



ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM DESIGNERS: ROLES, QUALIFICATIONS, AND TRAINING

Leftheriotou Piera¹,
Pavlis Korres Maria²ⁱ

¹Academic Tutor,
Master's Program "Adult Education",
Hellenic Open University (HOU),
Greece

²Professor,
Department of Early Childhood Education,
Faculty of Education,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH),
Greece

&
Module Coordinator & Academic Tutor,
Master's Program "Adult Education",
Hellenic Open University,
Greece

Abstract:

This paper examines the roles, qualifications, and training of adult education program designers, emphasizing the complexity and social nature of their responsibilities. While literature often portrays designers as neutral experts applying technical standards, real-world practice is influenced by organizational dynamics, resource limitations, and power relations. Effective designers must possess expertise in adult learning principles, program design methodology, group dynamics, communication, negotiation, and intercultural competence. Ethical awareness and critical reflection are central to their practice, as design decisions enable or constrain opportunities and reflect personal values. Systematic and ongoing education is necessary to prepare designers for these multifaceted challenges, including knowledge of program steps, organizational structures, and technology use in face-to-face and online settings. By cultivating reflective practice, cultural intelligence, and ethical vigilance, designers can improve decision-making and foster collaborative environments that enhance program quality. Implications for professional development and organizational practice are discussed.

Keywords: adult education, program design, designers' training, designers' role, designers' competencies

ⁱ Correspondence: email mariapavliskorres@nured.auth.gr

1. Introduction

Adult education program design is a multifaceted process requiring a combination of technical, social, and ethical competencies. Although extensive research exists on the preparation of educators, far less attention has been given to the role and education of program designers (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022). This paper explores the responsibilities of adult education program designers, identifies the qualifications necessary for effective practice, and discusses the educational strategies required to prepare individuals for this complex role. By highlighting both technical and social dimensions, the study underscores the importance of reflective, ethical, and context-sensitive practice in adult education.

2. Roles and Responsibilities of Designers

Program designers are individuals or groups responsible for planning educational programs and accountable to organizational leadership for both the design process and its outcomes (Cervero & Wilson, 1994). Program design may constitute a primary responsibility or be combined with administrative duties, and in some cases, it may be undertaken occasionally or voluntarily (Caffarella, 2002). Designers are often actively involved in implementation, not only in coordination and monitoring but also as educators (Houle, 1996; Jarvis, 2004).

Each designer develops a unique approach based on formal qualifications, experience, and organizational role. As program design is primarily a social activity rather than purely technical, designers can be compared to “orchestra conductors,” coordinating diverse contributions into a harmonious outcome (Caffarella, 2002). They strive to align design processes with the specific organizational and social context in which programs occur (Wilson & Cervero, 1996a).

Designers’ application of knowledge is influenced by their perspectives on program design, adult education, and organizational culture. Each program reflects decisions shaped by personal intentions and circumstances (Brookfield, 1995; Sork, 1996). While the literature often presents design as an objective, technical skill, this perspective overlooks political and ethical dimensions, which are central to effective practice (Apple, 1986; Freire, 1985; Wilson & Cervero, 1996b; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022). Constraints such as limited time, scarce resources, and asymmetrical power relations require designers to develop negotiation and networking strategies to achieve program objectives (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Sork & Caffarella, 1989).

3. Required Qualifications of Designers

Effective adult education program designers must possess knowledge of the principles and methodology of adult learning and program design, applicable to both face-to-face and online contexts (Leftheriotou, 2014). Given their coordination of diverse individuals and groups, they also require skills in group dynamics, effective communication,

collaborative relationships, and negotiation strategies. Continuous professional development is essential to maintain and enhance these competencies.

Critical awareness of ethical issues is central. Designers make choices that enable or constrain certain opportunities; thus, ethically responsible designers are aware of their value systems, critically reflect on their practice, and assess the alignment of their decisions with their values (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995; Caffarella, 2002). They must facilitate meaningful dialogue among stakeholders to negotiate differing perspectives effectively.

Interpersonal and intercultural skills are vital for collaboration and networking, fostering an environment conducive to effective program design (Leftheriotou, 2014; Sork, 1997). Such competencies are particularly important for designing e-learning programs, where participants may come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022).

In Table 1, the main qualifications of designers are presented, organized by category, providing a clear overview of the knowledge, skills, and professional attributes that contribute to the successful design and implementation of educational programs for adults.

Table 1: Required Competencies of Adult Education Program Designers

Category	Description
Technical Competencies	Knowledge of adult learning principles and program design methodology (face-to-face and online) (Leftheriotou, 2014; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2022)
Personal / Social Skills	Group dynamics, effective communication, collaborative relationships, negotiation strategies (Leftheriotou, 2014; Cervero & Wilson, 1994)
Ethical Awareness	Critical stance toward ethical issues, ability for self-reflection and evaluation of practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983)
Intercultural Competence	Functional communication and collaboration with culturally diverse groups, management of diversity within design teams (Sork, 1997; Magos & Simopoulos, 2010; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2022)

The personal and social competencies of each designer determine the quality of their relationships, as well as their abilities in networking and negotiation, and their capacity to create the collaborative environment required for program design (Leftheriotou, 2014). It is particularly important to highlight the role of intercultural competence, which is essential not only for effective communication and collaboration with groups of diverse ethnocultural identities—who may be the target of educational programs—but also for the creative management of diversity within design teams (Sork, 1997, as cited in Caffarella, 2002; Magos & Simopoulos, 2010). “Intercultural competence” is considered to be the set of social skills that enable individuals to recognize, accept, and creatively manage diversity by readjusting previous views and attitudes and developing new strategies for effective communication with all the people they encounter in their daily interactions (Magos & Simopoulos, 2010).

Continuous professional development is necessary to maintain and enhance these competencies, ensuring designers remain capable of addressing evolving challenges (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022).

4. Education and Training of Designers

From the description of the role and required qualifications of the designer, a reasonable question arises: what kind of education is necessary to adequately prepare those involved in the design of adult education programs? In contrast to the extensive references found in the adult education literature regarding the training of educators, references to the education of designers are very limited and indirect, in the sense that the content of their training is implied through the description of the role and the qualifications required for its successful performance. This may be due, on the one hand, to the fact that the designer is often equated with the educator, and on the other hand, to the prevailing "technical" perspective of design, according to which effective design is achieved through individual learning and the application of specifications defined by a model (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022).

However, because the role of the designer is demanding and multifaceted, requiring specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes, systematic education is essential both for those who are about to take on the role and for the improvement of the practice of those already engaged in designing programs for adults.

It is evident that designer training programs should be structured according to the principles of adult education program design. Their content largely overlaps with that of educator training programs, as it includes the fundamental principles and teaching methodology of adult education, as well as topics related to group dynamics and effective communication. However, they should also cover all the specific processes of design and the standards for their implementation (e.g., needs assessment, evaluation, organization, and program delivery) (Leftheriotou, 2014; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022). Through in-depth study of design steps and/or specific models, and by attempting creative adaptation to different contexts, novice designers can acquire specialized design knowledge and skills, while experienced designers, critically reflecting on their practice in light of new knowledge, can enhance their daily practice (Caffarella, 2002; Houle, 1996).

The content of designer education should also include topics related to both the internal and external environment of design (e.g., external environment analysis, structure and functioning of adult education organizations), as well as ways of operating within it (e.g., networking, negotiation strategies) (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Knowles et al., 1998). These topics are necessary for adequately preparing designers, as program design occurs within a specific context that decisively influences it. According to Brookfield (1986), his professional preparation as an adult educator lacked an awareness that adult education programs are developed within political contexts and are subject to change through political decisions.

Furthermore, designers should also become familiar with ways of utilizing new technologies in the design and implementation of programs, to overcome spatial and temporal constraints and to optimize resources (Caffarella, 2002; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2022).

Special attention should also be given in designer education to cultivating attitudes derived from the principles of adult education (Jarvis, 2004), as well as to developing awareness of the sociopolitical and ethical dimensions of design (Sork, 2000). Designers should be sensitized to the political nature of education and the fact that they do not operate as "neutral experts," as their choices and actions in design are shaped by their beliefs and assumptions (Freire, 1985). Through processes of critical reflection, they should be "trained" to examine their perceptions and assumptions about adult education and their role, gradually forming a personal and authentic perspective on design (Leftheriotou, 2014).

Building on the discussion of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for designers, Table 2 outlines the key thematic areas that should be incorporated into the training of adult education program designers. These areas provide a structured framework to ensure that designers are adequately prepared to address the multifaceted demands of program design and implementation.

Table 2: Content of Training for Adult Education Program Designers

Category	Description
Theory and Methodology	Principles of adult education, design steps and processes, program evaluation techniques (Caffarella, 2002; Houle, 1996)
Group Dynamics & Communication	Collaboration, negotiation, and development of cooperative relationships in face-to-face and online contexts (Leftheriotou, 2014; Cervero & Wilson, 1994)
Organization & Environment	Structure and function of organizations, external environment analysis, networking, strategic action within the organization (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Knowles et al., 1998)
Technology	Use of new technologies in program design and implementation, especially for online learning programs (Caffarella, 2002; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2020)
Ethical & Political Dimensions	Awareness of social, political, and ethical issues, development of critical thinking and ethical vigilance (Sork, 2000; Freire, 1985; Jarvis, 2004; Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2020)

5. Discussion

The role of adult education program designers is inherently complex and context-dependent, influenced by organizational structures, resource limitations, and power relations (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Wilson & Cervero, 1996a, 1996b; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2022). The expectation that designers can remain neutral and purely objective is unrealistic, as practical decisions are shaped by political, social, and ethical considerations (Apple, 1986; Freire, 1985; Brookfield, 1986).

Designers' effectiveness relies heavily on interpersonal, collaborative, and intercultural competencies, as these directly impact program outcomes and participant

experiences (Leftheriotou, 2014; Sork, 1997; Caffarella, 2002). Ethical awareness and critical reflection allow designers to navigate dilemmas and ensure their decisions align with both personal values and professional standards (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995).

The strategic use of technology and understanding of organizational dynamics enable designers to overcome spatial and temporal constraints and improve program delivery (Caffarella, 2002; Knowles et al., 1998). Systematic training and continuous professional development equip designers with the skills, knowledge, and reflective capacity required to address these challenges (Houle, 1996; Jarvis, 2004).

Overall, adult education program design is not merely a technical task but a socially, ethically, and politically situated practice (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2022). Continuous development, contextual awareness, and critical reflection are essential to enhancing program quality, inclusivity, and relevance (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Sork & Caffarella, 1989).

6. Conclusion

Adult education program designers occupy a demanding and multifaceted role that requires not only technical expertise but also social and intercultural skills, ethical awareness, and the capacity for reflective practice. Their work involves navigating complex organizational and societal contexts, making decisions that directly impact learners' experiences and outcomes. Effective designers can be seen as "visionary realists," committed to collaborative design processes while remaining fully aware of the conditions they face and the responsibilities they assume. They continuously strive to implement required design specifications while recognizing that each educational program has implications shaped by the beliefs, values, and assumptions of those involved in its development (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 143; Freire, 1985).

Systematic, structured, and ongoing education is essential to equip designers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective program planning and implementation. Training should integrate core principles of adult education, teaching methodologies, group dynamics, and communication skills, while also addressing all stages of program development—including needs assessment, evaluation, organization, and delivery (Leftheriotou, 2014). It should foster critical reflection, enabling designers to enhance existing competencies, develop new skills, and engage in the "*reflective relationship between practice and theory*" (Schön, 1983; Freire, 2006, pp. 228–232). Furthermore, it should cultivate intercultural competence, ethical vigilance, and awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions of education, acknowledging that designers are not neutral actors but decision-makers whose choices influence both learners and broader educational contexts (Jarvis, 2004; Sork, 2000; Freire, 1985).

Organizations that invest in designer development are more likely to produce high-quality, inclusive, and responsive adult education programs. By fostering reflective practice, intercultural competence, and ethical awareness, designers are better prepared to create learning experiences that meet the needs of diverse learners while addressing

broader social, ethical, and political considerations. In this way, well-prepared designers contribute not only to the effectiveness of individual programs but also to the advancement of adult education as a socially responsible and transformative practice.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Piera Leftheriotou obtained bachelor's degrees in French Literature and in Early Childhood Education in Athens. In 2005, she completed a master's degree, and in 2014, she earned a PhD from the Hellenic Open University. Her doctoral dissertation was entitled "Planning Adult Education Programs in Greece: The Case of the General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning". Since 1984, she has been working in the field of Adult Education at the Greek Ministry of Education. She is a member of the scientific staff of the Hellenic Open University (HOU), serving as an Academic Tutor in the Master's programs "Adult Education" and "Education Sciences." She has published articles and book chapters on adult education and e-learning. Her research interests mainly focus on adult education and on the training of educators in both face-to-face and online learning environments.

Maria Pavlis-Korres obtained a university degree in Political Science in Athens and a PhD with honors from the University of Alcalá in Spain. From 1983 to 2018, she worked in the field of Adult Education at the Greek Ministry of Education, where she was involved in the design, development, monitoring, supervision, implementation, and evaluation of Adult General Education programs at the national level. She has been a member of the scientific staff of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) since 2012, serving as an Academic Tutor in the Master's programs "Adult Education" and "Education Sciences." In 2020, she was appointed coordinator of the Thematic Unit EKE51, "Design, Management and Evaluation of Adult Education Programs," at HOU. In 2017, she began teaching in postgraduate programs at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), where she was elected Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education to teach "Lifelong Learning and Non-Formal Education." She was elected Professor in 2022. She serves as a reviewer and a member of the editorial boards of international scientific journals. She has

published numerous articles, book chapters, and books on Roma issues, adult education, and e-learning. Her current research interests focus on the design, development, and evaluation of adult education projects—both face-to-face and online—as well as on group dynamics and the effective use of communication tools to promote interaction in online learning environments.

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