

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR LESLLA TEACHERS: A STATUS REPORT

Patsy Vinogradov

Teachers of low-literate adult ESL learners work in challenging contexts. Their learners are unique; they are new to English and also new to print literacy. Teachers of this level must be both language teachers and reading specialists, and they often have not had many opportunities for professional development that focus on their learners. Workshops and conferences often assume literacy in learners, and it can be difficult to apply the ideas and resources shared to low-literate adult ESL classrooms. Where can teachers of such learners go to grow professionally and connect with colleagues? This report outlines current efforts in professional development for these underserved practitioners and presents an argument for nurturing a growing format of PD for LESLLA: study circles.

### LESLLA AS A UNIQUE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEED

Many adult immigrant and refugee students in the United States are well educated in their first languages, and they are academically prepared for English coursework upon arrival to their new country. For the most part, these are the learners that adult ESL teachers have come to expect in their programs, and such literate students are the only ones discussed in many certificate and graduate programs for teachers (Vinogradov & Liden, 2008). But other students have had limited or no formal schooling, and some have never learned to read in their first languages. McHugh, Gelatt and Fix (2007) estimate that about 750,000 adult immigrants in the US are not literate in English or their native language(s). Such learners are referred to in many ways: emerging readers, adult emergent readers, pre-literate /non-literate/semi-literate<sup>1</sup>, or discouragingly, “level zeros.” In this paper, learners with little or no first language literacy are referred to as LESLLA learners. LESLLA refers to an international group of scholars whose work focuses on the “Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition” of adult learners<sup>2</sup>.

As an adult ESL teacher and teacher educator, I talk with many teachers who are frustrated with the progress of their LESLLA learners. A frequent comment is, *I’ve been teaching ESL for 10 years, but I’m new to working with pre-literate learners. It seems like nothing I’m doing is working.* Others point out a common mismatch between oral and written skills: *My pre-literate learners can converse just fine. Their speaking skills are*

---

<sup>1</sup> These terms are commonly used interchangeably, although they do have distinct meanings. Pre-literate learners come from an oral tradition with no written form. Non-literate learners come from a literate culture, but have not learned to read and write. Semi-literate learners have had some schooling, but generally only a few years. Non-Roman-alphabet literate learners are literate in a language or languages that are either not alphabetic (i.e. Chinese) or alphabetic non-Roman (i.e. Cyrillic) or alphabetic, non-Roman and consonantal (i.e. Arabic) (Haverson & Haynes, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> For more information about LESLLA, see [www.leslla.org](http://www.leslla.org). For ease in writing, “LESLLA” is used here as an adjective to describe low-literacy adult ESL learners, their teachers, their classrooms, and PD directed at them specifically.

*very strong, but they barely recognize their names in print.* These comments indicate that teaching LESLLA learners is quite different from teaching those with strong first language literacy (Birch, 2002; Burt, Peyton & Adams, 2003; Huntley, 1992). Teachers of this level need a different knowledge base and different skills to successfully instruct LESLLA learners, and there is a severe lack of training available in working specifically with these students (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Vinogradov & Liden, 2008).

The following pages can act as a resource list for LESLLA practitioners who are seeking to improve their practice. Where can LESLLA teachers turn to learn more and to enrich their teaching? Where and how can they connect with other LESLLA professionals to share their successes and find insight to their struggles?

### **DELIVERY: WHAT IS THE CURRENT PACKAGING FOR LESLLA PD?**

When planning professional development, teacher educators juggle two priorities: the *content* of what is to be offered and how best to *deliver* it to practitioners. Both are critical. If one is lacking, the other suffers, and the professional development (PD) doesn't have the impact intended. How are LESLLA teachers currently accessing professional development? Although no documentation exists to describe PD for LESLLA teachers around the country, some general observations can be made about current delivery of LESLLA specific PD. These activities fall into four general 'PD delivery' categories: workshops and conferences, short-term coursework, online print resources, and teacher training videos.

A string of professional organizations and their conference organizers are clearly noting the need for LESLLA related PD. At national professional conferences such as TESOL<sup>3</sup> and COABE<sup>4</sup>, as well as the bi-annual Language Teacher Education conference<sup>5</sup>, LESLLA learners have been the focus of a handful of pre-conference workshops in recent years<sup>6</sup>. Concurrent sessions and poster sessions have included a smattering of presentations devoted to LESLLA learners. At the state and regional level, anecdotally through my colleagues I am aware that teaching LESLLA learners has been the focus of training opportunities for teachers in California, Georgia, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, and no doubt others. Workshops and conference sessions continue to be the most common delivery method for LESLLA PD.

---

<sup>3</sup> Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, see [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Adult Basic Education, see [www.coabe.org](http://www.coabe.org)

<sup>5</sup> Language Teacher Education conference, see [www.carla.umn.edu](http://www.carla.umn.edu)

<sup>6</sup> Recent pre-convention workshops have included (Bigelow & Finn-Miller, 2011; Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011; Liden, Poulos, & Vinogradov, 2008).

Second, in addition to such one-shot presentations, short term coursework has appeared that provides LESLLA-specific PD. While face to face coursework in teaching LESLLA learners remains rare, many excellent options have appeared online in recent years. For example, ELL-U<sup>7</sup> is a free professional development network for ESOL practitioners funded by the Department of Education. They have identified working with adult emergent readers as a learning priority, and in December 2011 an interactive online course for LESLLA teachers was launched. A follow-up study circle began in February 2012 to allow LESLLA teachers to delve deeper and discuss relevant research and its connections to the classroom with like-minded colleagues<sup>8</sup>. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Literacy Council developed an online course for LESLLA teachers and volunteers that presents common characteristics of LESLLA students and offers concrete teaching suggestions<sup>9</sup> (Minnesota Literacy Council, n.d.). In Virginia, a similar online course is available through the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center<sup>10</sup>.

Third, a number of online print resources for teachers to increase their knowledge and skills about teaching LESLLA learners have recently been launched. While a few years ago next to nothing was available online specifically geared toward LESLLA teaching and learning, thankfully that is no longer the case! Colleagues at Bow Valley College in Alberta, Canada, have developed an extremely thorough online resource center at [www.esl-literacy.com](http://www.esl-literacy.com). Here LESLLA teachers can find print materials for classroom instruction, guidance regarding assessments and lesson planning, readings and suggestions for teacher study groups, and much more (Bow Valley College, n.d.). And locally, [www.multilingualminnesota.org](http://www.multilingualminnesota.org) devotes a portion of its online language resources to teachers of adult pre-literate ESL. It includes information on balanced literacy, learner-generated texts, extensive reading resources, published materials, and teacher resources<sup>11</sup>. In addition, the Minnesota professional organization for ESL teachers and TESOL affiliate, MinneTESOL, along with its partner organization in Wisconsin, WITESOL, published a special issue of their academic journal in 2008 that specifically focused on low-literacy learners. That volume is available free online at [www.minnewitesoljournal.org](http://www.minnewitesoljournal.org). On a national scale, CAELA<sup>12</sup>, a subdivision of the Center for Applied Linguistics, offers brief reports, annotated bibliographies, archived listserv conversations, and other print resources to teachers, some of which have focused on low-literacy levels (Vinogradov & Bigelow,

---

<sup>7</sup> ELL-U is an online professional development portal for adult ESL teachers, and can be found at [www.ell-u.org](http://www.ell-u.org)

<sup>8</sup> The online course was developed and is taught by Martha Bigelow, and the study circle was developed and is facilitated by Patsy Vinogradov.

<sup>9</sup> This course was developed by Burgen Young and is available at <http://online.themlc.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> This course was developed by Nancy Faux and is available at <http://valrc.org/trainings/onlinecourses.html>

<sup>11</sup> [www.multilingualminnesota.org](http://www.multilingualminnesota.org) was created and is maintained by the author, Patsy Vinogradov, with assistance from Max Vinogradov.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Adult English Language Acquisition has a handful of print resources for LESLLA teachers and a bibliography of published texts for LESLLA learners. For more information, see <http://www.cal.org/topics/ell/adult-esl.html>

2010). And stepping out even further to look at LESLLA internationally, the LESLLA Symposium website ([www.leslla.org](http://www.leslla.org)) archives its publications and presentations as well as related resources for LESLLA scholars and practitioners. For the self-directed LESLLA practitioner, there is much to be found and learned from via these online print resources.

Currently, a fourth path to receiving LESLLA PD is in the form of teacher training videos. The New American Horizons Foundation released a professionally-made teacher training video for LESLLA instructors entitled “Building Literacy in Adult Emergent Readers,” (New American Horizons Foundation, 2010). The video is available online for free at [www.newamericanhorizons.org](http://www.newamericanhorizons.org), along with ideas for using the videos for staff development (see also Kurzet, 2002). Also, Literacywork International, a literacy-focused research and development company, has developed and posted a number of videos in classroom settings that demonstrate a wide variety of teaching strategies and assessment options<sup>13</sup>. While simply watching the videos may not be very impactful, videos such as those mentioned here have been incorporated in other PD activities as well, such as workshops and study circles (see Vinogradov, 2011; Vinogradov, 2012). Integrating videos within other PD formats allows for discussion and group reflection on the content and moves the activity from passive viewing to one with the potential to change practice, theories, and assumptions (Smith, 2010; Vinogradov, 2012; Webster-Wright, 2009).

Both the online print and video offerings mentioned above have appeared in the last three-five years and show that professional developers are indeed working to respond to LESLLA teachers’ PD needs. Such extensive, free, online resources for LESLLA teachers as those described above allow practitioners to engage in ongoing learning on their own, through self-study, or to share and explore these resources informally with colleagues (Smith & Hofer, 2003). The number of offerings now available also indicates that the use of technology is particularly useful in delivering PD for LESLLA teachers. This is especially important since LESLLA teachers are often scattered around communities among many programs, are not paid to attend PD, or are simply not able to easily meet regularly for face-to-face PD experiences (Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001).

Despite the challenges, professional developers continue to offer a wide variety of in-person options for LESLLA teachers. To provide a local example, working with LESLLA learners was determined as a core PD need for adult ESL teachers in Minnesota following a statewide survey of nearly 700 ABE practitioners (ATLAS, 2009).

---

<sup>13</sup> Literacywork International is directed by Heide Wrigley and more information can be found at [www.literacywork.com](http://www.literacywork.com)



## CONTENT OF LESLLA PD

Beyond designing the delivery of PD, teacher educators must attend to high quality content. This list of workshop presentation titles for local PD for LESLLA teachers in the Minnesota *Case in Point* above indicates content typical of LESLLA PD: lesson planning, literacy instruction, and multi-level group management. Across the many delivery options for LESLLA PD, topics remain generally consistent. Content of workshops and short-term online courses tend to focus on the knowledge base topics listed in Table 1 or on specific instructional strategies such as the language experience approach, balanced literacy, meaningful assessment, etc. For reference, I've culled common topics from the recent conference sessions and online PD options and compiled them in Table 2. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it gives a sense of "what's being talked about" in current LESLLA PD.

*Table 2*

*Typical Content of LESLLA PD*

Assessing literacy and oral skills	Extensive reading	Oral language for literacy
Balanced literacy instruction	First language literacy	Phonemic awareness
Building blocks of literacy	Hands-on learning	Reading essentials
Characteristics of LESLLA	Learner-generated texts	Reasons for low-literacy
Components of Reading	Lesson planning	Resource Sharing
Contextualized phonics	Managing multi-levels	Visual Literacy ( <i>see Bruski, this volume</i> )
Early childhood connections	Materials development	Writing Fiction Stories

While the topics in Table 2 are immediately practical for the busy LESLLA practitioner and may increase her repertoire for the classroom, current offerings rarely move beyond "knowing that" and "knowing how" into what Smith refers to as "knowing whether and why" (2010, p. 71). When PD reaches for the 'whether and why,' the objective is to change theories and assumptions in what amounts to Webster-Wright's concept of professional learning (2009). Knowing *about, that, and how* are important to offer, of course, especially for new teachers to this level or to the field who need more and better instructional strategies immediately. As Smith writes, ABE teachers, "like professionals in other fields- need a wide range of learning experiences. They need access to the types of training and PD that states and programs currently offer to them, but they also need opportunities to participate in authentic continuing professional learning activities, which are rarely offered" (2010, p. 71). For a LESLLA professional to really understand her classroom practice and to make wise, informed choices for individual learners, professional developers need to offer more options such as study circles that can move beyond learning about

something or how to do something, experiences that include job-embedded learning activities in collaboration with like-minded colleagues. This PD option is further examined below.

## **MOVING TOWARD KNOWING WHETHER AND WHY: LESLLA STUDY CIRCLES AND COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY**

How can teachers work together to dig deeper into the complexities of LESLLA teaching and learning? One option mentioned above is study circles, a PD format that moves beyond the one-shot workshop model. Study circles offer teachers a place to explore important issues together over time. This type of collaborative inquiry, as defined by Kasl and Yorks, is “a systematic process in which participants organize themselves into small groups to explore a question that all members find compelling.” (Kasl & Yorks, 2010). Study circles are one format of collaborative inquiry. They offer a realistic, effective option for professional learning for LESLLA teachers and in the ABE world in general, where teachers of similar levels and content may be isolated in various programs and scattered throughout a city or state with little opportunity for interaction (Hord, 1997; Young, 2009). A study circle brings practitioners together and is one way of creating the conditions for what Lave and Wenger call a community of practice (1991). Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of people who share a passion for an activity and who interact regularly to improve their performance (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoPs provide a way of thinking about collegial social interaction as a critical element to professional learning. Wenger (1998) describes three components of a CoP. The first is the *domain*, or the defined area of shared inquiry. The second is *community*, or the various relationships among the members and their sense of belonging. And finally is *practice*, or the body of knowledge, methods, cases, stories, tools, and documents used in the community (Wenger, 1998).

NCSALL (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy) describes study circles as small learning groups of practitioners, usually 8 to 12 teachers, who meet to discuss issues of relevance to their classroom practice (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2006). They are organized around a specific topic. The groups generally meet for three to five sessions and are guided by a facilitator who has experience with the topic of study. NCSALL names three key elements to study circles: professional wisdom, research, and their application to practice (NSCALL, 2006, p.11). Prior to each session, participants read a selection of relevant research on the study circle topic, and they may have written or classroom-based reflection tasks to complete as

well. During meetings, study circle participants actively discuss the readings and tasks and explore together how research can inform their classroom practice. NCSALL outlines four objectives for participants of a study circle:

1. Read research articles presenting findings from adult education studies
2. Discuss the relevance of the findings for the students with whom they work
3. Discuss strategies for applying the findings in their classrooms and programs
4. Make plans for trying strategies or changing their practice (NSCALL, 2006, p. 1-2)

Such PD brings teachers together, connects research and practice, and creates a forum for sharing professional wisdom. Study circles and other forms of collaborative inquiry in PD could lead in a number of important directions for LESLLA teaching and learning.

In my recent work with study circles with LESLLA teachers, I have been taken aback at the amount and quality of professional sharing teachers engage in during our time together. They report increased reflection with the research they are reading, professional support in often isolating settings, and increased teaching repertoires. As one study circle participant put it: “The ‘come back around and see how it is going’ feel was refreshing and so unlike the conferences that give a thousand ideas, but no time to really absorb and focus on them. The conference effect, like trying to catch a thousand ping pong balls all being hurled at you simultaneously...some ideas have extra value to you but get lost in the shuffle,” (see Vinogradov, 2012).

To sum up this overview of LESLLA PD offerings, most current offerings have solid footing in what Smith refers to as “know about,” “know that,” and “know how” types of knowledge (Smith, 2010). Workshop sessions, online print resources, short-term coursework, and viewing teacher training videos may build awareness, build knowledge, and even change practice (Smith, 2010). But with the exception of study circles, current LESLLA PD rarely moves into the ‘knowing whether and why’ that teacher development experts assert is critical for changing theories and assumptions. Such PD lacks the reflective opportunities required to qualify as professional learning that can powerfully change practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone, 2009; Smith, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). Study circles, however, provide a notable exception and hold distinct promise as a PD delivery option for developing effective LESLLA teachers (Vinogradov & Liden, 2008; Vinogradov, 2012).

## **CONCLUSION**

LESLLA learners are faced with a double-challenge: learning English while learning to read for the first time in life (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). While teachers of this level have limited research and resources to guide their practice, a variety of professional development opportunities are now available. All of these offerings have a role in the life of a LESLLA educator. Taking advantage of these PD opportunities can help LESLLA teachers explore and improve the teaching and learning in their classrooms and better serve our low-literacy adult learners.

## **AUTHOR**

Patsy Vinogradov has been involved in ESL since 1994. After teaching in Russia, she worked extensively with adult immigrants and refugees in Nebraska and Minnesota. Patsy teaches at Hamline University and is a professional developer in the area of adult ESL learners, particularly those with low first-language literacy. She is a PhD Candidate in Education at the University of Minnesota and also works with MinneTESOL, the Minnesota TESOL affiliate.

**REFERENCES**

- ATLAS. (2009). ABE Practitioner Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.atlasabe.org/pd-system/research-surveys/abe-practitioner-survey-2009>
- Belzer, A., Drennon, C., & Smith, C. (2001). Building Professional Development Systems in Adult Basic Education. *Annual review of adult learning and literacy*, 2, 151.
- Bigelow, M., & Schwarz, R. L. (2010). Adult English Language Learners with Limited Literacy. *National Institute for Literacy*, 33.
- Bigelow, M., & Vinogradov, P. (2011). Teaching Adult Second Language Learners Who Are Emergent Readers. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31(1), 120–136.
- Bigelow, Martha, & Finn-Miller, S. (2011). Teaching adult ELLs with limited formal schooling. Presented at the Commission on Adult Basic Education, COABE, San Francisco, CA.
- Bigelow, Martha, & Vinogradov, P. (2011). Professional development tools for preparing teachers to teach adult emergent readers. Presented at the Language Teacher Education, Minneapolis, MN.
- Bow Valley College. (n.d.). ESL Literacy Network. Retrieved December 23, 2011, from <http://www.esl-literacy.com/>
- Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(8), 597–604.
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational researcher*, 38(3), 181–199.
- English Language Learner University (ELL-U). (n.d.). Retrieved December 23, 2011, from <http://ell-u.org/>
- Haverson, W. W., & Haynes, J. L. (1982). *ESL/literacy for Adult Learners*. Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Hord, S. M., Laboratory, S. E. D., Research, U. S. O. of E., & Improvement. (1997). *Professional learning communities: What are they and why are they important?* Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Kasl, E., & Yorks, L. (2010). "Whose Inquiry Is This Anyway?" Money, Power, Reports, and Collaborative Inquiry. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(4), 315.
- Kurzet, R. (2002). Teachable moments: Videos of adult ESOL classrooms. *Focus on Basics*, 5, 8–11.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge Univ Pr.

- Liden, A., Poulos, A., & Vinogradov, P. (2008). Building Literacy in Adult Emergent Readers. Presented at the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), New York City, NY.
- McHugh, M., Gelatt, J., & Fix, M. (2007). *Adult English language instruction in the United States: Determining need and investing wisely*. Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute.
- Millar, V. (2009). *Discovering the Benefits of a Reading Circle on ESL Literacy Instructors*. Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Bow Valley College.
- Minnesota Literacy Council. (n.d.). *Online Training*. Retrieved December 23, 2011, from <http://online.themlc.org/>
- National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. (2006). *Training Guide: Study Circle Facilitators*. Funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers program. Cambridge, MA: NCSALL.
- New American Horizons Foundation. (2010). *Building Literacy with Adult Emergent Readers*. Retrieved from [www.newamericanhorizons.org](http://www.newamericanhorizons.org)
- Smith, C. (2010). The Great Dilemma of Improving Teacher Quality in Adult Learning and Literacy. *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal*, 4(2), 8.
- Smith, Cristine, & Hofer, J. (2003). *The characteristics and concerns of adult basic education teachers*. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Vinogradov. (2011). *Study Circle Guide for Teachers of Low-literacy Adult ESL Students*. St. Paul, MN: ATLAS, Hamline University. Retrieved from [www.atlasabe.org](http://www.atlasabe.org)
- Vinogradov, P., & Bigelow, M. (2010). Using Oral Language Skills to Build on the Emerging Literacy of Adult English Learners. CAELA Network Brief.
- Vinogradov, P., & Liden, A. (2008). Principled Training for LESLLA Instructors. *Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition*, 133.
- Vinogradov, P. (2012). "You just get a deeper understanding of things by talking:" Study Circles for Teachers of ESL Emergent Readers. *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education*, 1(1).
- Webster-Wright, A. (2009). Reframing professional development through understanding authentic professional learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 702.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Young, S. (2009). Supporting and Supervising Teachers Working With Adults Learning English. CAELA Network Brief. *Center for Adult English Language Acquisition*, 6.