

# A Phenomenological Study Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of Virtual Professional Development through the Lens of Adult Learning Theory

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## Abstract

This phenomenological study design explored the lived experiences of teachers' perceptions of virtual professional experiences through the lens of adult learning theory. The participants were comprised of elementary educators from a suburban county in New York state. The participants in this study were all forced to shift to virtual teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions addressed were how do educators describe their experiences with virtual professional development, what characteristics of adult learning do educators value most, and how does virtual professional development compare to traditional in-person professional development related to educators' professional growth and/or career? Through qualitative analysis of email questionnaires, interviews, virtual observation, and document analysis, coding was conducted to discover themes to understand the educators' lived experiences better. The findings from this study were as follows: Participants preferred in-person professional development experiences; the positive aspects of virtual professional development were convenience and the relevance of topics; the negative aspects of virtual professional development were lack of engagement and technological issues; and participants benefited from in-person professional development experiences as related to their careers.

## Introduction

In the field of education, professionals are expected to expand their knowledge to stay current about topics relating to student learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many states passed laws requiring professional development hours for teachers to retain their certification or teaching license. For example, New York state teachers must maintain 175 hours of professional development every five years under the NYS Department of Education Commissioner's regulation (NYSED, 2009). In addition, many teachers' contracts include required professional development time at the school district level. "Professional development is a strategy that schools and districts use to ensure that educators continue to strengthen their practice throughout their career" (Mizell, 2010, p.1). Society has moved into a digital age and there is value in exploring teachers' perceptions of virtual professional development as it relates to adult learning theory.

## Research Questions

The objective of this research was to explore teachers' perceptions of virtual professional development as compared to traditional in-person professional development through the lens of adult learning theory. The three specific research questions that guided this qualitative study were:

1. How do educators describe their experiences with virtual professional development?
2. What characteristics of adult learning do educators value most?
3. How does virtual professional development compare to traditional in-person professional development as it relates to educators' professional growth and/or career?

## Review of Literature

### Theoretical Framework

The greatest teachers of ancient times were the teachers of adults (Knowles, 1990). The ancient Greeks were taught by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle while Cicero and Euclid taught ancient Romans. These teachers invented ways to involve the learner in the activity of learning because they viewed learning as the process of active inquiry.

Andragogy is a concept popularized by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles' theory of andragogy created a way to differentiate learning in childhood from learning in adulthood. In his book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Knowles (1980) contrasts andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" with pedagogy, the "art and science of helping children learn" (p. 43). Andragogy, stemming from the Greek language meaning "studies of man," can generally be described as a "model of assumptions" about how the characteristics of adult learners are different from the traditional pedagogical assumptions about child learners. Knowles' concept of andragogy presents the individual learner as one who is autonomous, free, and growth-oriented.

Knowles et al. (2015) stated that andragogy is anchored in six main assumptions:

1. Learner's need to know
2. Learner's self-concept
3. Learner's prior experiences
4. Learner's readiness to learn
5. Learner's orientation to learning
6. Learner's motivation to learn

Knowles believes in fostering self-direction. He argues that proactive learners, who take the initiative in learning, learn more and learn better than passive or reactive learners, who wait to be taught by a teacher. "They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners" (Knowles, 1975, p. 14). Grounded in a humanistic philosophy, Knowles also suggested that self-directed learning should have the development of the learner's capacity to be self-directed as its goal. The constructs of andragogy by Malcolm Knowles is the theoretical framework referenced throughout this study.

### Professional Development Concepts and Strategies

Well-designed and implemented professional development should be considered an essential component of a comprehensive system of teaching and learning that supports students in developing the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). It is thought that professional learning should link to educators' experiences and bridge into leadership opportunities to focus on the growth and development of teachers. Darling-Hammond (1994) believes that teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly, so that they can help students create useful cognitive maps, relate ideas to one another, and address misconceptions. Teachers need to see how ideas connect across fields and to everyday life. It is beneficial for teachers to know about curriculum resources and technologies to connect their students with sources of information and knowledge that allow them to explore ideas, acquire and synthesize information, and frame and solve problems. In addition, Darling-Hammond believes that teachers need to know about collaboration: how to structure interactions among students, how to collaborate with other teachers, and how to work with parents to shape supportive experiences at school and home.

### Virtual Learning

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, students and educators were suddenly shifted into new virtual learning environments with new methodologies. Synchronous learning is learning that takes place in real time, where a group of people are engaging in learning simultaneously (Lawless, 2020). Synchronous learning enables learners

to ask questions and receive answers on-the-spot, while also collaborating freely with their co-learners. Some examples of synchronous learning include live webinars, video conferencing, virtual classrooms and instant messaging. *Asynchronous learning* is designed to allow learners to complete courses without the constraints of having to be in a certain place at a certain time. Asynchronous learning does not hinder learners by place or time. With the internet, asynchronous learners have the freedom to complete course materials whenever they choose, and from any location. Some examples of asynchronous learning include online courses, email, blogs, pre-recorded video lessons or webinars, and online forums and discussion boards.

With virtual learning, the range of educational experiences for students and adults extends far beyond those offered in traditional settings. Teacher-centered classrooms may evolve into student-centered ones. The role of the teacher may change in becoming more of a coach than an information dispenser. To realize the vision of utilizing technology, school districts and colleges of education must prepare teachers to use it.

### Data Collection Procedures

For this qualitative phenomenological research study, four main types of data collection methodologies were used to analyze teachers' perceptions of virtual professional development as it relates to adult learning theory. The data collection methods were email questionnaires, interviews, observation, and document analysis.

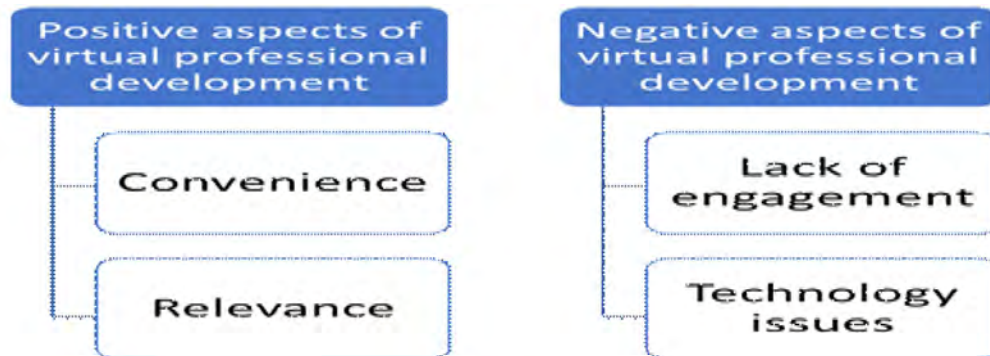
### Credibility and Dependability

Validity and reliability are the standards most frequently used for good and convincing quantitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985; 2000) propose specific criteria for qualitative research using the terms credibility, dependability, and generalizability. The researcher employed the use of member checking to ensure credibility in addition to maintaining detailed explanations of how data were collected and analyzed for dependability. Data sources and perspectives triangulated this study. Using detailed questionnaires and interviews, observation, and document analysis, the researcher developed a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. Lastly, by using these combined data sources, the researcher triangulated it by viewing the data through both the participants' and researcher's lens. This combination increased the generalizability and authenticity of the study.

### Participants and Methodology

The eleven participants in this study were selected with a purposeful sampling approach as is frequently utilized in qualitative research studies (Creswell, 2018). A phenomenological methodology was used as it was best suited to explore the lived experiences of educators who have

**Figure 1**  
**Positive and Negative Aspects of Virtual Professional Development**



participated in virtual professional development. The study participants were emailed the questionnaire in order to provide meaningful and thoughtful responses. Virtual interviews were conducted as a follow-up to each questionnaire as a method of member checking for accuracy and reliability. For this study, the participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

### Results for Research Question One

All the participants in this study commented on the positive and negative aspects of virtual professional development for research question one. The major themes are indicated in the figure above (see **Figure 1**).

#### Positive aspects of virtual professional development

The data revealed two main themes regarding the positive aspects of virtual professional development: *convenience and relevance*. When discussing the overarching theme of convenience, the participants shared examples from their own experiences with travel, home life, time management, and lifestyle. Under the theme of relevance, most participants highlighted that they appreciated the variety of topics that could be offered through virtual professional development. They also valued the ability to choose the topics that interested them or filled a particular need they had for their teaching. Convenience and relevance were highly regarded as two of the most positive aspects of virtual professional development.

#### Negative aspects of virtual professional development

The data revealed two main themes regarding the negative aspects of virtual professional development: *lack of engagement and technology issues*. The participants shared the sentiment that virtual professional de-

velopment lacked the interpersonal connection that traditional in-person professional development offers its educators. Technology issues are the other main drawback to virtual professional development. The educators in this study had all shared multiple instances when an aspect of technology had failed. These glitches included wireless connectivity issues, apps or websites not responding, problems with a site's log-in, and/or audio and visual problems.

### Findings for Research Question Two

Research Question Two addressed what characteristics of adult learning do educators value most. Each participant was asked to rank which of the following six constructs were the most valuable to them as adult learners as related to professional development. They were instructed to choose from the six statements listed below and select their top three choices.

1. I learn best with PD courses that I feel that I have a need to know.
2. I learn best with PD courses that are self-directed.
3. I learn best with PD which adds to my specific experiences.
4. I learn best with PD courses that have immediate relevance.
5. I learn best with PD courses that have immediate application.
6. I learn best with PD courses that I am internally motivated about.

**Figure 2**  
**Adult Learning Traits Valued by Educators in Professional Development**



The results are displayed in the bar graph above.(see **Figure 2**).

Knowles' constructs 4, 5, and 6 (readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn) received the highest rankings by the educators in this study with approximately 80% of the total votes. The majority of the participants related to the belief that when learning as an adult, it is valuable for the learning to be directly relevant to an aspect of their job responsibilities or classroom practice. This readiness involves situations where educators become aware of the content they need to know to effectively teach their students.

Equally as important to the belief that it is valuable for the learning to be directly relevant to an aspect of a teacher's job responsibilities was the construct of learning orientation. This idea supports the notion that the educators in this study valued professional development opportunities that had an immediate application of knowledge gained. The educators in this study appreciated learning about topics that had real-life applications in their classrooms.

Having an internal motivation to learn was ranked third. The educators in this study valued the desire to achieve their goals and pursue learning opportunities that they are internally motivated about. Having the option to choose topics of interest based on internal motivation for professional development is valued by the educators in this study.

**Findings for Research Question Three**

The researcher posed the last question: How does virtual professional development compare to traditional in-person professional development as it relates to educators' professional growth and/or career? Each participant in this study, responded that they preferred traditional in-person professional development to virtual professional development even though they had some positive experiences with the virtual format.

One participant summarized her thoughts below:

Both virtual and traditional professional development can be beneficial. While virtual learning offers the convenience and the opportunity to work at your own pace and maybe even from your own home, I do feel as an educator, it will never be as engaging as in-person learning. Adults, as well as our children, need to learn not only content and curriculum, but they also need exposure to social interactions and norms. After living through a pandemic, with wearing masks and long periods of time of having to be isolated, it is even more important now to bring back as many in person opportunities, because adults still need to practice interpersonal skills.

Without exception, the educators in this study felt strongly about the need for in-person opportunities to learn together as adults for their professional growth, career satisfaction, and advancement.

**Discussion and Recommendations for Future Practice**

This study was beneficial for two groups of stakeholders: school leaders and instructional coaches. From the findings of this study, school leaders can gain insight into the type of professional development they offer to their faculty. In-person professional development should be considered as the "first choice" of format for PD offerings at Superintendent's Conference Days or faculty meetings. In-person training was especially valued when educators were learning about a topic that either had direct relevance or direct application to their classrooms. In-person coaching and modeling should be considered as well as allowing for opportunities for teachers to talk with each other about the content presented. If school leaders cannot provide in-person trainings because of time constraints or financial limitations, choosing or developing virtual professional development sessions which increase teacher collaboration should be considered.

Instructional coaches can also benefit from the findings in this study. It is recommended that the virtual instructor integrate activities that foster communication and engagement. Some techniques can include the use of the chat feature, break-out rooms, screen sharing, asking direct questions to participants, and allowing participants to come off “mute” to engage in dialogue. Allowing the use of the chat feature enables the participants to share their thoughts with each other during the session which increases the extent to which they are active learners. Break-out rooms, which can be used during synchronous virtual professional development, allow for the participants to speak to each other in real-time and share their thoughts and experiences about the content being presented. Break-out rooms also offer the opportunity for the instructor to interact with the participants in smaller groups and check for understanding. Allowing for screen sharing, is another way for the instructor to encourage participants to add on to their learning by showing or illustrating a concept to the group based on their experiences. Instructors may also consider organizing their content in a PowerPoint format to make the information more accessible for the participants and increase their engagement with the topic. Building a “question and answer” period into a virtual professional development session also increases collaboration because it affords the participants an opportunity to share their thoughts. Encouraging and/or requiring participants to keep their cameras “on” during a virtual professional development session allows for increased interaction between the instructor and the participants. Verbal and non-verbal feedback can be used by the presenter to adjust the content of the session if necessary.

Additionally, developing a hybrid virtual professional development session which the researcher had observed in this study, is another way to increase engagement among the participants who are in-person learning together while the instructor is presenting the content virtually. Asynchronous virtual professional development can be offered for topics that are generally a requirement for the district and/or state regulation. Teachers could complete these types of training at their own pace and in their own choice of location. Lastly, instructional coaches can benefit from the knowledge of adult learning styles specifically valued by educators. They can gain insight into the way that educators perceive their adult learning based on the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Virtual learning is here to stay in the world of education but finding ways to prioritize authentic in-person experiences is still a valued and important characteristic of adult learning and the human experience.

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