

Theoretical Defense and Professional Growth Reflection

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Introduction

This document serves to defend the theory that grounds my instructional practice, beginning with andragogy and self-directed learning in module 1, that was then applied in module 2 through a mock professional development session. These theories were further developed in my module 3 presentation and expanded in the second professional development created in module 4. The main goal of my professional development is to standardize and implement consistent scaffolds for a summative assessment for every subject and grade level within a 9-12th grade public high school. After a needs analysis, it was determined that there was inconsistent branding and use of scaffolds across all departments. While some educators have employed highly individualized scaffolds like specific graphic organizers and analysis frameworks, other educators provided little to no scaffolding.

I used andragogy and SDL because adult learners, educators specifically, have limited time to partake in learning experiences and these two theories leverage adults pre-existing knowledge and focus on subject matter relevant to their work. The initial professional development in module 2 focused on adult learners leveraging and sharing scaffolding materials they have already created within their teacher content teams, or TCTs. They were then instructed to create a shared scaffold as a TCT, relying on SDL, specifically Grow's staged model, where learners entered the professional development at different stages but leaned on facilitator-created guides dependent on stage.

In module 3, I homed in on the aspects of these theories that drove my work, specifically how respect and relevance are built on leveraging educator experience. The second professional development session, developed in module 4, expanded on the educator-oriented structure of my professional developments and extended their opportunity to apply scaffolds in future course work. This looked like educators analyzing student feedback and proficiency data regarding scaffold use from the formative to the summative, and opportunities for modification of their scaffold to better meet the needs of learners by aligning to rubric specific standards. This final alignment phase opens educators up to utilizing this scaffold in future units assessing the same skills, and also provides the process for creating scaffolds for all other summatives, maintaining a reiterative loop for feedback and curriculum development. This reflection will explain the strengths, limitations, and implications of this work.

Theoretical Defense

As previously mentioned, the two theories that guide my professional development design and my core instructional design philosophy are andragogy and self-directed learning. These two theories work together to highlight that respect and relevance for adult educator learning audiences are built on leveraging educator experience.

Andragogy is seen through viewing adult learners as experienced learners with a wealth of knowledge to pull from and a need for culturally relevant learning experiences (Knapke et al.,

2024). This theory is what shaped my decision to have the TCTs build a shared scaffold together with materials they already created, instead of having a lecture-based professional development format. In initial iterations, I toyed with the idea of having facilitators provide a template for a scaffold that educators could fill in, but after focusing on the relevance aspect of andragogy, it was important that teachers had the opportunity to leverage their own work within their own teams. Scaffolds themselves vary from grade level to grade level, and even more so from subject to subject. There are also different preferences educators have for scaffolds based on student need and placement within a unit. When creating a PD with andragogy in mind, I could create an opportunity for educators to refine pre-existing material that aligned with their specific subject and grade level. Not only does this respect the width and depth of scaffolding, but it respects that educators already have these materials and need to work with their specific context to create a realistic resource. Treating teachers as the primary source of expertise instead of recipients of knowledge reflects the core idea that adult learners bring relevant experience to their learning.

Self-directed learning is seen through viewing adults as capable learners who are in control of their own learning, but have varied levels of comfortability when refining their practice (Merriam, 2001). I apply this theory through the use of Grow's staged model, where educators enter professional development at one of 4 stages of readiness: dependent, interested, involved, and self-directed. While all educators bring valid expertise to the table, some need help when refining or adding to their practice. This doesn't assume that these learners can't work on their own, it assumes that learners need a guide to work on their own effectively depending on what stage they're at. This theory is seen in the organization of the learners. Some TCTs utilize scaffolds more than others based on general administrative observations. However, there are still learners in those sub groups that may be new or unfamiliar with some concepts. If I put all learners that were unfamiliar with scaffolding together, they wouldn't have the content specific relevance needed to create the end scaffold. This means I must put all learners in TCTs with some kind of scaffolding guide for learners at different stages. Any stage of learner will benefit from the subject-specific content discussed, but have the option to lean on a facilitator created guide if needed. This gives less self-directed learners their own scaffold while preserving the design process for all learners.

Outside of the theories applying to the initial professional development, it also applies to the timing of the second professional development. I scheduled the second professional development about 4 weeks after the first so educators had time to apply their scaffold within their own practice, reflecting self-directed learning. After applying their scaffolds in practice, they then have the opportunity to discuss data and make revisions to the scaffold based on student feedback and performance data. This process itself shows educators that their learning in professional development is something that they refine and take ownership over in their own practice, instead of just something they're lectured about and forget (du Toit-Brits et al., 2024). By providing this gap, educators can create current material informed by recent data that's directly applicable to their current and future practice. A self-directed learner has ownership over their work and this process reflects the importance of that within an adult learning audience.

Critical Analysis: Strengths and Limitations

There are a wide array of strengths and limitations with this professional development. The strongest evidence to support this design lies in the use of educator-made material as the foundation for the scaffolds created. Instead of using a facilitator created template, educators

work in their actual teams to create something familiar. Since TCTs are already working with scaffolds and materials they've created, a sense of ownership over their learning is established (Knapke et al., 2024). Not only this, but the scaffold is designed with the unit educators are actively teaching, making the scaffold and data generated immediately relevant. Educators creating this shared scaffold from previous work also addresses the original need, where administration reported inconsistent scaffolding use amongst departments. By creating a common and shared scaffold within TCTs, all subjects across all grade levels will have some form of consistent, relevant scaffold that all educators have ownership of.

The biggest limitation with this design is that it does not completely address the branding gap seen within present scaffolds. Educators with pre-existing, highly personalized scaffolds may be more resistant to adopting the new scaffold on top of their old one (du Toit-Brits et al., 2024). Another limitation is the short, 50 minute session which may not allow enough time for complete buy-in on the educators end, or enough time for all learners within a TCT to understand the new scaffold and have their voices heard.

What makes this professional development strong is partially its limitation. Using prior work is beneficial and can save time, but there's a real possibility it leaves educators with highly-specific scaffolds in the dust. I explain in my module 3 presentation that respect and relevance are built on leveraging educator experience. This professional development respects educators' experience and aims to create a relevant scaffold for immediate use and revision. However, it doesn't truly address how different educator experiences work with one another. Some educators may not agree with everyone on their team and feel slighted, and some may have more experience to leverage if they're a special education teacher but are not confident to push back in discussion. Finding ways to build in resolution tools would be an effective way to respect all educators in their discussions without overlooking the positive impacts of their experience. This professional development is not final and it's essential to reflect on my practice as an instructional designer to create experiences that can be effective in all professional developments over time (Idris et al., 2024).

Implementation Challenges and Theory-Based Solutions

Implementing this professional development has its challenges, many of which relate to the subject matter as opposed to the design itself. The first major challenge that could arise is resistance from educators who already have highly personalized scaffolds that they've refined for years. It's important to leverage experience from adult learning audiences, but it must be done correctly. This issue can be redirected by a simple reframe from the facilitator. Facilitators should not phrase this new scaffold as a replacement for educators who have strong scaffolding, but rather a new structure that is shaped using one another's materials. This solution relies on andragogy by leveraging educator work for a new material instead of taking away what they already have (Knapke et al., 2024). This ensures that educators still have ownership over previous materials and strong contributions to a new material.

The 50 minute PD session, as noted in the strengths and limitations, is also a constraint. A solution for this is backed by Grow's staged model, where facilitators add an additional PD session for TCTs to work on the material. This will stretch the 2 PD sessions to 3 PD sessions, but it still fits the 50 minute time frame that can't be changed. By splitting the first professional development session into two parts, teams are allotted more time to engage with the material and

draw on one another's understanding. This also provides time for learners who may be at an earlier stage of self-directed learning to grow a foundational understanding of scaffolding before actually designing material (du Toit-Brits et al., 2024).

A final challenge is the risk of more experienced or talkative teachers dominating the small group discussions within each TCT. This may cause quieter or new teachers to back away from the discussion and not have their experiences taken into account in the larger scaffold created. Granted, the short 50-minute time frame may exacerbate this issue as well. A way this can be mediated is through facilitators building structure into the discussions, like having educators anonymously answer a Google Form sharing opinions on scaffolds and TCTs overviews together as they discuss. This structure is arguably a form of social learning theory, where the educators' expertise is the foundation of the discussion (Ossenberg & Henderson, 2024). This way all voices are heard regardless of personality dynamics.

Professional Development Goals and Trajectory

Designing this professional development made me think about a few future goals I have as an instructional designer and as a facilitator. One main goal is identifying concrete needs from parties I design for. As an educator within this school system and an instructional designer completing an M.Ed. that designs content for administrators, I'm often pulled in two directions. My M.Ed in Instructional Design and Educational Technology has given me a strong understanding of adult learning theory and best practices for instructional design to better understand the tension between two parties. I want to make sure I am addressing concerns I have experienced personally, and common anecdotal concerns I've heard from educators alike. At the same time, I know I need to design professional development with administrators needs and requirements in mind as well. This causes me to assume what would work for each party I'm designing for. Designing for an adult learning audience requires strong understanding and application of adult learning theory, while weighing the needs of that learning audience's administrators. In the future I hope to combine my facilitator philosophy and understanding of andragogy and self-directed learning with subject matter experts from both the learning audience and administrators to create strong professional developments.

Working with SMEs to meet this goal requires me applying social learning theory in an observational sense. Social learning theory promotes the idea that learning through observation is a great technique for an adult learner, and in turn, a great technique to use in designing professional development (Ossenberg & Henderson, 2024). By observing these two parties' work or actions, I am able to then apply the understanding of that work myself. For example, if I observe the daily realities of a teacher in a school, I can see exactly how they manage their time, what they seem to need assistance with, how they align their curriculum, and more. While this isn't as common of a practice with an administrator, I can sit in on meetings, track the responsibilities of individual administrators, and more.

I do understand this may not be realistic for all professional developments and that it would take a great deal of time to apply this theory effectively. Something not related to social learning that

can aid in completing this is by conducting a more thorough and specific needs assessment for each party. This builds on the needs analysis I already did for this unit, which highlighted scaffolding inconsistencies and branding. Applying a more structured version of this to future professional developments would make these two parties' voices essential and interdependent. For example, educators are asked what they struggle the most with and administrators are asked what the biggest problem in the school is. If most educators say conflict resolution and most administrators say attendance, I can have each party debrief why they think that, and create a course that solves that problem. This would also be a lengthy approach, but it's necessary for long-term change. If the main goal of a professional development is to drive solutions that benefit both parties, viewing professional development as an iterative, reflective process instead of a stagnant requirement will lead to measurable change and growth (Idris et al., 2024).

As I complete my M.Ed, I plan to apply this structured, needs-based assessment approach within my teaching and current context before branching out into large instructional design for corporations or school districts. Having the needed tools to develop my instructional design practice and interact with clients and their learning audiences will help in my search of instructional design positions outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

My vision for effective adult education is that educators are experienced professionals whose expertise must be leveraged for respectful and relevant professional development. This vision is grounded in the learning theories of andragogy and self-directed learning. These theories guided all aspects of my design for each module, from building TCT scaffolds from educators' pre-existing material to every educator being supported by a facilitator guide, regardless of their stage according to Grow's staged model of SDL. Instead of formatting the development as a lecture, providing a need-to-use template, and telling educators what to change, these design decisions were all given back to the educator. This reaffirms the importance of connecting adult learning theory to the actual practice of adult learners.

While I have learned formative aspects of professional development through this work, I've also learned that there are limitations to theory-based practice. Effective adult education leadership is something I am still learning and will continue to learn, and one major concept I've understood is that theory is not always what happens in practice. As highlighted previously, the strengths of a theory-backed design can be its limitations. By designing for what I think an educator needs or what I think an administrator needs, I lose sight of the core issue. For example, it's best adult learning practice to allow educators to use their materials to leverage experience and establish respect, but by making them modify these tools, there's a risk that the development isn't as impactful or relevant. Theory is what grounds my design practice, but it becomes a limitation when the design is not created with the people it's for (Ossenberg & Henderson, 2024). Long-term, effective professional development values the administrator and the educator voice, while also adhering to the theories of andragogy and self-directed learning.

References

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