning: “I want the freedom to determine my own environment. I have been really frustrated when I am expected to go to professional development about classroom and curriculum development when I don’t work in the classroom. I want to choose what I want to go to and do for my own professional learning – and to choose what I don’t want to go to a particular
workshop. Go to a workshop that focuses on classroom strategies? Equipment and technology – classroom tools? I don’t want to go to those kinds of workshops. But when there’s a workshop on retention strategies, I want to be able to take advantage of that workshop. I want to be able to control – to choose what workshops I go to. I want to be able to choose what I spend my time on – on what I determine is valuable to me in a sense of my own learning. I want to control my own learning opportunities – and determine what I want to spend my time on. I want the time I spend on my professional learning to be valuable.”

Emma is a good example of the findings that Robin Grenier discussed in her study of museum docents – that they used the formal professional development to provide them with content but it wasn’t until they started working and applying that content that they learning actually began. Emma spoke a lot about applying knowledge as a means of coming to grips with what she had been taught in formal learning activities. Emma claimed that 80% of her learning occurred informally: “I can honestly say that the learning I received in the formal learning environment – I haven’t really learned anything in the formal learning environment. Have I learned about a specific body of knowledge? Yes. Have – because I’ve had to learn about a specific body of knowledge because it was part of my career path many, many years ago – I had to know a body of knowledge associated with working with the court system. I had to know about the court administration model. But my real learning about the tenets of the law and the tenets of justice occurred in the informal setting of the court house. It occurred when I interacted with judges, attorneys, public defenders, clients, in the nature of the court house. It created a framework – a reference for how to deal with issues and material, the body of knowledge that I gained in the formal learning environment. The informal environment, though, is where all my real learning became actualized. The formal learning, don’t get me wrong, it was fascinating. It provided me with genuine information. But my own real learning was sharpened – made sense – in the nature of the court house. To me – that was real learning because it had a genuine impact on me personally. What I did in the real learning – within its natural context – I’d say 80% of my learning was form the informal, the context of doing the work. Because what I was doing had real impact – you could practice the work, reflect on it – and continue to develop your knowledge. I had really great mentors – people who really helped me develop my skills on the job. All of my learning occurred in the context of the job. . .So now, again, it’s time for me to learn again to use the environment and my experiences in the environment provides me with the understanding of the adult education field – so I’m learning again in an informal environment.”

Besides Robin’s work, Emma gives a great example of Kornell & Metcalfe’s study – in terms of how much effort she put into mastering material. “Recognize that you have finite resources – Understanding what your funding organization is expecting of you – taking a look at the grants lets you know what you need to understand. As a self-directed learner, I’m going to devote 75% of my time understanding what the grant outlines for me – and I spend 25% furthering the research. I have questions that I want to answer. I’m going to print out ten articles – not a hundred – but ten articles that are exactly what I’m looking for. If you don’t find what you are looking for in the articles you have – knowing
where to go for the right kinds of articles that will get you the information that you need. There’s a part of me that wants to keep looking and looking till I find the answer – but the practical part of me knows that I have limited time to spend to get to the bottom of things. You need to know how to research efficiently to get you the answers you need in as expeditious a manner as possible.”

**What is the underlying meaning?**

What does all this mean, really? Emma is has a self-aware, logical, methodical approach to her learning and solving work-related problems. She uses the experience of work for her learning and reflection and is very goal oriented. She talked about a number of different kinds of problems she addressed – overcoming poor retention rates, relating to the 1199 learner population by understanding more about union loyalties, etc. – by turning them into learning projects and building her foundational knowledge, her mental schema about the work. She learned by talking with experts a lot – and she had a clear definition of what constituted an expert to her. She often felt that because the work she was doing was so distinctly unique from her own program peers – that she had to go outside to find experts. She visited program sites and had administrators from other states come and visit her program. She connected with peers in other states and created a professional learning community so that they could get their answers met; share trends, data and research; and be part of a bigger conversation than she would be able to have at her local site.

She was an active, self-directed learner that dedicated every Friday (her own expense) by delving into international adult education, trying to get a better understanding of international models, and forces that would be impacting immigrating students. In most of her learning projects, she was entirely goal-driven. But in this case, she was dedicating a significant amount of time learning for its own sake – and she was enthusiastic about it and committed to expanding her knowledge for its own sake. Maybe, she suggested, it would be helpful to her program to understand what immigrant students are dealing with in their native countries – but that was not the primary driver for her sustained engagement in this learning. Again, she was very methodical in her approach – researching, finding online communities, talking with others, reading trend literature.

She also was someone who enjoyed being able to control her work and her learning. She described herself as a lone wolf, but enjoying working with experts and those who could really share expertise with her. In the end, she said, “so we go to conferences, come in contact with others who have similar different experiences – but after the conference, we go our own separate ways – even though I take some of the information, insight, from them with me.”

She sees her learning environment as involving everything – students, colleagues, resources, experts from everywhere, research, data! And spoke about the constraints of her immediate environment, in that she was running a program that was entirely different than the other service models of her organization – and no one, not even the director, had any insight about how the program should operate. She liked being able to manage this –
though, just like managing and controlling her own learning. She talked about how her colleagues had a hard time accepting her different philosophy – and she spoke about the difference between cultures at work – an educational and business one. The social caring component – but the need to teach people to read, to meet objectives and to produce results.
Appendix K

Memorandum: Grace

Grace

What is it about?

It was difficult to tease out an actual learning project from Grace’s narrative. She talked a lot about sustained and intentional activities to develop materials and curriculum for her class which included planning, research, development, and evaluation – but I found myself wondering if this was just the way she went about resolving classroom challenges, versus learning projects that were meant to improve her proficiency? The work she undertook on her own improved her classroom practice – so I am including her intentional efforts at developing classroom resources as her individual learning projects. Again, she undertook series projects throughout the year – and it appeared to be fairly active and consistent. For example, she spoke about students test-taking performance as a triggering event which made her think about and analyze what they were getting wrong. She talked to students (“But if I talked with them, and you said, did you know… they’d say, ‘oh yeah’”) and ultimately identified the problem as a vocabulary one. She didn’t think that they really understood the vocabulary. Another thing they lacked, she determined from their conversations and test results, was that they had little foundational knowledge – a common problem for adults who cannot read well. She decided to develop an interdisciplinary curriculum that would include social studies, American history, novels, and daily news events.

After identifying the problem and determining that she was going to build vocabulary and foundational knowledge, she talked with the lead teacher – about finding suitable resources that was very specific – particularly about current world crisis – what’s going on in the world today as preparation for their GED exam. She refused to use the books and resources that were on hand because she thought they were outdated, stereotyped adult learners, and were of a limited mindset. She researched and brought in materials that she thought were more suitable – and included high level questions. After using the materials, she thought that the higher order thinking skill-focus was too challenging – and she is going back and re-introducing the material. She started to incorporate teaching reading comprehension strategies as well. She looked at a lot of different reading programs as she was developing her material – and developed some reader-response and text-connected questions and prompts. She developed a rubric to help students know what they needed to be able to do – and provided practice developing their own questions.

In the process of developing her material and curriculum binder – she exclaimed that “I would try everything that I might use – I might go to someone who – here, there are two teachers I would go to – one is especially good with learning disabilities. . .I would go to somebody.” She said she would ask them for feedback on the approach she was using – and talk about what she was trying to accomplish. She indicated a few people she works
with have given her reading material that has been helpful. She brings students into her planning and development activities – “I would talk with them about what and why they think they can’t – what they think the problem is – and so I’d ask the student specifically.”

Asked how she evaluates whether something is really working well, she said that she uses testing – “or if you’re just working with someone – you ask a simple question, you know pretty much as soon as – you know, they’re getting it or not getting it. You can ask them to demonstrate – to show me that they understand.”

Again, she described herself as a planner, but was unable to be very articulate about what goes into her planning process – “Well, probably the first thing is – you have to know, like, where you’re trying to go – what you are trying to – accomplish. You have to know what they can do and then you need to figure what the difference is between what they know and what they can accomplish. And you try to develop steps to try to get them there.”

She also developed a curriculum binder on multi-cultural, diversity education – with stories and articles that she researched and put together, with surveys, and questions, Conversation prompts – she also developed a curriculum binder about work – using real life materials – insurance materials, plans, compensation programs, etc., and put them in her binder with copies of associated reading materials that were appropriate for their reading levels and areas of interest.

In terms of professional development, she reported that most of it wasn’t particularly helpful (“some of the professional development is terrible”) – and she reported on a woman that presented a workshop that was not well-received and conveyed a message that was bothersome to her and her colleagues – not to get involved with their students. To which she responded: “They need something – ‘I got this bill in the mail’; what does it mean?’ You have to say – this is what you have to do. (A colleague) sees this all the time. You have to spend time helping students figure things out. You have to sit down and help them figure it out, you know. Really – we’re working with students with needs. How can you not get involved? Yes. Don’t get involved. I have to get involved. If they don’t see us as being willing to help – they come to school, they need help. If I can help them in any way I do.”

In terms of the environment, she indicated that their program supervisor is one that promotes and supports their professional learning. They use her as a learning facilitator and feel confident that if they make a case for why some professional development activity would be helpful, they are able to attend and be compensated for their efforts. Grace also is comfortable reaching out to folks beyond her normal work environment – when she was developing her integrated reading/social studies curriculum, she reached out to a “very good friend here in town who I know is an excellent teacher and a person who I highly regard and we talked at length about the problem and what to do. . .And there was this one lady, I love her, she’s Dr. MS, she was the director of curriculum at (a nearby school district). She was so bright and smart, and so giving of her time. She was
wonderful – a very positive influence on me – got me really thinking in terms of the
different – the ways we used to teach – she was going to review my curriculum. . .she
was a big influence on me.”

Grace was also interesting in that she reflected about her own history of education and
learning and used what she had learned to improve her practice – she practiced strategies
that she was teaching to her students and continued to use them herself.

In her personal life, she also shared two different learning projects – one that involved the
use of a learning journal and history of what she learned and decisions she made about
gardening. She had a lot of these sustained periods of connected episodes that she used to
resolve challenges and to develop skills – to become a better gardener and to be able to
manage her small business better. She was consistent in undertaking these similar
sustained efforts in improving the materials she was able to use with her students in the
adult education program.

**What is the underlying meaning?**

Grace had a lot of public school teaching history, but was in only her second year in adult
education, which may explain why she was focusing her efforts on having suitable
curriculum and learning how to pace and modify her materials. She had very definite
ideas about teaching that reflected her practice – but might not translate well to adults,
though she hadn’t seemed to make that connection or realization yet. For example, she
indicated that she had been reprimanded the year before regarding the reading program
she was developing. Her focus on foundational knowledge, vocabulary, and higher
thinking skills would seem to make sense for students at the adult secondary education
level – but it may have been out of sync with what students needed to be able to know
and do for the GED test. Grace still seemed to be a bit stung by the review and was trying
to improve her own understanding of the adult reading challenge. She asked – and
attended – the prescriptive reading program professional training workshop, which is
designed to teach adult educators about adult reading strategies, but was still at odds with
the approach and the text that was being used, believing that a program being used in the
public schools was better.

I appreciated that she used her own learning experiences to reflect upon what might be
happening with some of her students and spoke about teaching them strategies that she
had found effective for her. She said she still finds herself practicing the same skills as
she teaches her students.

Grace mentioned working as a collaborative learning partner – having others go to the
same workshops together so that they could reinforce one another; in fact, Grace often
seemed to use and seek colleagues out to ‘confirm’ and validate her thinking, but, at the
same time, she seemed somewhat flexible and able to take different perspectives into
account.
It’s interesting to think about the different kinds of learning focus between more experienced and newer ABE teachers. There is a lot of creative work being spent on developing curricula – but this is often presented in light of the need to differentiate instruction, which is provided in very small groups, or one-to-one. Grace was one teacher who indicate that she liked being able to teach to a small group – versus the one-on-one model that is more typically used at her program site because of the different perspectives, the richer dialogue, and the opportunity for students to teach one another – something I think she seems to appreciate for her own learning.
Appendix L

Memorandum: Isabella

Isabella

What is it about?

Isabella is an active learner who meets Houle’s description of someone who loves to learn for its own sake! She described herself as a “planner” – and easily bored if she was teaching new things. “Because all my life I’ve planned. I’m an absolute type-A personality. You know, a concrete, sequential kind of girl.” Asked to describe her planning process in detail though, she still struggled to put words to her actions. Finally, near the latter half of the interview, Isabella reported that her planning process involved: “If I ever showed you the papers I have – (laughing) – I’ve got everything, well, for the ESL, not so much. But for the others – for the others, the two highs and lows, I – I plan out the year. I go from sort of the – the big – down to the more and more – sectioned off, all right. I have like a flow chart – let’s call it that. I usually do a flow chart for the year. This class, I’m going to these books that I’ve got. Papers and papers, you know, all different types that give me the flow charts. But like each year we get new books, different books – it doesn’t work; it does – so I’ll be revising those this summer, too. But, you know, I do it in that way. I need an overview. I always have to have the overview first of all, and then, go down to the parts.”

Another example of planning a learning project that she conducted on how to teach World War II to her GED students: “Well, the thing is – back in my old life – (laughing) – I – I had created a – a unit where I . . . hmmm . . . where I had a list A to Z. Let’s put it this way. This is how I managed it with the – the gifted kids. I had just looked up World War II stuff in the past and I came up with an A to Z listing of people – of people, places, things from the Axis Powers down to Zyclone B-Gas, you know, the one used in the gas chambers. And when I was – the jig long ago, I had this huge list from A to Z, but then – I – I had another sheet that I had created that had categories, like – ah – Hitler’s beliefs, ah – Hitler’s – ahhh – creations, etc. and important battles. So I had categories that then I would have them – before, you know – just on their own, in class with partners and such, try to put this A to Z list under the different – oh, oh – then I know it would be very hard. So, if I had like military battles, or something, I would have it alphabetically. The answers would be underneath – there would be blanks, but the first letter would be given to that so that they could, you know, otherwise it would have been really hard. So that’s how we used to learn it. So I had all this information to begin with – but, again, this was just, you know, part – part of what I ultimately put in the World War II – but I began with this, and so I knew that I wanted to cover certain military things – and – and – just found out when they took place, and did it chronologically. Of course, the people were introduced at the beginning. The causes and then the people – ahhmmm – good guys, bad guys, etc.”
She talked about building on this World War II project as something she wanted to use for her GED class, but hasn’t started to use it yet.

Her planning she said included background research, investigation to find out what’s already known – then determines her goal, her overall goal – and the audience. Then she determines the transportation method – how she intends to convey the material. What method, she said, would be the subject “justice”.

Isabella had over 33 years of teaching experience and speaks several languages, and worked for several years with gifted and talented students at the high school level.

She shared a learning project that she undertook years before – developing a poetry book – two volumes to use for teaching purposes. She described spending two years on the project and reading every book of poetry she could find – again using a list and categorizing system.

She developed a volume of Bible expressions for her ESL group, spending hours and hours of on-line work, typing up and finding materials. She found someone to help her set-up a computer software program that would help her search Bible expressions – she created over 172 expressions – ones that are common to our culture. She broke them down into categories of 25 sets, and created pre- and post-tests.

Asked how she knows when she has finished a project – she spoke about being “saturated” Isabella explained: “I’m not a social studies person, but I – I really felt that for an English (laughing) person – truly – that I had exhausted what I would want to put in there. It – it – it just felt complete. I would – I would research and I – you know – there was nothing new that I was coming up with. I mean – I - you know – it would repeat things I already had. I mean – I seem to – I thought that I had exhausted all that I wanted to put in there. I mean anything more – I truly – it would have been beyond the beyond, I mean. There’s a place to stop and I knew it. I knew I had to stop somewhere (she was laughing at this point).

I think that a lot of Isabella’s creative curriculum materials develop starts with her enthusiasm for the subject and material and her desire to hook her students in similar ways. She is motivated by her desire to be always excited about her work – and teaching. She described herself as being born to teach – and shared a story of lining children up in her neighborhood and playing school with them at the youngest of ages. And that she herself excelled in school and loved learning.

**What is the underlying meaning?**

I think Isabella’s own enthusiasm and desire to delve deeply into subject matter is a large driver in her work. She has dedicated enormous hours and energy to developing curriculum resources that she thinks will be useful in motivating students’ learning – students of all ages. She has devoted extensive hours to learning projects – one collection
of poetry took two years to produce and her school spent $1,000 to copy and reproduce the texts for use at the school.

Isabella likes to seek others out – when she was struggling with her first ESL class this year, which she was asked to take on after the school year began – and obtained course materials and a general curriculum outline from experienced, expert ESL instructors (at her adult ed program and at a local high school). She copied materials and sought out online resources, as well. She expressed a disappointment in not thinking that she was suitably prepared for the class and struggled quite a bit – and is intending to spend time over the summer planning and getting ready to work with them in the Fall. She engages others, when she is stuck – seeks out experts. She is an avid user of technology – decided she wanted to learn how to use power point for her history unit with her adult ed students, and invested significant time working with others to master the technology well enough to do what she wanted to do.

She spoke about professional development that was not particularly suitable to her and indicated that she hasn’t had an opportunity to go to a professional conference yet, but would like to. She felt that she had sufficient resources for her own learning, but did mention “camaraderie” as something she missed. And a “full-fledged” conference. But she is an interesting example of a self-directed learning who loves learning and, as she said to me, whether I get to use these materials or not – it’s been a joy to develop them.
Appendix M

Memorandum: James

James

What is it about?

James presents an interesting paradox: he has significant teaching experience in the younger grades (middle school – 6th grade social studies for 35 years) but is in only his second year of adult ed. He believes the skills of teaching from intermediate school transfer readily (“the skills that you have as a regular teacher obviously transfer over”). The other paradox is that he does a great deal of learning projects on his own – driven by his own curiosity and they seem to follow an interesting pattern – reminded me of the research approach in the book The Lost: A Search for Six Among Six Million – mostly serendipitous – putting himself in a position to have things happen serendipitously – like his learning project that involved his trip to Germany. His father had spent time at the close of the war, during the occupation of Germany, in a southern town on the Austria border and developed an unusual friendship with a German dentist. James wanted to find this gentleman and learn more about his father’s experience in Germany at that time and learn more about the relationship from the German’s perspective. He packed his family up and traveled to the town and started sharing photographs and asking questions. One person in a restaurant finally recognized the picture and name – said the dentist had been dead for a while – but that the man’s son was still practicing dentistry in town! James went to the gentleman’s office and got to see him and share photographs. But the son of his father’s friend was not friendly, open, or forthcoming. James found the house and took video of it for his father and then proceeded, on his return, to tell him more stories about his experiences – including the fact that the dentist had done the bridge work on Churchill’s teeth. James contacted a London curator of a show on dental work and Churchill’s own! But found out that the story was inaccurate. This was quite an extraordinary journey that took up significant time and expense – and was all done for his own interest.

As for as his teaching goes, he only shared one experience where he developed a binder for students to discern their learning styles and interests; he developed a series of questionnaires – that he said he researched and pulled different things together, re-wrote the material to make it user-friendly and tried it out with his students. He said feedback from his students indicated that they enjoyed using the tools and finding more out about themselves as learners.

James related several learning episodes – that built upon one another as a matter of research – he talked about being interested in (town street) – researching the street name and finding that Charles Dickens had visited (the town) and declared this street as one of the most beautiful streets in the world – not just the U. S., James noted. He conducted research about Dickens’s visit – the book he wrote and is still searching for an original printing of the book. He traveled to London to visit Dickens’s home, as well.
It is clear that there is a lot of research related to his own learning and the projects he undertook on his own – but he doesn’t relate many that he has done for his class.

He seems to be very independent in his own learning – and only indicated near the end of the interview that when he was first hired, a more experienced adult math educator coached him – sharing materials, visiting and observing his instruction, and having James observe his work. He also spoke of a woman upstairs working with GED math who provided resources and assisted him when he was first starting out.

On a scale of 1 – 10, with 10 being the highest, James rated the professional learning environment to be a 7 or 8; he said that teachers have an opportunity to go to conferences (he went to the state’s LD conference for adults), professional development activities are held at his site; teachers meet every two weeks and discuss issues and challenges – share resources, etc. He said that their program supervisor had given them an opportunity to meet separately by program-service type, that being the GED teachers could meet as their own group separately, the EDP folks, ESL folks, etc., but that the teachers turned the offer down saying that they preferred to meet together for the sharing opportunities.

James also talked about the part-time nature of the work – and the different attitudes that exist in the field – wanting to help give folks another chance – but complaining that some folks come year after year without seeming to get much out of the classes and take up the seat of someone who could take better advantage of the learning. His attitude represents many in the field – and indicates that the learning environment for adult students can be a bit ambiguous. For example, he indicated a challenge for him was in teaching fractions to students with very low math skills – saying it was difficult for him to teach what he wasn’t sure folks would really need or use! How often in real life, he wondered, do we really have to know how to multiply and divide by fractions? This caused him to be someone uncommitted, or so it sounded to me, about his curriculum. He talked about his own uncertainties about the field of adult ed and particularly the challenges associated with working with adults with basic skills.

It seemed to me that James was still struggling to come into his own as an adult educator – he talked a lot about reflecting on his own experiences – and said, for example, that he thought he was a good choice for teaching mathematics to beginning adult students because he had been a math phobe himself and could understand what they were struggling with. He justified his view by implying that as this was a basic math course, he really didn’t need to know too much more than the students. . .staying just a few steps ahead. But that he could understand their frustrations. He talked about using the negative experiences he had in education – “and there’s probably more negative than there are positive – and I try to keep that in mind.”

James said he didn’t feel constrained by the environment – but talked about the environment as being constraining – people worked part-time, they were isolated in their classrooms – some aspects of the program were “separated from each other. I mean, as far as physical environment is concerned, I mean, I don’t see the GED group at all,
except maybe at a workshop. I mean, they’re upstairs in their own little corner, so we are. . kind of. . and, you know, we don’t eat lunch together. We don’t have breaks together, so, I mean, it’s kind of difficult to, you know, and then, of course, I do have a . . I’m a part-time person.”

The Internet and technology were his primary sources for gaining knowledge, developing materials, and researching his areas of interest. He indicated that he had worked to overcome his initial resistance to using the technology – preferring the library at first – but finally, over a summer, determined to teach himself how to use technology for his own needs. He indicated that he just ‘jumped’ in and started trying things out – but that his sons gave him some help as well. He was much more of a loner in tackling his learning experiences – but that may well have been because he was still knew and dealing with individualizing his resources. He doesn’t teach small classes, but individualizes all of the material for the 7 – 8 students he has at any one time in his classroom.

*What is the underlying meaning?*

There’s evidence that he has a rather serendipitous way of going about his learning, though it is very research-focused. He researches, reads, follows up on leads – travels and puts himself in a place to pursue his own learning – wherever it will take him – “one thing just kind of leads to another. . .” and, “I planned to go to Germany”, and “I hadn’t really intended to get into Dickens.”

He was interesting in that he conducted these extensive and sustained learning projects that addressed his own curiosities – but had much more difficulty in trying to explain or explore whether he did any kind of similar thing as related to the professional environment. He didn’t talk about the extended, sustained research he did on his own as being transferred to his work in the adult ed classroom. I found myself wondering if some of his perspective was the fact that he really saw his position as really ‘part-time’ and still new – though he had confidence that his experiences as a teacher in the public schools didn’t constitute suitable background – though he acknowledged that he was a bit surprised that he was invited back a second year. He worked at individualizing material for his students – finding math websites that would provide additional instruction or approaches that were different than he was able to do in class. He also indicated that he didn’t teach a small classroom group – discussion – but had individual packets that students did on their own. He did develop a project – a binder, that adults could use to get an understanding of their learning style and he could uncover some of their interests.

James was an interesting mix – saying that he wasn’t constrained by the environment – then describing in more detail than others (so far) about how folks were located in different parts of the building – no central location for staff to get together – that everyone that was part time didn’t have lunch together; etc. It was interesting that he held these two different views in his mind.

I found myself wondering how programs can inculcate a stronger sense of a unified understanding of principles about adult learning that everyone would know – be aware of
and be committed to. There was such interesting insight in his struggle with coming to grips with the limits of the program model – considering who was an appropriate learner, for example, and who wasn’t – who was taking up seats that could be better used by other students. I often felt, as a program director, that this was something new teachers grappled with more than experienced teachers. Would be interesting to see if there’s a difference – but in interviewing a colleague of James, I heard an entirely different take on these things – he had much more experience teaching adults and had developed an entire curriculum for struggling math students that I understand James uses.
Appendix N

Memorandum: Mia

Mia

What is it about?

Mia has had a lot of different and interesting teaching experiences that have helped her understand her role and the profession from different perspectives – having scored BEST portfolios, for example, getting an on-line ESL certification; teaching reading in the elementary grades – reading the same books as her children in order to be able to talk with them about their reading and practice comprehension strategies. She’s taking on a new role of professional developer in the adult education field.

She talked a lot about how she solved challenges – including the organization of an ESL classroom by sustained, intentional efforts that incorporated her colleagues in her efforts. For example, she was tutoring in a teacher’s classroom Mrs. A.), who was “having a hard time.” So Mia was tutoring to see what was going on and whether there was something that could be done – given that the school district had no additional money to address this rather undefined challenge. In the process, Mia worked to get her ESL certificate online and used the tutoring experience as an opportunity to get classroom practice with a supervised teacher, as well. Mia determined that the lessons needed better structure – she said she was observed by an experienced peer, and used CMT score results (6th year class). So Mia searched and found resources for Mrs. A., web sites that would help, and she began trying things out in the classroom. She explained her planning process – getting to the program with sufficient time before class to get as much planning done for the few days she was tutoring – and met with Mrs. A. so they could determine some sort of structure for the learning activities, to understand what the lesson would look like being delivered in the class – and determine what they wanted the lessons to accomplish. Over the course of the improvement period, Mia and Mrs. A. team-taught; observing one another; trying new things out – they decided to join classes (the whole class and the group being tutored). Some students, she explained, needed small group work to develop background knowledge that was necessary for them to work in the full group. “I really like the whole team-teaching aspect of adult education. Again, I taught classes with mixed level, so, we could really target the needs of students and we could move them back and forth, you know, if a new student didn’t respond in reading – they should be in one area – but again, it’s differentiation.” So they did small groups with “non-speakers”, conversation groups with the really high level students.

Mia spoke a lot about blending formal with supplemental, self-directed and sustained learning activities. One learning project she described grew out of a presentation by Tom Sticht about the mega-skills approach developed by Dorothy Rich. Mia and a colleague who attended the workshop determined that this was something that would be very helpful with their family literacy program, and as a result inaugurated a learning project focused on presenting a workshop with colleagues. Part of the trigger for this event was
the desire of her program administrators to take full advantage of Tom’s workshop and have participants develop a follow-up activity. “I put together a workshop with another . . . ahhhh . . . she’s a consultant with the State Department, leader-in-residence with the Department of Education. She works primarily with secondary reform that’s going on. She’s been working with us with the Family Literacy program that we have, and we needed to do a workshop for our Family Literacy people that they would come to see, and we decided to take something we learned from Tom Sticht, which was the Mega-skills with Dorothy Rich. We took that and basically made some comparisons with the 21st Century Skills to see how these mega-skills related and actually found they were the same thing, and how we could use that, you know, with parents, children, and then families. And you know, obviously you could also apply them to adult education and how it all fits together and how important it is. And we developed the entire workshop.”

“It was a blast,” Mia continued. “We just – we were on the same – we had the same enthusiasm for it. We were – ahhhhh – that’s how I think I learn. I totally prefer – I’m probably one who likes to do things independently and then work with someone to share the information in – you know – to start putting things together. How should we go about this part? Does this make sense? Is this okay? Should we go in that direction? I really like to – ahhhhm – like when I took an online course for the ESL to get my ESL certificate, just to have that – ahhhhm – I took that one class for the year – adult ed/ESL certificate? And I took that online – and I kind of felt that I just had to do it. So I didn’t want to have an interest (laughs) – I was good with just experiencing it for the sake of doing it, get the grade that I needed to get, and just move on. . . This situation was a little bit to do with Tom – I had a group, you know, there was a group of us, the family literacy group, that was working together. . . in their evaluations talking about wanting to know more about Dorothy Rich and her mega-skills, because we are using some of that – we had them looking at Merloni books and finding those mega-skills within and how you could teach using those books. And at first, (teacher) and I were thinking of trying to connect – we wanted to make sure there was a connection between that workshop and the second workshop that we were doing, so we were sure going to have that workshop here and in doing that we wanted to make sure that we related back to – we didn’t just want to pull something new out of the hat. We wanted to relate back to the previous workshop we did. So first we were looking at, you know, Merloni and focusing on, kind of like, readers’ response and trying to throw writing in there and all of that. And kind of working through that and thought we had a plan – and we brought it to the group. They - we had some discussions around that cause we also had the mega-skills book and we kind of had that there, as well. But it was all kind of like pieces, there wasn’t any full development of anything and – through (colleague), we got the book. Cone copy came in and we started to go through it – we just got really excited. So then, as a group, it kind of – that’s what the focus became. So, how can we still do readers’ response and those types of things that were in this book (showed me a copy of the book she was referring to) and connect it to what’s happening in the state and the country as far as 21st Century Skills, because that’s the terms that we are hearing now. And so (the consultant) is in the thick of it – with the secondary reform going on – we just started to – that’s why we started to develop that – so and it was a lot of back and forth. We would discuss, we would . . . ahhhhm – you know, how about this part? And then, you know, we would put – we also
shared this excitement about this material, and then (MN), her feeling was – cause she
was a retired teacher, administrator – all of those things. She was really – we’ve been
through this before – so she was around for a long time – 12 to 15 years – and I know that
someone else in the building was saying that she remembers having – doing some sorts of
things with her program many, many years ago.”

She continued with her learning project: “We showed the mega-skills, you know, we
talked about mega-skills, and then said how relevant it was to the things going on with
CT education in general. And ahhh the Commissioner had done – which we found online
– his power point in highlighting 21st Century skills in CT. And we also found he had
made points about – ahhmmm – specifically how there were a couple of points
specifically related to adult education and overall – workplace and job skills training,
which is very important o ahhmmm adult education and family literacy, as well. So then
– instead of us making – you know, connections – we basically said, ‘lets take the job
skills and tell us what mega-skills match with those. And they can come to their own
conclusions – you know, they would match them, but then at the end, many in the group
said you need all of these mega-skills to be – to have 21st Century – they all kind of fit
with each other. Then, it was more giving them a chance to take a – really discover the
book themselves like we had. We gave them points of interest that we wanted to make
sure they touched base on – then we did a – ahhmmm – ha them participate in readers’
response where they kind of went around in a circle and they each had different kinds of
sticky notes – so they would read a – we would select a passage for them to read, which
was all related to skills that had to do with jobs – specific jobs that had these mega-skills.
And then they responded and they passed it to the next person who then responded to
their response. To model that for them, we did a kind of rigorous response via e-mail with
each other. Which was challenging because you’re going to tell them that you can do it if
you really - it was probably going to work better as a chat room or a blog situation but - I
sent out the first e-mail to everybody. And then they – then we decided that didn’t work.
So then I sent out an e-mail to (HS)’s program, she would respond to me, then she would
send it to the next person without two responses, and then it came back to me – so those
three I used as an example for the group –ahhmmm – we had an example of readers’
responses. We were looking for them to do. And then to connect to families, we talked
about how could you use this with children? How could you use this strategy with adults?
How about the family? Ahhmmm – you know, and then they were excited to find out that
they were getting more goodies after – the book. So, we really had a good time with it.”

What is the underlying meaning?

Mia was a very active reflective learner who drew upon a great deal of her experiences
for understanding and refining her approach to her work. Asked if she thought that adult
educators had time and the skills to reflect on their practice as a means of developing
their skills, responded, “The time factor I could agree with (they don’t have enough time,
I told her some researchers have argued) – the ability? I think that everybody has the
ability to reflect. But I think that some people just don’t know how to do it. I really do. I
think when – that’s one of those things it takes time to learn how to go about that without
getting frustrated. It’s not criticizing yourself – you’re looking at what you’ve done, and saying, how can I do it better the next time? How could I have done that differently – not better – shouldn’t I have said that word differently. How could it have been done differently? Could it have been made better? Sure. Could it have made it worse? Sure. How could it be done differently? I think I’d mentioned this to you before but I really had a great – in my first teaching experience, when I was at (college), I had a really great – ahhmm – student teaching advisor that we had to keep reflective journals when we were student teaching, and, you know, he wanted – and he would grade us because we had to say something that we had found that really worked and something that we found that really didn’t work. But not to say that it didn’t work – but how and why and how it made you feel. And how. . and what, you know. I guess I really had a good sense of being – having had that experience as a teacher and a professor, because he also taught in the school that we were student teaching in – he was one of the teachers. I had the good fortune to have those people.”

Mia was very reflective – and used a lot of learning projects throughout her career – short, goal-focused; beginning with research (Internet), and using peers and colleagues as a way of stretching out – strengthening and deepening her understanding.

She was an active user of data to get insight on the successfulness of her efforts.
Appendix O

Memorandum: Natalie

Natalie

What is it about?

Natalie is an interesting example of someone who described using learning projects rather effortlessly and efficiently to address work-related challenges. She mentioned at least two distinct learning projects, one was a program improvement project, and the second, a class-room improvement project.

Natalie was hired to tackle the challenge of developing a family literacy program; she began with the grant itself with its service expectations – part of the problem: “We had some issues,” she said. “The program wasn’t turning out to be what we wanted it to be. and the program’s materials, the pictures, the presenters – I just thought, wow, if I had a flexible level of teaching, I’d be happy.” As the narrative moved forward, she came back and started to define the problem with greater clarity – the new grant, posed a problem for them – the number of enrollments had been low, the program had been geared to a specific audience (Credit diploma and GED) - the grant provided a clear focus of whom to serve. Because enrollment numbers were low, a critical component of the program – PACT Time (Parent and Children Together Time) – was difficult to achieve (there was only one family at a period in the program) – because of the enrollment problem, it sounded like the program operated as an adult work focused service. She spoke with the funder about the focus of the grant – as there were a lot of limitations associated with the grant, including the number of hours (4) that folks had to participate at one site as one group. She also indicated that the location was a problem, too, as it wasn’t on a bus line – it wasn’t accessible to their service population (which is regional). The program needed to be child-friendly, on a bus line – she even tried to find a bus service that would transport her parents’ children who needed car seats.

To tackle these issues, she reached out very collaboratively – and created many partnerships – with others in the community. But first she studied the grant, identified its issues, met with her director; together they met with the funder and talked about how to transform and move the program forwarded with the new changes.

She went to the CAACE Conference and selected workshops that dealt with Family Literacy, and in one of the sessions, connected with a family literacy staff member from another program. She visited that program to get a sense of how they were operating and how the classrooms, PACT-areas, etc., were set-up. She felt nervous – but welcomed to the program site – and has maintained a very collegial relationship with the family literacy representative from the program she visited – they continue to talk and get together at conferences.
She totally changed the program – stating that the work represented all the actions she had taken – the CAACE Conference, the peer-family literacy relationship and program visit, speaking/collaborating with the director of the YMCA (she knows this program and director and has for awhile) – and was able to provide child care as a result of this partnership. She attended state meetings about family literacy as well as the national conference; she researched and read about the program model; attended workshops held by the state’s family literacy coordinator and read recommended materials. She went online to research good practices and good models, and talked with and engaged her students in the planning process – and as she was trying things out. For example, when they decided to move the program, Natalie engaged students in the conversation about relocating.

Natalie assessed the value of the program changes and her efforts by attending to specific data – enrollments, attendance, and participant growth. For example, she looked at the emotional development of the child over the course of the program as one indicator of success.

Natalie’s second learning project focused on improving her writing instruction. Using student test outcome data, Natalie determined that she wasn’t spending sufficient time in helping students develop their writing skills. She acknowledged that she hadn’t had a program, approach, strategy – or really a means of checking student development and progress in their writing skills. She said her previous approach had been to deal with her students as “adults” and expected them to address the material in class and in the book. But test results showed a lack of attention to skill development.

Once identifying the problem, Natalie developed a semester-long series of weekly writing assignments; providing weekly feedback on students’ skills. She had identified the improvement of writing as her one professional goal for the year, after hearing colleagues at a CAACE conference talk about identifying personal goals annually as a means of improving their skills. In terms of her writing improvement project, Natalie developed an outline for students to use to supplement her classroom instruction, and a series of writing prompts from the GED textbook (after searching online and going to bookstores looking for suitable material). She also developed a rubric that addressed the GED examination expectations.

Natalie actually tried the assignments out on herself over the summer as part of her planning and development process, trying to assess how hard it would be to get to the writing reviewed and evaluated amidst everything else she had going on. She decided that she couldn’t really expect to give the assignment on Monday and be able to get feedback to students on Wednesday; she said that the class schedule influenced how she managed the writing assignments: “And so, at times, I would try it on myself, cause I’d give this out on Monday and have it back to you on Tuesday. I felt I gave myself probably an unreasonable expectation, cause in a class that meets twice a week, and you’re meeting Monday and Wednesday, I’d have to give it to you on Monday – and usually something comes up on Tuesday for me, and you can’t get to it on Wednesday. I’d feel guilty that I
didn’t give them that time, because by the time they get back to class they have no feedback. So the timing of the classes themselves didn’t always happen.”

In developing the writing packets, however, Natalie went online and looked for materials – anything that would be helpful; no matter how many sites she visited, though, she found that they were too expensive or didn’t have the variety and kinds of essay topics she was looking for. She went to the bookstore – looking for anything relating to GED writing and found that everything was focused on grammar: “I wanted to find the right book on how to write an essay – it didn’t exist.” So she went back to the regular GED book and found topics that she could pull together - and found enough writing prompts for the 13 week course. She developed an outline of what the GED essay should look like – and began using the new writing packets with her students.

**What is the underlying meaning?**

Natalie appears to like to establish goals for herself and meet them – and she definitely has defined episodes of learning – with a lot of social engagement and connection with others as an important part of her process. The way she went about developing her family literacy program is an awful lot like the way I went about mine – I researched material, I met with folks, visited sites, went to the National Conference – and then started to test things out. Like Natalie, I used collaborators from the early childhood education network to guide my work in the area where I was weakest. Natalie has a practical approach to her learning projects – and she often spoke about using data to help identify problems and in assessing her success. I was struck by her trying out her own writing program over the summer to see if she could get the writing done and the feedback organized in a timely manner – trying to discern if her plan would work with her students. She was confident in discussing the steps she took in both learning projects – and described a strong dependency on others. Regarding the environment, she expressed challenges about having to work in a regional program where none of your resources and materials are ‘centralized.’ She talked about working out of a series of bags – ‘this bag is my test material bag, my writing bag,’ etc., something a lot of us in adult ed can relate to – “I didn’t want to become an adult ed bag lady,” she said at one point. On the other hand, while she said it was hard to work in a regional system – and that she, for example, didn’t have another colleague at her particular site teaching GED, so that she had no one she could ‘pop her head into their class’ at any time and ask questions. On the other hand, she said that she could always find folks to talk to that would help her - she always spoke with her program director when she was at the central office site, and the administrative support person who had been with the program for so many years that she really could answer any practical kind of question. She felt that she was really well-connected within the system and reached out to folks – even though she didn’t always have someone at her respective sites (she worked at 3 different locations) regularly.
Appendix P

Memorandum: Olivia

Olivia

What is it about?

Olivia talked a lot about her approach to teaching, which is based a lot on her own experiences. For example, it wasn’t until she was having difficulties in college that she diagnosed herself as having a learning disability (dyslexia). She didn’t have any trouble in high school, as she described herself as being smart enough to succeed. But in college she found that she hadn’t really learned how to study or how to learn. She went to the college’s advising center and realized that she couldn’t afford the assessment to officially determine whether she was actually dyslexic or not, so she worked on her own to figure out how to succeed in college. One of her realizations was that she was being overwhelmed by learning and determined that not everything written in the text or spoken by the professor was important. She taught herself how to identify what was important to retain and what was “fluff”. She said she recognized what was and wasn’t significant by how the professor emphasized certain aspects of the presentation, or the repetitive use of particular words – the description of key aspects. In reading, she developed her own coding (which she still remembered – yellow highlighting was for the main point and purple for definitions). She also learned to cross things out that were not important. She learned to focus only on what she needed to know. She uses this same approach with her students today. Olivia also spoke about using and reflecting on her experiences as a means of guiding her work with her students. She was conflicted – telling me that learning had been very difficult. That she was lazy and the worst student at her college – at the end of the interview, however, she said she was an active learner and “loved learning”, but that she learned from everything and not limited to what she learned in the classroom.

Regarding the learning project construct, Olivia seems very goal-driven and shared many series of episodes that she put together to address an identified goal. The only actual fleshed out learning project she shared was a personal one from her youth, when she determined that she wanted to learn how to play tennis. Describing herself as athletic, Olivia determined that she wanted to learn to play tennis well enough to beat peers who were also playing and to “be the best”, but not necessary looking to play in college or professionally. Identifying being the best at tennis she could be, she set out reading books (“I’d sit there and read all the books”), a good encyclopedia, and The Rules of Tennis. She played tennis with her brother and watched Pete Sampras, saying that, “this is exactly how people do it.” She had a friend who played, too, and asked lots of questions – and with practice – and “applying what I learned” – she became the tennis player she wanted to be. “How did you know you had learned what you wanted to learn,” I asked? “Cause I could beat everybody. Honestly; that’s it – when I couldn’t lose. I knew I had gotten to the point that I’d wanted to get.”
Olivia also talked about her GED math group, saying that her students were “very, very low – there are things that they really don’t get. And it’s really hard because you kind of lose steam – how are these people ever going to pass the GED? What can I do to get them there?”

In this instance, she decided that, based on her own learning experience, that they were being overwhelmed with the material and didn’t know how to distinguish between the relevant and the irrelevant. They were overwhelmed with what didn’t matter. So she changed the way she was teaching – she took a lot out of the work and used the CASAS competency tests to determine what adult learners really needed to know and be able to do. She focused on the “minimum stuff that they would need for the tests.” She’s giving them less homework – but none of this seemed to work. She’s trying a new approach – teaching what’s significant to know. She’s focusing on the basic math concepts (decimals, fractions) and spending “quality not quantity time” teaching. She brought her colleagues into the conversation – and her students. Went through books and investigated online looking for different ways her material could be presented. She is dealing with the stress of how much has to be covered in the semester for adult learners to be ready for the GED test. She has reviewed her curriculum and reduced it to what they need to know and do for the test. She is using the SMARTboard as a means of differentiating and improving her instruction. All of her lessons are done on the technology – students don’t need to write notes because she prints the work out (has packets for students) and gives it to them. They are able to see her process of doing the work. The homework assignment is included, and problems for them to solve – so that students can do as much or the minimum she has assigned for practice. She gives them all the answers and procedures for getting the answers to problems on the back of the printed sheets – so that students aren’t struggling to understand what they may have done incorrectly.

Olivia talked about the professional learning environment as entailing “everything” – colleagues, students, technology, resources – and indirectly, policies, procedures, and the program model as constraining to the professional learning environment. For example, she did not attend professional development workshops or conferences because she described herself, again, as “lazy”, and that because she wasn’t paid to go, the administrators couldn’t really believe that the professional development was actually worthwhile. She has two little children at home and is struggling with managing her home life (“my personal life is a disaster,” she said is response to a question about planning). It was clear, too, that she wasn’t on top of what resources were available to her students – “There are some problems that I know that – I’ll never – quite figure out – mmmhhhhmmm – we had a problem on Friday. There seems that there is just some process information that – that they just don’t get.” “Is there a resources here that you can send students to?” “Like, I’m not sure. I’ve heard yes and I’ve heard a no – so – I’ve heard both, you know. I’ve heard it costs $900 or whatever so. . .”

She exclaimed, “I’m only here for three hours, and I’ve got 15 other people. And I feel bad – but they still come. But they just don’t know how to get into that – and those people I do try to help – but there’s just – there’s just this select group that – there’s nothing I can do. And I know that – and of those people – I’ve spoken with other
teachers, and there’s nothing they can do either because they’re having the same problems. They’re older, and they’re just coming till they can get their paycheck (students – not teachers), and then it’s time to go.” Yet, asked to assess the value of the environment for her own professional learning, she scored it a nine out of ten (ten being great). Interesting.

Overall, Olivia focused on her own teaching – and her learning style which was described consistently throughout. She indicated that technology has changed the landscape, but that colleagues were still the most significant resource. She had criteria that she used – particularly that they were working with the similar students and teaching the same discipline.

What is the underlying meaning?

Olivia was somewhat consistent in the way she described her own approach to learning – and she talked a lot more about her personal learning approach than any definite learning project. But I think she has a lot of personal confusion about learning – distinguishing between formal, traditional learning (not good) and learning from experience and all other things (great – “I love learning”). This may well relate to the fact that she had to self-diagnose her own learning challenges and teach herself new strategies to achieve in college. Yet in graduate school, describing herself first as the “goof-ball” in the class and being initially overwhelmed by her classmates, came to see that they were not much more knowledgeable than she was! Her capstone project in graduate school, for example, was published in a teaching magazine – she developed a reflective tool for students to use. She identified the fact that students were uncomfortable in asking questions in class – so she developed a tool, divided in two columns, with a separate third panel across the bottom portion of the paper. In one column students talked about what they already knew about the concept or topic, and in the second, what they learned in class. In the bottom panel, they were able to write questions for the teacher that they had not asked in class. In the follow-up class, Olivia would address all the questions. She was very proud of this accomplishment and of having ‘bested’ her smarter colleagues. So there’s a lot of insecurity about Olivia in her sense of herself and her work. For example, she said she did no planning at all – just jumped off the deep end of the pool. On the other hand, she talked about all the work she had done over the previous summer to get her GED math program back on track. She went through the GED book, eliminated what she didn’t think was necessary – in light of using the practice tests for guidance – and developed material, power-pointed that she later translated for the SMARTBoard.

Still she was consistent in how she talked about her approach to learning throughout the various episodes she shared – she was also big on thinking through all the questions she had about something (her pediatrician – and asking her students to apply their questions to her reflection-in-action form) and going to someone she considered an expert to help answer those questions. It was hard to understand the difference between how she described herself and some of the examples she shared that sometimes confirmed and sometimes seemed at odds with her personal explanations.
For Olivia, there seemed to be a lot of personal emotions connected to her own experiences that she continually referred to for helping her deal with her current work. She talked about the significance of experience and her reflection on that as important to her teaching and her understanding her students.
Appendix Q

Memorandum: Paul

Paul

What is it about?

Paul spoke a lot but didn’t say much – and of all the interviews, he had the most difficulty of separating and talking about his own learning and the work he did in the classroom. In nearly every instance, though focusing the interview questions on ‘your learning, not your adult students’ learning,’ he immediately discussed challenges that came up in his classroom. I realized that these challenges all represented learning experiences for him. Nearly at the close of the interview, for example, he discussed how hard he had worked with a student to prepare him for the GED math exam – and explained that the student had already failed the exam more than once, and had worked previously with two excellent math instructors. Paul said that he had tried everything – spoke to his colleagues and director, asking again and again, “what would you do? What would you do?” “That’s what I’ve learned,” he said, “that was a learning experience for me because I used to think – ahhmmm – and, by the way, I’m not any less of a teacher, in fact, if they’re willing to put in the effort, then I’m going to put in all that I can put in.”

Despite the fact that Paul had more training and background in Adult Education (a master’s degree) and had been working in the field for 20 years, he still seemed somewhat insecure about his abilities, saying at one point to me that “Some people in the regular schools were born to teach – born to be teachers. Me, I was not born to teach. . . .” He described a triggering event, volunteering in high school to assist a teacher by volunteering in her classroom of younger students. He described this teacher as inspirational – “my experience watching this excellent teacher – (Mrs. C.) – I remember her name to this day. Watching her manage and create such a great learning atmosphere, week after week, and for her students, day after day, because they had the benefit of – and ahhh – lucky, plain old lucky. They were lucky to have Mrs. C. for their teacher –= she made my experience so great, so – not great, so – ahhhhhh – for no better word, delightful. After that year of experience that I thought maybe I want to be a teacher and maybe I could try to emulate this good teacher Mrs. C. Mrs. C was no doubt born to teach. I, on the other hand, had to learn every day – every day.”

He talked about professional development as being something that was foisted on him and his colleagues, and something that you endured, “It’s the same every year, just a routine that we’ve gotta get done. . . as that person who said ‘I’ve got to get this done, it’s necessary – you get thru the day. It’s horrible.’ I can’t remember the exact words but basically the seed was put in my head – alright, go thru the motions.”
Despite this attitude, which he explained was handing down and shared among veteran teachers when he first began his teaching experience, much of what he discussed in terms of sustained, intentional learning experiences was his attempts to test out and try new ideas that he picked up at these workshops. For example, the lead teacher asked teachers to consider “pairing and sharing” something they were working on, developing, or trying out in their classrooms that they wanted to share with colleagues – or ideas, resources, etc. This was a strategy used in adult professional development workshops for awhile; the lead teacher chose to try this out with her own staff. Paul liked this activity and decided to try it out with his students. The first year he tried it, it didn’t work – the students were resistant and he couldn’t really follow-up on it in light of classroom challenges. He didn’t let the idea die, though, and attempted it again the following year, with only a minimal more success. The third year, he tried it again and found the results were positive and very worthwhile; students, though resistant at first, enjoyed the experience. In this instance, Paul reflected that it was his leadership that made a difference. He initiated the activity differently, followed-up and supported students in their efforts, provided resources and support to each student as they prepared their work for classroom presentations.

This was not the only instance where Paul demonstrated that he tried things out, reflected upon them, refined and tried them again.

The only significant learning project Paul described was a personal one – but one that was emotionally exhausting and draining and impacted, negatively, his year of teaching. Paul talked about having taken an action, marrying a woman in another country that resulted in a significant project. He had to meet and interview immigration experts, meet with lawyers, obtain copies of material and have them translated; worked through a system of learning about international immigration procedures; spoke with Senator Dodd and Senator Lieberman’s staff. A representative from Senator Dodd’s office worked with him over a two year period, as Paul unraveled the process, met and followed the timeline and paperwork (he drew me a concept map of his learning experience and what he had to do and file and follow to achieve the outcome). He reported that he kept e-mail trails, wrote letters, met with specialists – all to resolve his personal challenge. This, he explained, ate up an incredible amount of his time over a 24 month period. But he persisted and stayed on top of things.

In his explanation of his own learning experiences, he spoke about the value of his colleagues and learning from his students, most particularly. He referred to his students often – explaining that because they were adults, he could ask them if what he was doing was helpful, where they were stuck and what was problematic for them.

He spoke of doing research on the Internet, going to the library – though he said he hadn’t needed to go to one in a while. He also indicated that his colleagues shared resources and that they had sufficient material for what they needed to get done.

He talked about being a planner, and again, having learned how to plan in reaction to a negative experience he had as a beginning teacher when his administrator said his
planning book was not adequately prepared. Paul still uses a planning book, which he showed me – but he has developed his own way of planning – using bullets and concept maps that connect resources and student needs.

What is the underlying meaning?

It’s hard to see learning projects in Paul’s approach, though he spoke of the work he did to help his wife immigrate to this country, a process that took more than 2 years and had a significant impact on him personally and professionally. He is an interesting paradox in that he was not able to disentangle his own learning from his work with students – students are his primary learning resource. He works individually with his students and prepares significant amount of work for each of them – assessments, work sheets, examples, materials – things he pulls from different places and puts together himself. He asks for their feedback frequently and reflects on what is working and not working and is continually revising his efforts.

He is not articulate and not conscious of his own learning, though. And it appeared to be unsure of himself. He called me between interviews to tell me that he didn’t think that he had anything valuable to contribute or say – and was sometimes, I thought, concerned that he wasn’t doing all that he thought he should be doing. The birth of his son, and the work to get his wife moved to this country, are important to him – he took a telephone call from his wife while we were in the interview and talked about child arrangements.

I was thinking about Eraut and researchers who say that people can be inarticulate about their own learning experiences, but doesn’t mean they aren’t engaged in them – they just have difficulty talking about them. Paul used a great deal of his classroom experiences as thought for developing his skills – and going to colleagues and using a variety of resources. And while he really seemed to disdain professional development, these experiences always acted as triggers for him to try things out – though he was unable to describe or explore the process of thinking and planning and the specific actions he took in transferring and trying out the skill learned from the workshop to his classroom.
Appendix R: Robert

Memorandum

Robert

What is it about?

Robert had over 48 years of teaching experience; 16 years in adult education and 33 years in middle schools where he taught math and science. He also taught reading and reading in grade 4; taught in high school, too, and professional seminars. “I’ve probably had a diverse teaching experience,” he reported. Robert has an undergraduate degree from College; a master’s degree from another; took courses at the a third university – and at “several other colleges.” He also reported that he’s “done some reading and things along that nature.” But he hadn’t taken any adult ed courses in college.

Learning by experience was an important theme in this narrative. “Because I’ve been teaching for so long. . . .” “I do look at new things that are coming out. But I also have a reasonably good library, so to speak, and here at Adult Ed, they’ve always been very good. . . .So, ahhh, I don’t know that it’s so much serendipity as one might think. I don’t think it really is; I think there’s a lot more thought put into it than just pure luck – that I’ve pulled something off the library shelf or found something at the bookstore that just worked out. I think not. I think most of the time, at least with me – I think with most of the teachers here – it’s ahhh, you know, you look it over – and – ahhh – everyone here has had a lot of experience. I don’t think there’s a teacher here in the adult program that’s working with – ahhh – less than 25 years. So, you know, you can pretty well be assured that, ahhh, they have a particular facility.”

And again: “I’ve been an educator in 1961 and I wanted to be the very best I could be. I didn’t want to do something else. And, ahhh, I don’t know. I feel very successful. I really do. And I haven’t stopped learning.

The learning project Robert shared concerned his desire to improve math skills among adults in his basic math group, and particularly, their estimation skills. He identified the problem as adult students needing to have a strategy for understanding whether their answers to questions were right or wrong – in addition to the typical adult education approach, which was to have the answers in the back of the textbook. One of the major projects for “an adult learner in math – even in very basic math – it’s the ability to know whether in fact you have . . . ahhh . . . arrived at a correct solution. . . .so I did take on this task of . . . studying this – to find out if there wasn’t a rather quick way of doing this and so – ahhh – developed a program that made it possible for students to do division without estimating because many of them have great difficulty with that. . . . would allow a person to know if they had added correctly, subtracted correctly. In other words, that they had done all of the basic math programs correctly. . . . By having systems that work you could basically do the – do the – ahhh – skill and know that it actually is right. At least to make
a 99%, which is very high. I use systems that make students very happy – and they know they can be successful.”

His learning project entailed recalling a math book he had read (“I still have the books at home.”) The original book he referred to was written by a man in a concentration camp – “I read the book and I was so enthralled with it that I decided that it was worth developing – and I developed from what he laid out to start with. I just added on a little bit here and a little bit there – so – and it was probably a project that now – often and took . . . ahhh. . . several months to accomplish. But it was well worth it.”

Robert described how he first identified the problem based on student difficulties in class, and identified the problem as one of estimation – the inability to know whether you are right or wrong until you look the answer (up) in the book.

He started out with a plan – “I had a definite plan, I mean, I knew exactly where I wanted to go.” He conducted research – at the local library – picking up math books until he found one that fit – he read a number of books, not entirely, but different sections, chapters, as he “knew what I was looking for and therefore, I kind of – went thru several pages; if it didn’t seem to be meeting my needs I went to something else.” “You have to do quite a bit of looking into.” “I found the one that I was particularly fond of. As a matter of fact, it’s still on my bookshelf.”

He reported going to several libraries – his own, the local library, a nearby University’s library – and to another university’s library. He went on the Internet and then bought the books he wanted, because he didn’t want to be limited in having the book accessible (“cause I didn’t want it just for 14 days. I actually wanted it for my own resource.”)

Robert did not bring anyone else into the project – he worked alone, he said. “I had talked to other math teachers; yes, but on this particular project, I don’t really think I did. I pretty much did it on my own. But remember that I’m retired. If I had colleagues – if I was working in a public school, I probably would have been able to. . . but in the facilities that I was working in, it didn’t really lend itself particularly or easily.”

He did, at the end of the interview, indicate that colleagues – the teachers’ lounge – was a great learning asset; “You are frequently sharing things and that’s very important. I think that was one of the great things in the public schools that I worked in. We had a teachers’ room – we spent free periods in there. And during that time – exactly . . . believe me, I found more answers to problems or I found problems that needed to be addressed in these conversations than I certainly would have found if I hadn’t had them.”

With his learning project, once he developed the program, he tried it out with students (“you work with students and you see how it’s working. I mean, if for instance, so to speak, laid an egg, then, I mean, you wouldn’t – I wouldn’t continue with it because, I mean, it’s obvious that – and I mean, I’m not talking about one student. I mean I’m talking about a number (stretches out the word ‘number’) of students.” His project was “well-received” from the beginning.” “Now if it hadn’t, I don’t know as I’d have
continued on – I probably would think I couldn’t have, you know. And gone to
something or just finally said that I’m dealing with something that’s impossible. But I
didn’t really think it was. I knew darn well that I could get the thing resolved if I could
work on it. Now I just have that kind of a feeling about the things I do – I’m actually very
successful, most of the time.’

He was happy to share the program with his colleagues (one of his colleagues continues
to work with it – and tweaks it) and Robert presented seminars showing his program to
other math teachers of adults.

What is the underlying meaning?

I was struck by how much Robert discussed and pointed to his experience as important to
his own learning – and that he had confidence that he could solve most problems readily.
He discussed, for example, taking a job that would require him to learn something new
and that was like something his students would find themselves working with – a retail
store, handling merchandise, customers, and the cash register. Robert indicated that the
work was more challenging than he had anticipated – that you had to be doing multiple
things (relating well to customers, problem-solving, and handing out the right cash!). He
said he took the small, part-time, short-term in part because he wanted to be able to use
the experience to help him understand what his students needed to know and be able to
do.

Besides his extensive experience, Robert also had a definite style of planning: “Second,
you plan. How are you going to – or are you going to attack the problem or are you just
gonna say, ‘he’s just failing?’ Cause you know, you could just do that and think that
that’s just it. And then once you’ve decided that – ahhhmmm – it’s worth working on,
you start to make a plan. I mean, how are you going to attach that problem differently
than it’s been done in the past. And – ahhh – so you start thinking about it. And if you’ve
got enough experience, ahhh, you try different techniques. And, ahhhh, in order to try
different techniques in the adult field that I’m in you really have to use the Internet to a
degree, use the library to a degree, use the College to a degree. . .ahhhmmm. . .put them
altogether and build from there.”

He was consistent in his approach to tackling work-related challenges, and indicated that
he put a lot of time into developing different things over the years that made the work
better for his students. His confidence in his experience and its ability to help provide for
him the resources that he could draw upon was clearly evident. He described himself as
more of a loner – and did report on the challenges of the greater adult ed field and its
impact on his work – indirectly, though he was clear about the challenges:

“They’re very useful,” he responded to my question about conferences and professional
development. “Ahhhmmm, you pick up ideas that you can bring back and use with your
students. Ahhh, I think with the financial situation today that we’re finding this is done
less and less. But I mean, I think it’s a very good, important resource.” He talked about
the greater goal of adult ed – dealing with adults who need to become more successful in
their own lives – “And in being more successful, hopefully, to be happier – okay – so I think that, you know, I suppose in the big broad sense that’s probably the ultimate goal that we have.” And he was also very strategic in the way he made use of his time, even in a program where resources were diminishing. For example, he indicated it wasn’t worth his time to conduct a professional development workshop for colleagues because it would take 20 – 30 hours of prep time, which he wouldn’t be compensated for – and he questioned whether it would be worthwhile or useful to his colleagues: “I know I wouldn’t do it. If I couldn’t devote the . . ahhh. . prep time to it.” He was, however, strategic in how he used his time: “but if you’re working 15 hours a week – in your work period – adult teaching is different than public school teaching. I mean, I could sit at my desk for maybe – for 45 minutes and my students are doing other things. They don’t need me sitting there chatting with them. So, as a result, while they’re working on theirs, I could be working on mine. So, I mean, that’s probably a good part of it. I was getting paid for it, in a sense, because I was running a classroom and also doing this research on my own.”

I was struck by the clash between his dedication, his use of his background and extensive teaching experience – and his recognition of the constraints of his work environment. His understanding of the overarching goal of adult education was interesting – and not uncommon in the field. And indicates a dichotomy between those educators who believe the skills are necessary – or the personal satisfaction (“happiness”) of students as most critical.
Appendix S

Memorandum: Sophia

Sophia

What is it about?

Sophia spoke a great deal about teaching – and two learning projects, one that resulted when she went to a math conference and attended a session on using a graphing calculator. She loved the workshop and realized it was something that would help her students prepare for the GED exam. She hadn’t been familiar with the graphing calculator - graphs on a small screen that you have to apply dimensions to – it could do many things, but there wasn’t enough time in the workshop to really master the technology. “You really have to practice, she said. “I cold use some more practice. But I’ve incorporated some things; I know how to do some things and pass it on to my students. But that one you need time. . .you have to spend time. . .doing things, and learning them, and re-doing them, and figuring out why it doesn’t work. Things like that. So the graphing calculator workshop was good, but that you need a lot of practice.” She followed this up – how will you improve your practice with it – by saying that she can ask her children because they use these calculators in their high school and can help her practice its use. And her students in her adult ed program help her – they’ve used the tool in the past and can show her; so “I learn from my students,” she noted. Her other learning project was more hypothetical – feeling competent and comfortable teaching algebra II to her secondary education adult learners. Again, she said she would first try to tackle the material herself – take the book home, work through all of the problems, check the answers in the back of the book. If she was finding that she was missing something – she would talk with at least two other folks – her sister, also a math teacher in a larger GED program and the director of her program site to identify someone who might be able to help her.

She learned a lot and often with her sister who is also an adult ed teacher and people in her program – she relied on others quite a bit. She also insisted on mastering things on her own – taking the book home and working through all of the problems again and again until she was confident that she could explain the content and process to others.

She’s been teaching in adult education for 13 years and has a lot of confidence in her skills and abilities. She talked about evaluating students (reading their eyes, their faces; using data on test scores, samples of their work, practice tests); she also loves professional development and continuing education courses. Sophia talked about an illustration course she took as part of her science program in graduate school as a great opportunity to connect art, science, and math – all things she loves.

She said at one point that she didn’t have enough time to develop her own professional learning experiences: “I’ve never developed one on my own. I don’t know – I don’t know – I like the idea of going to a relevant workshop where someone else has done all the
work. . . the benefits of that. I feel like I don’t have a lot of time for learning something on my own – and I don’t know if I’d want to do all that – I don’t know. It’s a lot of work. So I’d rather go to something that’s relevant – and where they’ve done the work and I’m sort of absorbing all that information – I’m a pretty quick learner.” Still, she was an active learner on her own – one of those individuals that Tough, Eraut, and others have indicated don’t recognize their own learning as professional learning and tend to equate learning with professional development. This was an interesting paradox – she seemed to use a lot of series of learning episodes to address challenges as they came up and maybe she sees these as just taking care of the work. But she didn’t really see her efforts in the same way that she valued the formal professional development activities.

She indicated that it was important to have workshops that were relevant and applicable to her work – or that had genuine personal interest for her (like the illustration course). Sophia didn’t always think that it was easy to be able to develop professional workshops for the adult ed teachers because of the diversity in their backgrounds and the courses they teach and the students they work with.

Sophia also indicated that she had a lot of freedom and ability to determine what professional development she participated in – and wished that there was more funds to allow for more of this type of support. P. Cross and others have indicated that those with a lot of education tend to prefer more formal learning opportunities, and I found myself wondering if Sophia didn’t fall into this category. She seemed to downplay her own efforts – though she also indicated that she was learning all the time, reflecting on her past experiences, particularly.

**What is the underlying meaning?**

It’s difficult to know if Sophia was less interested in her developing her own learning programs because of the time involved – she didn’t really describe any learning project in great detail though she was articulate about how she solved problems and the enjoyment she received from professional development activities. She did mention the need to undertake sustained learning efforts if she had to teach something outside of her usual sphere of expertise – like teach Algebra II, then she said, that she would find a way to learn it – “I search out things,” she said. “I don’t just stop because something is not available to me. I would pursue any avenue I can find the information. . .now with the Internet, it’s helpful. But after talking to other people, they can be wonderful resources to find information. . . If I had to teach something for algebra II that I haven’t done in a very long time – I would research it, you know. I’d read the textbook – spend some time working on problems till I understood it. So that I could then teach it to my class. I wouldn’t stop until I felt comfortable and confident in my abilities to explain it to somebody else. . . I would do some problems – the answers are at the back of the book so I would check that I was on the right track. . . I would ask – possibly I’d ask Mr. Wallace to find a teacher in my day program. I’d also ask my sister who is a fellow math adult ed teacher in (another program). So I would have two resources of somebody who could help me get the answers. So I would probably refer to people – if I couldn’t figure it out by myself, from the book. I’ll ask somebody else.”
She was very reflective and talked a lot about learning from her experience, noting that teachers needed time for reflection. She found that she was always reflecting on her practice – driving home, getting into bed at night – thinking about another way of doing things. She spoke a lot about the broad adult ed field and the barriers – “(another program) is a big program, my sister is a contracted teacher, so, you know, she’s getting compensated for her time – so if she’s doing something at home, she’s often getting compensated for it. When you’re not on contracted hours, no work is no pay. So it would be nice to get a little extra money in – so – to me, maybe that’s the part of adult ed – it would be really nice if we had better work opportunities.” Sophia also expressed an appreciation for being able to manage and control the professional development activities she wanted to participate in – rather than being mandated to attend those that had no application to her classroom.

Sophia was reflective – a big user of experience and reflecting on that to learn. She engaged her students, colleagues, and was dedicated to getting to the root of any problems. But she didn’t relate any actual learning project –

Tough said there are times in the lives of professionals when everything is really working and until something occurs to trigger additional learning, may not be involved in a learning project all the while. I could see that Sophia is an active learner and is continually thinking about her practice. And she has a certain logical way of going about her work. A lot of her learning, I suspect, was based on problem-solving as issues came up.

It is difficult to distinguish between problem-solving and sustained learning projects when some of the projects evolve because of problems that emerge in the classroom. But the sustained, intentional effort is for me the deciding factor.

Sophia is also an excellent example, I think, of someone doing a lot of learning – recognizing those efforts by not valuing them in the same way that she valued professional development, and indicated that she’d want to be compensated for working on her own learning project.

I think, too, that Sophia described the four frames associated with the environment that the situated learning researchers discussed – symbolic, functional, roles and responsibilities, and the work folks do – as well as the problem solving. Sophia talked about all of these in relationship to her work environment.