



Adapting Study Design to Address Recruitment Challenges

Background and Context

The [Teaching Skills That Matter–SkillBlox](#) (TSTM-SkillBlox) instructional support pilot was designed to help adult education teachers integrate instruction aligned with the TSTM framework, a U.S. Department of Education initiative supporting learners’ academic and employment goals. At the center of the pilot was SkillBlox, an emerging digital application that enables teachers to find, organize, and share open educational resources aligned to TSTM skills and topics. Teachers also received professional development webinars and ongoing support to apply TSTM practices in their classrooms. Recruitment targeted teachers in Kentucky, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Washington, across a range of adult basic education, secondary education, and English language programs.



The Challenge of Implementing a Rigorous Design

The research team originally designed the pilot as a teacher-level randomized controlled trial (RCT). Teachers who volunteered would be randomly assigned to either an intervention group, which would receive training and access to SkillBlox, or a control group, which would receive delayed access after the pilot. Power calculations assumed 40 programs across two states, each with 7–8 teachers, yielding a sufficient sample to test the pilot’s impact.

Yet recruitment challenges emerged almost immediately. Many states doubted they could meet the target number of programs, citing limited teacher capacity and competing demands. Instructors were stretched thin, often working part-time across multiple sites, and programs struggled to meet the staffing levels required by the design. Even after broadening the recruitment pool to four states, programs continued to struggle to reach the minimum number of teachers per site.

Teachers themselves also voiced reluctance. Many expressed limited capacity, such as from initiative fatigue and competing demands. Others were explicitly discouraged by the prospect of being placed in the control group, where

they would contribute data without receiving the intervention itself. This combination of structural constraints and teacher concerns meant that the original RCT design was no longer feasible.

Pivoting to a Quasi-Experimental Design

Rather than abandon the study, the team adapted. They shifted to a quasi-experimental design (QED) using propensity score matching. All teachers who expressed interest within a program were assigned to the treatment group, removing the barrier of random assignment and ensuring that everyone received access to SkillBlox and professional development.

To strengthen participation, the team introduced honoraria. Teachers in the pilot received a \$250 package, including a \$150 sign-in bonus, \$30 gift card upon completing baseline surveys, and a \$70 gift card for completing follow-up surveys. This increase, particularly the larger incentive at follow-up, helped boost retention.

“Build in flexibility and extra time for development challenges . . .”

To create a comparison group, the team asked program directors to help recruit nonpilot teachers from the same sites. These teachers received smaller honoraria for completing surveys, \$30 at baseline and \$70 at follow-up. Ultimately, 38 pilot teachers and 42 comparison teachers enrolled, allowing the team to preserve analytic value despite abandoning random assignment.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

The pivot to a quasi-experimental design preserved the feasibility of the study while still supporting meaningful comparisons between treatment and non-treatment teachers. Propensity score matching provided a way to address selection bias, while removing random assignment reduced barriers to recruitment and engagement. Teachers responded positively to the revised structure, appreciating both the resources offered and the recognition of their time through honoraria.

The experience highlighted the importance of teacher-centered design in research implementation. Studies that do not account for teachers’ workload, initiative fatigue, or skepticism about control group participation risk faltering before they begin. Flexibility in both research design and recruitment strategy was essential in keeping the study viable, demonstrating that rigor in adult education research often requires compromise and adaptation.

Key Takeaways

The TSTM-SkillBlox pilot illustrates that even the best-laid research designs must bend to real-world constraints. RCTs may not always be feasible in adult education so alternative designs that preserve analytic value should be considered. By shifting to a quasi-experimental design, offering honoraria, and reframing participation to emphasize benefits rather than burdens, the team preserved rigor while ensuring feasibility. The lesson is clear: adaptability, collaboration with state and program partners, and respect for teachers’ realities are essential for successful intervention research in adult education