

A City Learning Together

Reciprocal Collaboration of Academics and Practitioners at the Chicago Park District

Dan Hibbler
Leodis Scott
DePaul University

Nicole Ginger
Chicago Park District

Abstract

Concerns regarding professional preparation among practitioners and academics in the parks, recreation, and leisure profession demand real examples of people working together for the good of their overall community. Such reciprocal collaboration (two-way interaction from academics to practice and from practice to academics) has started to take place at the Chicago Park District (CPD) by bringing in academic professionals to implement practitioners' professional development and system-wide program evaluation. This article describes the collaborative experience occurring at the city park level and introduces added ways to "bridge the divide" between practitioners and academic professionals. We believe that a city, dedicated to learning together, can bring about promising outcomes, especially by implementing adult learning principles and practices; and by implanting academic professionals to work alongside practitioners in a long-term effort for improving the parks, recreation, and leisure services of an entire city.

Keywords: *Chicago Park District, professional and practitioner development, ADDIE Model, adult learning principles, reciprocal collaboration*

Dan Hibbler is an associate professor in the School for New Learning at DePaul University. **Leodis Scott** is a faculty instructor of adult learning in the School for New Learning at DePaul University. **Nicole Ginger** is Professional Development Manager for the Chicago Park District. Please send correspondence to Dan Hibbler, DHIBBLER@depaul.edu

Introduction

In order to describe the experience of two-way interaction, it would be appropriate to give an introduction about the Chicago Park District (CPD) and other related terms, such as the chief program officer (CPO), the professional development manager (PDM), along with common acronyms such as the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and its certified park and recreation professional (CPRP) training and examination.

Another important aspect for describing this reciprocal collaboration involves adopting an evaluative ADDIE model, which stands for Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ASTD Learning System, 2006; Hodell, 2015). Many academics and practitioners may be previously aware of this model, but it serves as a practical guide for encouraging interaction among professionals from different disciplines and backgrounds. In this context of the CPD, this model served as an essential guide for encouraging learning among both practitioners and academic professionals.

About the Chicago Park District

As one of the largest park districts in the United States, the Chicago Park District (CPD) has over 594 parks and 270 field houses (recreation centers) across the City of Chicago. It offers over 8,100 acres of green space and 26 miles of lakefront. In addition to traditional parks, the district has two conservatories, a zoo, 10 museums, and a professional football stadium called Soldier Field, (where the Chicago Bears play home games). All of these are vast property holdings of the Chicago Park District (CPD). Unlike many large park agencies, programming by CPD staff is a key focus. CPD offers an extensive array of leisure opportunities including all forms of athletics, swimming, youth services, gymnastics, woodworking, ceramics, day camps, etc. It also offers an extensive array of special events, such as movies in the park, theater, concerts, organized races, and festivals (Chicago Park District, 2014).

The agency is comprised of park and recreation professionals who have either formal education from a university or experiential learning from career training. It also employs natural resource staff that manages CPD's landscaping, horticulture, and tradespeople that ensure facilities are functional. The education levels and credentials of these professionals range from high school diploma and its equivalent to graduate degrees.

The Chicago Park District is also part of the City of Chicago. Unlike most park and recreation organizations in the United States, CPD is not housed or directly tied to city government; it is commonly referred as its "sister" agency. Instead of being a department reporting to the mayor or even an agency of elected officials, CPD is governed by a board of commissioners appointed by the mayor. Another distinction is that CPD, like other park and recreation agencies in Illinois, operates as a separate taxing body rather than funded through the city tax levy (Illinois Parks and Recreation Association, 1978).

Academic Preparation and Professional Practice

During 2009, the Chicago Park District (CPD) recognized a disconnection between park and recreation agencies and the academic institutions who prepare future practitioners and professionals in the field. Moreover, given that the CPD serves millions of visitors and Chicago residents each year, it became increasingly important that trained park and recreation professionals provide the natural spaces and program offerings for an ever-

changing populous. Therefore, the CPD's executive leadership took an innovative approach and embedded within its organization a local university academic professor, who had both a PhD in leisure studies and was a certified park and recreation professional (CPRP). This approach required the academic professor to take an extended leave of absence from the local university and to dedicate a full-time commitment to the needs of CPD. This arrangement was intended to bridge the divide between practitioners and academics. The professor was assigned to CPD for up to two years to explore the issue of disconnection between academic preparation and professional practice with the long-term goal of providing enhanced services in the city.

In the same year, the professor joined the CPD as the chief program officer (CPO) and immediately began to assess the needs of the organization. It quickly became clear that one of the greatest needs of the organization was professional/practitioner preparation. The newly appointed CPO, with full support of the CPD superintendent, gained approval to hire a professional development manager (PDM) and began the process of instituting a professional development program for the organization's 1,700 public-facing employees in the Community Recreation Department.

Before conducting a formal needs assessment, based on professional experience, the CPO recognized that staff skills and morale could immediately be impacted by CPD making an investment in them through the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) certified park and recreation professional (CPRP) training and exam. CPD partnered with the Illinois Park and Recreation Association (IPRA) to launch this training with 30 CPD managers. For the first time in many years, CPD offered training and funded the exam and application fee for each participant. After the initial launch, CPD built a formal training curriculum, and a process to allow all staff to participate—regardless of position and full- or part-time status.

At first the CPRP trainings were rather informal and very content-based; often they were just a transmission review of a PowerPoint (Pratt, 1998). Trainings were well received because they were recognized as a move in the right direction, but staff were recognizably distracted—looking at their phones, talking among themselves, etc. It became increasingly clear to the CPO and PDM that expertise was needed in the area of adult learning to support staff success. The PDM began a master's degree program in educating adult learners at a local university, which proved to be very successful in assisting her in supporting the staff learning process. As the PDM gained more experience, the quality of the CPRP training at CPD began to take on a more formal shape, with adult learning techniques and facilitation methods prioritized (Rothwell, 2008). Recognition of the program also increased with local universities and agencies asking to attend the sessions and be a part of the growing audience.

To help staff succeed, adult learning theories helped trainers recognize that individuals do not walk into a classroom as a blank slate, but they have experiences that can be resources for new learning and furthering their intellectual development (Rothwell, 2000; Knowles, 1980). Knowing and understanding this, the training sessions were redesigned to focus more on the learner versus the content (Pratt, 1998). One change was considering the importance of the learner's previous experience with the related content, training, or exams (Taylor & Lamoreaux, 2008). Because taking an exam on "company time," where successes—as well as failures—would be publicly known, CPD realized that many staff were very anxious about the exam. To put staff at ease, the focus shifted to the nurturing learning theory; creating an emotionally safe environment with peer and facilitator support (Pratt, 1998).

The PDM focused on reducing staff anxiety, building confidence, and providing tools to comprehend the materials. The learning environment was also redesigned by playing relaxing music upon entry, facilitating discussions about how the staff has overcome challenges, and discussing the nature of test anxiety. Study sessions were also expanded from three classes to four, so that the staff had more time to prepare. Importantly, CPD also set out to bridge the divide between academia and practice by collaborating with a second local university professor, who was an active member of the national and international park and recreation associations (i.e., NRPA, WLO), to co-facilitate the sessions. This method not only ensured that the staff had access to an educator in the field, but also reintroduced formal learning and the importance of collaborating and learning from external experts.

The PDM incorporated different activities focusing on adult learning principles such as appreciating different learning styles and introducing creative study techniques. These principles would allow staff to embrace their experiences, strengths, and talents without traditional training approaches that emphasize rote memorization or instruction. For instance, facilitators employed a self-assessment that helped staff to identify their distinctive learning style characteristics (Kolb, 1984). Once those learning styles were identified, staff were broken into groups of similarly oriented learners, and guided to create group study techniques based on their learning style. This exercise gave them an opportunity to test out the method in a safe environment, guided by the PDM. Results from these efforts were quite positive; in fact, trainers witnessed an increasing pass rate on the CPRP exam. Today, CPD boasts over 130 CPRP staff (an increase from only four in 2009); plus the dozens of staff from other agencies that attended the training sessions. Importantly, the certified staff are now active participants in the professional development program; they are looking for opportunities to gain continuing education units (CEUs) in order to maintain their certification.

Implementing Adult Learning Principles through ADDIE Model

When the professional development program began, its focus was solely on CPD's public-facing staff, namely Community Recreation. Community Recreation is comprised of staff with varied roles and educational levels: attendants, program instructors, park supervisors, program specialists, and managers. The process to launch the professional development organization-wide followed the well-regarded ADDIE Model, which typically is a systems approach and instructional systems design (ASTD Learning System, 2006). As Figure 1 illustrates, the ADDIE Model is based upon being named after five essential elements: Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation. From a systems approach, analysis involves the inputs for the system; design, development, and evaluation describe the process; and implementation represents the output (ASTD Learning System, 2006). This systems model can be applied in multiple circumstances, especially with the goal of bringing participants together, both practitioners and academics, for professional development and tracking continued performance. This model provided the framework needed to get the program off to a good start and sustainable in the future. The ADDIE model is an easily accessible, adaptable, and comprehensive tool that can influence all levels of program and training development.

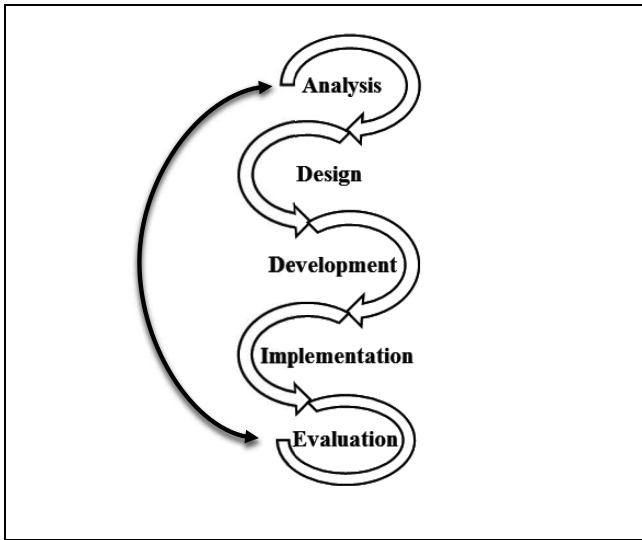


Figure 1.1. Adapted ADDIE Model (ASTD Learning System, 2006)

Analysis

With the CPRP training program in place, CPD took the essential first step of conducting an analysis to determine staff needs (Neal, 2011; Rummler, 2008). Given that the professional development program and personnel were just beginning, CPD started the initiative—and continued biannually—with input from managers and an employee survey. The manager and employee feedback were essential in getting employee support of the initiative and helping to build the future training program from the ground up. Developing the needs assessment was a collective effort with department heads and managers developing questions that included actions such as the following:

- Ranking workshop options and the level of interest
- Identifying certifications of most interest, such as the CPRP
- Providing suggestions on the areas of most need and improvement at the park and administrative level, including policies and communications.

Development and Design

Once the survey results and interviews were complete, CPD implemented the next phases of the ADDIE model, development and design. CPD took two approaches in this endeavor: break-out development workshops and a more formal design where staff would attend internal conferences. To support the subject matter expert in developing and facilitating content, CPD designed a comprehensive train-the-trainer workshop that taught the experts how to facilitate group learning. The train the trainer workshop was based on adult learning techniques that gave facilitators a toolbox filled with different methods for their training (Bylund et al., 2009; Rothwell, 2008). To ensure that learning was transferred, this training followed a more apprenticeship-type design where learners were required to put together a 10-minute mini-training at the end of the workshop that demonstrated their new skills (Pratt, 1998).

Implementation and Evaluation

Once workshops were formalized, CPD set out to implement internal conferences. The set-up to designing these conferences was an enormous and collaborative undertaking. Working from the needs assessment, managers partnered together to identify content, find a location, select facilitators, determine layout, and focus on a target audience. In the end, CPD developed five to eight conferences annually that allowed staff to select any one of up to 12 options per hour. Importantly, some of the conference offerings included those led by local universities in an effort to encourage CPD staff to return to school to complete their formal academic degrees and enhance their professional preparation.

These conferences and workshops became an important component of CPD's state and national accreditations, Distinguished Park and Recreation Accreditation (DPRA) and Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA), respectively. Both accreditations emphasized a need for professional development for the entire organization as well as formal education for the staff regarding CPD policies and procedures. CPD was awarded both accreditations in 2012. Also important, CPD received the National Gold Medal Award in 2014 from NRPA. The Gold Medal Award recognized among other things, professional and workforce development as a valuable resource for its staff.

The final stage of the ADDIE model involved evaluation. Learning professionals, especially in the field of parks, recreation, and leisure, may find it difficult to organize evaluation, where time and resources are scarce. However, evaluation had been essential for increasing buy-in among all participants, for identifying multiple areas of improvement, and for determining the potential return-on-investment of programs (Kirkpatrick, 2008). It may also be important to add that evaluation can help to keep practitioners motivated with recognition for encouraging continued performance.

Knowing that just one type of evaluation does not tell the entire story, CPD deployed several additive components. These components of evaluation included the following:

- postsession student evaluations
- instant feedback via clickers during sessions
- monthly debriefs with managers
- learner feedback surveys

The postsession evaluations, or reaction surveys, were provided at the end of each class to evaluate session effectiveness (Kirkpatrick, 2008). CPD decided to utilize a simple ratings scale to allow participants to rate each training session. Questions were based on the overall quality of information, applicable to practitioner role. As an additional step in understanding the immediate impact of the training, CPD also asked participants to list one item they had learned during the workshop and the type of items they would like to see in future workshops. The data were compiled after the sessions to assess immediate impact, and then referred to when similar trainings were conducted or during retraining the same CPD staff.

Also getting feedback from managers and supervisors was an important part of the CPD program evaluation process. The professional development manager scheduled monthly debriefs with managers across the district to talk about the most recent training and any future learning needs. The format of these debriefs was an essential component of the professional development program and utilized questions based on the appreciative inquiry that focuses on positive versus negative aspects in the program and its processes (Peterson, 2003). Some specific questions included the following:

- What have we accomplished?
- What could be done or what is something that we can easily implement next time?
- What should be done, or what is something that may take some work to employ but would add value?

CPD and the participating universities have been given the opportunity to conduct several events and internal conferences to advance the collaborative relationship. Today, these relationships are moving toward conversations on how to institute college credit courses within CPD, so that their staff can continue to increase their learning while applying academic knowledge.

In short, the reciprocal collaboration in CPD that involved embedding an academic professional into its day-to-day practices required viewing professional development from an adult learning perspective that valued the experiences, strengths, and talents of its practitioners. Implementing the ADDIE model with a focus on adult learning brought about creative and resourceful questions that helped to discover the broader purposes of CPD: simply to serve the city, its citizens, and visitors.

Final Considerations

The process of reciprocal collaboration must start with viewing academics and practitioners as a part of the same city. We believe that knowledge gained from two-way practitioner and academic interactions within CPD can be replicated to other park systems, cities, and communities. It requires seeing both academics and practitioners as adult learners who can learn from each other at the university or at the workplace. All participants share distinctive learning styles that can enhance professional and practitioner development, especially within the parks, recreation, and leisure fields.

Because of this interaction, CPD continues to partner with several university professors to further bridge the divide and gap between academic theory and real practice on the ground. Within months of implementing these new kinds of collaboration, more communication channels between the organizations began to emerge. In addition, CPD became an active member of the college and university relations committee through the state organization also participated in ongoing meetings with local and national universities. The reciprocal collaboration continues through partnerships with universities on student mentorship and free student access to CPD's CPRP preparation course. CPD is also beginning talks with universities to provide college level courses for its staff at a discounted rate so that its staff may successfully complete or continue their education.

These interactive approaches not only helped to bridge the gap between academia and practice, but they increased the number of college student interns employed by the CPD. This combined work describes the collaborative experience occurring at the city park level and introduces added ways to promote a city "learning together" to create opportunities for successful, long-lasting outcomes. From this overall process, we contend that implementing practitioner/professional development, system-wide program evaluation, and adult learning practices have improved the experience of parks, recreation, and leisure services throughout the City of Chicago.

References

- American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) Learning System. (2006). *Designing learning: Module 1*. Danvers, MA: ASTD.
- Bylund, C. L., Brown, R. F., Lubrano di Ciccone, B., Diamond, C., Eddington, J., & Kissane, D. W. (2009). Assessing facilitator competence in a comprehensive communication skills training programme. *Medical Education*, 43(4), 342–349. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2923.2009.03302.x
- Chicago Park District. (2014). *About Chicago Park District* [Webpage]. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/about-us/>
- Hodell, C. (2015, January). *All about ADDIE*. Retrieved from <https://www.td.org/Publications/Newsletters/Links/2015/01/All-About-ADDIE>
- Illinois Parks and Recreation Association (IPRA). (1978). *Unique nature of Illinois park districts* [Webpage]. Retrieved from <http://www.lib.niu.edu/1978/ip780506.html>.
- Kirkpatrick, D. L. (2008). *Luminary perspective: Evaluating training programs*. In E. Biech (Ed.), *ASTD handbook for workplace learning professionals*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD.
- Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge Books.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Neal, B. (2011). e-ADDIE! *T+D*, 65(3), 76–77. Retrieved from <https://www.td.org/Publications/Magazines/TD/TD-Archive/2011/03/e-ADDIE>
- Peterson, J. (2003, April). The magic power of appreciative inquiry. *Appreciative Inquiry Commons*. Retrieved from <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/research/bibPapersDetail.cfm?coid=3187>
- Pratt, D. D. (1998). *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Rothwell, W. J. (2008). *Adult learning basics*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD.
- Rummler, G. (2008). *ASTD handbook for workplace learning professionals*. In E. Biech (Ed.), *ASTD handbook for workplace learning professionals*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD.
- Taylor, K., & Lamoreaux, A. (2008). Teaching with the brain in mind. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *Third update on adult learning theory*, No. 119. doi:10.1002/ace.305
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Understanding by design*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.