
July 2003

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Smith, Robert L. (2003) "The Unheard of Benefit: Ongiong Professional Development for Adult Basic Skills Educators," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.

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The Unheard of Benefit: Ongoing Professional Development for Adult Basic Skills Educators

BY ROBERT L. SMITH

Ernest Hemingway wrote in *True at First Light* that “[a]ll men and animals acquire a year more of age each year and some acquire a year more of knowledge.” Undoubtedly the average educator, no matter the age level, wants to inhabit the informed group and build understanding along with knowledge. Systematic attempts to do this are considered *professional development*. According to Jackson (1992), professional development means increases in ability, skill, power, strength, wisdom, insight, virtue, and even happiness. Within one affiliation of adult education programs, called the Career Development Programs, a major professional development goal is to create a community of program leaders and instructors who continuously improve our understanding of how to provide workers with employability skills.

Currently there are 40 American steel-mill learning programs, most with on-site learning centers. They provide voluntary lifelong learning for broad vocational or personal development and try to offer “something for everyone.” The learners are very open to learning and to helping each other learn. Rather than providing job-specific training for the workers, Career Development Programs are a new breed of programs that foster holistic development of individuals. Such approaches lead to greater productivity, even though that goal is accomplished indirectly and concurrently with other goals (Kolb & Plovnik, 1977; Bierema, 1996). The hundreds of teachers involved are spread across a dozen states and a dozen steel companies. The Institute for Career Development (ICD) is the national organization responsible for establishing a community of educa-

tional leaders, most of whom have not sought college degrees in education.

The purpose of this article is to describe some of the techniques ICD uses to establish a learning community among the program leaders, including instructors. For readers from K-12 schools, think of how these techniques can affect interactions with groups of parents or other community members, as well as with staff members. ICD’s four groups of stakeholders are represented by Figure 1 on page 29. These four, including the learners themselves, must work in concert to manufacture maximum learning for the busy workers who choose to attend. In creating opportunities for these groups to collaborate, ICD thinks of itself as providing professional development, even if that effort sometimes entails merely providing a time and place to share professional ideas and techniques.

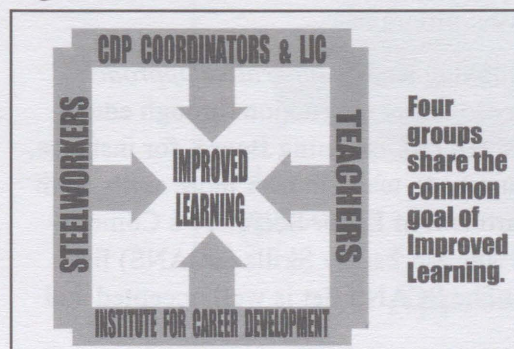
Robert L. Smith is a past president and member of the Tri-County Reading Council and a past president and the current membership chair of the Michigan Council on Learning for Adults (MCLA). He is senior program specialist of the Institute for Career Development. He admired and appreciated the thoughtful and tireless efforts of the late Sharon Yuille to provide professional development opportunities to the members of MRA and to MRA’s affiliate local councils statewide.

Background

Career Development Programs (CDP) serve more than 47,000 workers, all represented by the United Steelworkers of America, in 12 steel companies. Every year one in four workers chooses to take at least one course, with many taking multiple classes. This is a national basic skills program growing from the economic devastation of the 1980s when thousands of steelworkers lost their jobs and found that their highly specialized skills did not easily transfer to other jobs. Because the international union subsequently negotiated an educational program to prevent such agony in the future, more recent downsizings have left many workers better able to transition to new positions upon dislocation.

Career Development Programs are joint labor-management programs that filled 31,323 seats in 2000. In CDPs, local joint committees make site-specific decisions about programs with national guidance from the Institute for Career Development (ICD). The program is organized in harmony with education change expert Michael Fullan's (1993) precepts on educational administration: "Neither centralization or decentralization works. (Both top-down and bottom-up strategies are necessary.) Centralization errs on the side of overcontrol; decentralization errs toward chaos" (p. 37). Said another way, ICD provides centralized leadership while each of the 40 CDP provides decentralized leadership. This is similar to the organization of large K-12 districts, and the principle of merging professional development leadership from central office and from local schools, including teacher-directed improvement activities, is increasingly accepted.

Figure 1.



Defining the Challenge

There are special challenges with curriculum and content standards in a primarily decentralized system. Each learning center surveys its workforce and chooses its own local courses. The centers either hire the teachers directly or select national or local vendors who hire the teachers. At times, rather than working together for the overall good of the program, the vendors or teachers cater to participants and try to "sell" their own upcoming classes. Even when all instructors are cooperating to serve workers' needs rather than someone else's, there are complex professional development challenges. These challenges stem from the necessary tension between different stakeholders' needs.

What is needed in voluntary lifelong learning programs is a blending of what Brookfield (1986) called *prescribed needs* with *felt needs*. Prescribed needs are simply the content that program leaders regard as essential in order to justify the program to stakeholders. Prescribed needs, as defined by the CDP, are basic skills. Without a sense that transferable skills such as reading, writing, critical thinking, math, and communication skills are being learned, the companies and union will not continue to include the program in negotiated contracts. Felt needs are the content that attracts learners into the centers. A sign that reads "Math Class tomorrow" doesn't draw many workers, most of whom have good reasons to hide any academic rustiness they may feel. Instead, felt needs tend to be contextually relevant: how to use a computer, how to fix your computer, how to plan for retirement, how to landscape, and so on. Basic skills (prescribed needs) can be embedded within any course, which is the ideal blending that the CDP seeks. In other words, a course on landscaping can provide direct instruction on reading—such as how to cope with scientific names of plants, how to interpret and write blueprints, and how to use computers to create landscaping. The various ways the workforce programs assist instructors with this blending (or juggling) process is a staff development challenge. For K-12 systems, increasing students' chances of exploring felt needs may be a positive exercise that leads to increased learning.

Characterizing and Constructing Professional Development

Since definitions of professional development tend to be broad, it is helpful to examine what really matters to various stakeholders. Leaders at the local sites, including teachers, and at the national office shared their definitions of professional development with me during a 2001 qualitative study of six Indiana steel mill educators:

National Office Definitions of professional development:

- “You huddle everybody up and say here’s who we are as a staff.”
- “Getting on the same page, addressing the issue of the day.”
- “Actualization”—and it “must be defined in [its] own individual context.”
- “Bring people together and [start] a dialogue.”

Local Site Definitions of professional development:

- “Challenging people to develop... to grow as individuals.”
- An “incremental progress, ongoing.”
- “Some people want to challenge [themselves]; some scrape by.”
- “Climb out of the box. It’s a little chilly. Spread [your] wings.”

(Smith, 2001)

While these various views of professional growth may not be entirely synonymous, they share a sense that professional development is desirable for all teachers including adult educators whether they teach carpentry or basic writing, dance or heating, venting and air conditioning. The simple exercise of defining professional development can prove helpful at any educational level.

In trying to keep the huge variety of teachers alive and well in these professional learning communities,, ICD employs three types of professional development approaches:

1. Personnel Approach
2. Instruction Approach
3. Administrative Approach

(Smith, 2001).

The first, *personnel approach*, is the interaction between the national office and leaders at the 40 sites that seeks to help the educators grow professionally. It most often means sharing and analyzing together the instructional strategies and activities that create innovative learning environments for adults. The personnel approach involves both (1) face-to-face communication and training, including conventional training, site visits, and professional get-togethers, and (2) professional development from a distance, such as providing access to vision statements and positions papers, to a national resource bank, to online information (www.icd-uswasteelco.org), and to hotline help. As one program coordinator said, “We all get so bogged down with our day-to-day that we need to have someone say, ‘Oh, have you tried it this way?’ It motivates you” (Smith, 2001).

ICD’s *instruction approach* refers to direct curriculum provision, produced either by ICD alone or in joint projects with groups, such as the Adult Literacy Media Alliance and McGraw-Hill, among others. These workforce-oriented curricula often are delivered online or via CD ROM. The goal of the instruction approach is to influence the instructors by augmenting their courses with customized materials designed for the specific audience. “I don’t know how some [instructor] could be using our curriculum and not be influenced by it,” said Jerry Evans who directs ICD’s educational program (Smith, 2001). Some of these curricula are available online (www.icd-uswasteelco.org) and most are free-of-charge to any and all education programs.

Programs employing an *administrative approach* consciously try to affect instruction through educational policies. ICD’s Governing Board, for instance, requires instructors to teach four or more skills from the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) list in all courses. The SCANS list is well-accepted and broad-based:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Reading, | 7. Motivation, |
| 2. Writing, | 8. Creative thinking, |
| 3. Computation, | 9. Problem solving, |
| 4. Oral communication, | 10. Teamwork, |
| 5. Listening, | 11. Leadership, |
| 6. Learning to learn, | 12. Negotiating skills, |
| | 13. Interpersonal skills. |

(Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, U. S. Department of Labor, 1991)

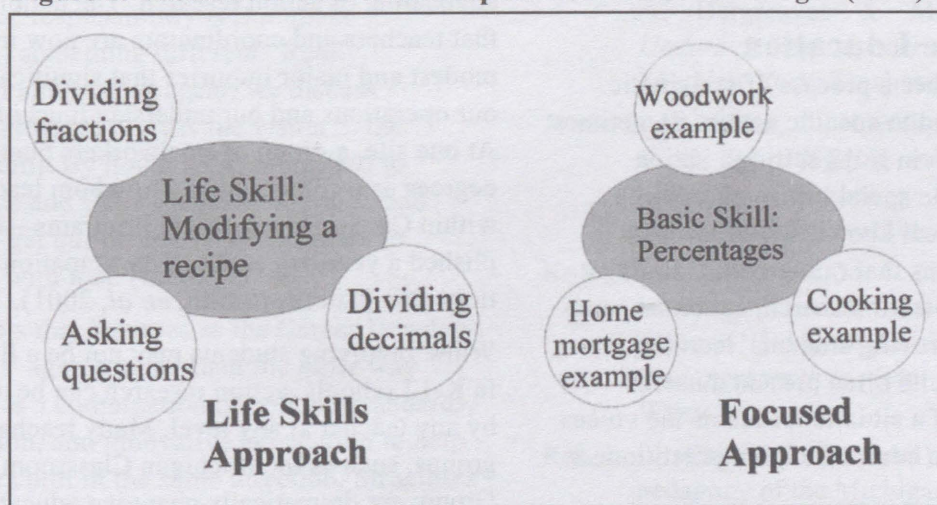
ICD has recently added a 14th skill to the SCANS list, Information Technology, giving teachers another option within the policy. (These same skills, especially teamwork, leadership, negotiating, and interpersonal skills, can be the focus of K-12 professional development for districts wanting to respond to the call for fostering employability skills by age 16.) Change expert Fullan (1993) says "you can't mandate what matters." Nevertheless, policies are part of the mix, another way to get stakeholders' attention in order to help them reflect on the learning environment. The administrative approach also depends upon interpersonal communication with site leaders, sometimes called "jawboning," for written policies alone are sometimes forgotten.

Most often, programs like ICD combine all three professional development approaches. Implementing policy, such as the teaching of SCANS skills, is unlikely to result in improved learning unless instructors are assisted with the details of how to teach the skills, which means blending two or three of the approaches. For instance, ICD believes in using thematic strategies such as those described by Dirkx and Prenger (1997) (see adaptations in Figure 2 below). These instructional strategies profit from oral explanation and subsequent rehearsal, which shows by example that the *personnel approach* to professional development must accompany the *administrative approach*.

Ongoing Staff Development for Adult Educators is an Unheard of Benefit

ICD and its 40 local joint committees have an annual tradition that amounts to an almost unheard of benefit—regular professional development time for adult education program leaders. The program personnel meet each June in a major city that is near at least one steel mill. For three days, the program coordinators and local joint committee members present to each other ideas that pertain to what has worked in the past few months and what problems have emerged. Outside speakers are also brought in to inspire and inform the individuals who will design the next year's educational programming. ICD helps set the theme

Figure 2. Thematic Instruction. Adapted from Dirkx & Prenger (1997)



of the annual conference, handles the logistics, and builds the conference into a growth experience rather than a holiday.

Though meeting once a year at a national conference is considered a luxury by adult educators, ICD holds that limiting professional development to an annual one-shot event is insufficient. Monthly meetings are the norm for sites' Local Joint Committees, and ICD attends at least one or two of each site's meetings annually to assist with program and staff development. ICD also strives to arrange a series of regional meetings each year. These produce opportunities for several Local Joint Committees to gather and swap ideas in a daylong session. ICD provides informal training at the sessions, but reserves plenty of time for the local programs to "bring and brag."

Instructors are welcome to attend this annual conference, some committee meetings, and the Resource Building Workshops. The local sites and ICD also hold professional development sessions, geared specifically for instructors. In the spring of 2001, for example, ICD conducted a two-day conference in Chicago for 30 instructors from around the United States. As new curricula are developed by ICD, special informational sessions are also conducted at sites that are choosing to use the instructional components. Each site also schedules its own orientation sessions for new staff, and, at many sites, workshops are scheduled to allow educators to learn with and from each other.

Action Research within Workforce Education

Action research describes a process of systematic inquiry designed to lead to specific action. Sometimes called *teacher research* in K-12 settings, action research emphasizes the social utility of research and foregrounds the local knowledge of teachers and learners. This means that rather than claiming a dispassionate stance toward research, action research is directed toward improving students' learning in the here and now. Results often present a useful multi-vocal analysis of a situation, such as the voices of steelworkers and the adult education practitioners serving them.

Perhaps the most successful professional development ICD has undertaken is the Teachers Action Research Group for Educational Technology (TARGET). Funded by a U.S. Department of Labor grant, TARGET began in 1997 when a group of 12 instructors and program coordinators explored how to create technology-delivered lessons to mill workers. Guided by ICD and Professor Amy Rose of Northern Illinois University, the group worked to grasp the basics of investigating matters of practice in systematic ways. TARGET has grown in numbers and has simultaneously grown beyond a focus on educational technology. Members now investigate any area of practice that is of interest or concern to them. The issue of participation has been a popular focus, and has resulted in several studies. The most recent results were published in *Focus on Basics* (D'Amico, Lentz, Smith & Taylor, 2002).

From ICD's standpoint, creation of groups to support action research is a highly effective way of advancing professional skills while also improving programs. The effectiveness of this group stems from its capability to empower local leaders to take charge of their own development and to engage with other team efforts to speed the program's development. While teachers and administrators do not tend to define TARGET as primarily an instrument of professional development, they like the opportunity to share their problems and best practices. (Rose, Jeris & Smith, 2002). The culture of the Career Development Programs is gradually changing through ICD's ongoing advocating of action research. The major change is that teachers and coordinators are now initiating both modest and major inquiries that significantly improve our operations and our understandings of the students. At one site, a group of steelworkers pursuing graduate degrees as a cohort—many of whom teach part-time within Career Development Programs—even accomplished a yearlong study of participation and nonparticipation patterns (Smith, *et. al*, 2001).

While involving students may not be a likely option in K-12 schools, action research can be accomplished by any teacher at any level. Many teachers research groups, such as the Michigan Classroom Discourse Group, are dramatically changing educational practice

while developing themselves as professionals (Rex, 2003). Funding for such K-adult work has been available through the International Reading Association and via the MRA professional development grants.

Implications for Adult Basic Skills Education and Conclusion

Adult education programs are structured in diverse ways. A few are joint labor-management programs and pursue the kinds of integrated professional development described in this paper. Collectively constructing and distributing a *vision of learning* (Jones, N.D.; ICD, 1997) or programs standards are good ways to start expanding a program's shared ideas about use of educational technology and other instructional approaches, for example. As programs undertake any steps forward, they should do so with the assumption that adult educators—even those without formal education credentials—desire and appreciate opportunities to advance their teaching skills. Forming learning groups, whether action research is involved or not, will result in positive outcomes for programs, as well as for individuals.

When adult education programs are structured with both centralized and decentralized elements, the organic and ongoing staff development needs can be addressed indirectly (or from a distance) as well as directly by the local stakeholders. It works best as a shared responsibility between the local programs and the national office. One program coordinator emphasized this approach when she said:

Whose responsibility is it to make [learning] something different? Really ours! ... I am [ICD's] agent: we discuss the standards, we discuss the vision ... the [curriculum]. By doing so, I'm inspired to come back and share that enthusiasm ... and we try to get our people in our program to interface with that. (Smith, 2001)

While ICD feels that it serves as the Career Development Programs' agent (rather than the other way around), it takes a combination of policies/standards, direct instruction, and innovative curriculum to help all stakeholders pull in the same direction. Structures

such as annual conferences, regional resource building workshops, and action research groups help provide opportunities to build and maintain the needed learning community that will keep a program strong. Since these programs are never static but are either improving or declining, ongoing professional development of all educators can tip the balance in favor of another year of growth.

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### \* EARL FLECK

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lives and works in the Minneapolis area. *Chasing Bears: A Canoe Country Adventure* and *Chasing Fires: Danger in Canoe Country* initiate a series of wilderness adventure stories based on his experiences as a father and canoeist. Lesson plans are available on his website at www.fleckart.com.



* KATHY-JO WARGIN

~~~~~  
is a local author of many picture books. Some of her titles include *The Legend of the Loon, The Legend of the Lady's Slipper, M is for Mitten* and *The Michigan Counting Book*.

### \* MARGARET WILLEY

~~~~~  
is an award winning author of the picture book *Clever Beatrice*. Margaret also writes short stories for adults and young adult novels. She lives in Grand Haven and uses the geography of Michigan in much of her work. Other titles include *Thanksgiving with Me, Facing the Music, The Melinda Zone* and *Saving Lenny*.



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