

HOW ADULTS LEARN

FORMS THE FOUNDATION OF THE LEARNING DESIGNS STANDARD

By Eleanor Drago-Severson

As we undertake the complex and compelling challenge of building capacity for all educators to meet the needs of all students, we know a few things for sure. The first is that supporting adult learning has a direct and positive influence on increasing student achievement. We know that not all professional learning initiatives — for example, strict content delivery, or what is often known as sit-and-get (Murnane & Willett, 2011) — have the same effect on student achievement. However, we also know that authentic professional learning, in which adults are learning and growing and experiencing as they participate, can make a tremendous difference for adults, children, schools, and school systems.

For these reasons and more, Learning Forward's new Learning Designs standard is an important reminder that shaping professional learning as opportunities for adults to learn and grow is essential and that our understanding of how adults learn is an essential component of this pressing goal. Doing this work — shaping learning and

growth-enhancing conditions in professional learning — will help us meet the adaptive challenges we encounter every day. This holds the promise of helping us to increase our personal and organizational capacities and resources. With new kinds of implicit and explicit demands placed on practicing and aspiring school leaders — principals, assistant principals, teachers, superintendents, district leaders, specialists, professional developers — who dedicate themselves to educating children and youth, we need to carefully consider how we can best design learning environments that are supportive of growth.



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I define growth as increases in our cognitive, emotional or affective, intrapersonal (the way the self relates to the self), and interpersonal (the way the self

relates to others) capacities to better manage leading, teaching, learning, and living.

More specifically, the three strands of the Learning



Designs standard — apply learning theories, research, and models; select learning designs; and promote active engagement (Learning Forward, 2011) — point toward the promise of crafting professional learning as learning labs (Drago-Severson, in press) in which educators learn about content, learn by engaging with each other, and learn from the process of learning itself.

APPLY LEARNING THEORIES, RESEARCH, AND MODELS

The first major idea in the Learning Designs standard focuses on the underlying beliefs and values that drive professional learning and the common features of robust learning environments that are informed by theories, research, and models. For example, the explanation of the standard names “active engagement, modeling, reflection, metacognition, application, feedback, ongoing support, and formative and summative assessment” as key components of many effective learning designs (Learning Forward, 2011).

These elements are all very important. As a developmental psychologist and teacher who has worked with K-12 educators as well as aspiring and practicing leaders in university settings, I have studied how people learn and grow for more than 20 years. My work is closely aligned with this standard in that both seek to create conditions that enhance learning and growth for adults with what I would call very different developmental orientations — that is, varied ways of interpreting their experiences and the differentiated kinds of supports and challenges they need to grow and learn. More specifically, constructive developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000) and the pillar practices (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, in press) derived from my research inform my thinking about the common features of robust learning environments highlighted in this strand.

For example, one particularly powerful idea from constructive developmental theory is that we, as human beings, make sense of our learning experiences, life experiences, and the world in qualitatively different ways. Understanding that, as adults, we have different ways of knowing — or

ways of taking things in and putting them together in our minds — reminds us that we need a variety of pedagogical practices in any professional learning in order to adequately support and challenge adult learners who have different ways of understanding their experiences. What feels like a good fit pedagogically for one learner might feel overly challenging for another, so paying careful attention to differentiating the structures we create and the expectations we convey in designing learning can make a big difference for educators and for our schools. This strand emphasizes these important ideas as well.

Feedback, for example, is an important part of learning, as is the yearning that most of us have for ongoing support. The Learning Designs standard reminds us of the importance of differentiating the ways in which we offer feedback and support to adults with different ways of understanding and experiencing learning environments. It also helps us to be mindful of the need to integrate a diversity of pedagogical practices and processes to enhance learning to meet the needs of adults with different learning styles as well as developmental orientations, or what I call ways of knowing. Mentoring is a context in which a person is giving and receiving feedback, and part of the role of a mentor — from a developmental standpoint — is to offer appropriate support and challenge. The Learning Designs standard emphasizes the critical importance of this aspect of learning and growing.

SELECT LEARNING DESIGNS

The second strand of the Learning Designs standard reminds us of the importance of three fundamental ideas that are essential to building effective learning spaces:

1. Supporting adult learning and growth has a direct

LEARNING DESIGNS:

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes (Learning Forward, 2011).



and positive connection to student outcomes;

2. Learning designs that invite adult learners to experience the processes they are learning about as they are learning about them are often most effective; and
3. Making those processes clear and explicit helps adults implement them in practice.

These ideas resonate with what I've learned over the past two decades about the importance of "developmental intentionality" (meaning to shape learning considering the needs and input of the learner), modeling, and transparency for crafting professional learning initiatives as learning labs. My learning-oriented model (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009) involves intentionally reframing practices we may already be familiar with — teaming, mentoring, collegial inquiry, and providing leadership roles — as spaces in and out of which adults with different ways of understanding their experiences can grow and learn.

Longitudinal research has shown that experiencing these practices and processes for learning and growth while in the process of learning about them serves as an important support to educator learning and growth and makes a positive and lasting influence on practice (Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, in press). By looking beyond the delivery of specific content to the experiences and needs of learners, to the messages we convey directly and indirectly as the leaders and designers of learning, and to our collective hopes for the work we do together, we can more effectively shape professional learning as learning labs that support individual, school, and system growth, as well as raise student achievement.

PROMOTE ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The third strand of the Learning Designs standard speaks to the importance of giving adults choice in their learning and to the power of working collaboratively with others. These are two ideas that match what I've learned through research and in workshops around the world from educators who serve schools and school systems in a variety of capacities. For instance, the strand's emphasis on the need to invite adults into processes of "discussion and dialogue, writing, demonstrations, inquiry, reflection, metacognition, co-construction of knowledge, practice with feedback, coaching, modeling, and problem solving" points to the promise and power of differentiation, and to the forward strides we can take — and *make* — when we commit to learning with, from, and for each other.

After all, it is not just the structures we create, but the experiences we design for adult learners that make a difference to their learning and growing when engaging in these learning enterprises. Attending carefully to developmental diversity — like all forms of diversity — is one important way that we can create environments of high support and challenge that can reach and inspire learners with different needs, learning preferences, and ways of knowing.

WE ARE ALL LEARNING DESIGNERS

The ideas presented in the new Learning Designs standard are imperative — and a call for even greater mindfulness — for all of us. I offer this because from my perspective, we are all learning designers. In working with colleagues, parents, and students, we are all mindful of the influence that design has on learning. Recognizing — as this standard emphasizes — that aligning our designs with what we know about the different ways adults learn, and how they learn best, holds great promise for the future of education.

Just as Learning Forward's decision to use the term "professional learning" is significant and inspiring, so too is the organization's commitment to sharing these new standards and ideas. Educators value professional learning that feels meaningful. Integrating theories, research, and models of human learning is a promising pathway for professional learning to achieve its intended outcomes and to open real possibilities for growth.

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