



Choice and agency drive educators' engagement in online literacy course

BY MCKENZIE RABENN AND PAMELA BECK

Many teachers have strong beliefs about the way literacy should be taught, despite what the research shows about how students learn best. If an educator's existing beliefs about literacy clash with updated instructional understandings and

methods about the science of reading, there's a likelihood that teachers may resist embracing change and filter out new learning, regardless of its strong research base. However, our recent study indicated the potential for overcoming initial resistance when professional learning incorporates certain design principles (Rabenn, 2023).

The qualitative study focused on teachers' experiences with a mandated science of reading self-paced online course to examine teachers' level of engagement and buy-in. The course was designed for K-3 teachers and included 15 hours of content over six modules to be completed at participants' own pace within four months of enrollment.



We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven participants located throughout a sparsely populated Midwestern state using the Zoom platform. The participants were elementary school teachers, interventionists, and administrators at diverse stages in their careers, with experience ranging from five years to 42.

At the beginning of the course, participants held initial hesitancy and skepticism regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the science of reading. For example, one said, “I’m a 4th-grade teacher. So, I thought, well, how could this be relevant to me?” Another said, “I did have a little bit of doubt, like, ‘Oh, here comes another (program such as) whole language or focus on phonics or whatever.’” Another participant said, “I was a little defensive ... like, ‘Well, you know, what’s the big difference? This has worked for other kids for years and years. Why would we change it?’”

Despite initial resistance, however, participants exhibited a positive shift in their perceptions of the science of reading after taking the course. One initially hesitant teacher said, “I truly value the course. It aids my students.” Another said, “I feel much more confident and assured now. I can assess students and better understand how to assist them.”

Our interviews with participants suggested the shift occurred, in part, because the program allowed a high degree of educator autonomy and

choices that encouraged participants’ engagement, satisfaction, and depth of learning.

AUTONOMY WITH SETTING, LEARNING PATHS, AND PACING

With adult learning, offering autonomy over the learning process has been shown to be effective in enhancing motivation, decreasing stress levels, and boosting participation and achievement (Paterson & Neufeld, 1995; Drea, 2021). Autonomy in choosing reading material bolsters intrinsic motivation and engagement, subsequently influencing knowledge acquisition (Cho & Perry, 2012; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014).

Consistent with such approaches, participants in this online course had varying degrees of choice with learning engagement and in pacing the readings. Participants took varied approaches to these choices. Some selectively engaged with articles, selecting what resonated most. Others were compelled to read every article, regardless of personal interest, but they reported less engagement and satisfaction.

Participants also had choices in how they completed a journal reflection at the completion of each module. The journal assignment began with a plethora of prompts. Some were consistent between modules — for example, “Talk about your takeaways from this module.” Others were tied to a specific article within a module — for example, “After reading the blog post

on ‘Five things every teacher should know about vocabulary instruction,’ what elements of the article resonate with you?”

Writing about what interested them empowered participants to reflect on what was most relevant. This had a positive influence on their engagement, promoted deeper thinking, and sparked transformative shifts in beliefs as evidenced in participants’ instructional plans.

Choice of learning environment also proved critical in facilitating comfort and focus. Opting for familiar and conducive environments reduced distractions, positively influencing satisfaction and knowledge acquisition. By selecting where they took the course, participants could engage more deeply with the material compared to a potentially restrictive in-person setting.

The self-paced nature of the course allowed participants to tailor their learning, considering personal schedules and readiness. The pause feature in the program ensured they didn’t miss out on valuable content, a luxury not available when in person. Pausing allowed educators to address distractions, actively manage their time, and optimize learning. This practice aligns with markers of effective online learning, fostering a deeper understanding of the content.

BUILDING ON PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

In adult learning, it is paramount to build on learners’ rich experiences



and prior knowledge. Failing to acknowledge expertise can lead to resistance and hinder confidence. One way this course addressed that was by reassuring participants that some practices used in balanced literacy approaches are also encouraged in science of reading, such as using high-quality read-alouds.

The course also built on participants' prior experiences by asking participants to create lesson plans that integrated new knowledge with existing expertise. While we didn't expect participants would teach the lesson plan with their students, our hope was that the lesson plan would allow participants to think about the ways in which they could implement the topics from the course with their own students.

This process of reflection and application ensured the learning was not solely theoretical, which facilitated a deeper understanding of the content and prompted changes in their instructional beliefs. It also supported engagement and built confidence. Creating lesson plans prompted participants to rethink how to apply course learning to their grade levels, and this resulted in shifts in teaching practice.

Throughout, the course acknowledged that many teachers had been taught about meaning-based literacy practices and balanced literacy in their education coursework and schools' curriculum materials, absolving teachers from guilt over having used methodologies that are not grounded in research on how students actually learn to read. Additionally, the difficulties of teachers' work and the level of change that was being asked of them was acknowledged (Margolis & Nagel, 2006).

It also reassured participants about the intersection between meaning-based and code-based practices. Code-based and meaning-based instruction have been hotly debated topics in the field of education for decades.

Meaning-based approaches place an emphasis on getting students

engaged in texts first and then teaching skills within those texts. Proponents for meaning-based approaches argue that reading is as natural a process as learning to walk or talk and that exposure to print will eventually lead to skilled readers. In a code-based or phonics approach, teachers organize instruction around a scope and sequence of word reading skills, moving from simpler to more complex skills.

LIMITATIONS

The autonomous online approach did present some drawbacks. Some participants expressed a desire for collaborative engagement, and the absence of peer interaction negatively impacted overall program satisfaction for some.

This desire for more interaction was consistent with the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, which calls for the ongoing development of collective knowledge to best meet student needs (Learning Forward, 2022). This highlighted the intrinsic value of peer support and collaboration in reinforcing new concepts and boosting confidence.

LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Going forward, the long-term sustainability of integrating practices aligned with the science of reading demands a continuous focus on professional learning and ongoing support for educators. To best equip educators, sustained momentum relies on fostering a culture of continuous learning and establishing a framework for continuous support and learning opportunities that address the evolving educator needs and integrate

opportunities for teacher autonomy. Through professional learning that includes educator agency, educational paradigm shifts like this are possible.

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