

**Report from the Field**

# Multimodal Professional Development: Empowering Educators with Digital Literacy Competencies

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## Abstract

This paper presents reflections from the developers of a professional development program designed to address critical gaps in digital literacy training for educators. Drawing from program evaluation results and their experiences developing and facilitating the program, the authors highlight strategies emphasizing accessibility, hands-on engagement, and practical application. Delivered through five interactive webinars, the program incorporated globally recognized frameworks, equipping educators with tools to align digital competencies with instructional and workforce readiness goals. Participating educators engaged in practical activities, including lesson planning and assessment, to immediately apply their learning. Guided by learner experience design (LXD) principles, program developers prioritized relevance, engagement, and flexibility through multimodal resources such as blogs, podcasts, and an online learning community. Their reflections focus on key design decisions, challenges encountered, and lessons learned, offering insights for future professional development initiatives to empower educators.

**Keywords:** digital literacy, professional development, competencies

Professional development remains a cornerstone of effective learning, particularly in the rapidly evolving technological landscape. However, many educators need help accessing professional development opportunities that equip them with the tools to integrate digital literacy into their teaching. Effective professional development is typically ongoing, content-focused, and aligned with educators' needs (Escamilla et al., 2023). This contrasts with traditional "one-shot" workshops, often lacking follow-up or context-specific relevance (Guskey, 2002; Sainz & Wang, 2022).

For educators, fostering digital skills is critical to preparing learners for success in a technology-driven world. The webinar program "Training ABE/GED Instructors and Practitioners to Integrate Digital Literacy Competencies into Their Teaching," funded by the Arthur (Jack) Payne Crabtree Memorial Fund under the auspices of the

American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), sought to bridge these gaps. This program not only addressed the critical need for accessible, relevant, and actionable professional development but also introduced innovative strategies for engaging educators in meaningful learning experiences.

This paper presents reflections from the webinar developers, drawing on the formative and summative evaluations and their experiences designing and facilitating the program. We share lessons learned about effective design strategies, challenges encountered, and insights gained from implementing the program in real-world adult education contexts. These practitioner-based reflections offer a grounded perspective on how digital literacy professional development can be made more accessible, relevant, and impactful for literacy educators.

## Professional Development Gaps

Despite the increasing emphasis on technology in education, many educators need more training to integrate digital literacy effectively into their instructional practices. This gap is particularly pronounced for educators working with adult learners, who face significant barriers such as limited access to technology or limited foundational digital skills. Research by Vanek (2017) highlights the challenges adult learners encounter in technology-rich environments, making it even more imperative for educators to be proficient in teaching digital competencies. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education’s LINCS (2023) initiative has identified a critical need for professional development that addresses these challenges. With such training, educators can avoid perpetuating the digital divide disproportionately affecting marginalized adult learners.

## Our Approach: Hands-On Engagement and Innovative Support

To address these challenges, we employed a hands-on, interactive approach to professional development while incorporating innovative strategies for engagement and support. We offered five webinars during which participating educators (hereafter referred to as educators) engaged in activities emphasizing the practical application of digital literacy competencies. These sessions combined foundational knowledge with

real-world instructional strategies, such as designing competency-based lesson plans and using assessment tools to measure learners’ progress. By incorporating structured frameworks, we ensured educators could immediately apply what they learned in their classrooms.

The program’s relevance was a critical factor in its effectiveness, as it directly addressed the pressing challenges educators face in integrating digital literacy into their teaching. We ensured the program content was informative and practical by focusing on skills and strategies educators could apply to their unique contexts. The webinars included case studies and real-life scenarios that resonated with the professional experiences of the educators, making the training immediately applicable.

Accessibility was a central feature of the program. Recognizing the diverse schedules of educators, we offered the webinars in live and recorded formats, which allowed educators to engage with the content at their convenience, significantly increasing participation and impact. The program also leveraged the Adult Learning Exchange Virtual Community (SCOC Consulting, 2026) to provide additional support. This online platform, discussed in more detail later, features curated resources, including blog posts and podcasts that reinforced the learning objectives of the webinars. The integration of these resources extended the program’s reach and fostered a supportive learning community among educators.

**TABLE 1: Webinar Title and Description**

| Webinar Title  | Description  |
|--|--|
| <b>1. Foundational Knowledge of Digital Literacy for ABE/GED Instructors and Practitioners</b>           | Introduced key definitions, perspectives, and significance of digital literacy for adult learners. Explored the evolving role of educators in technology-rich environments and laid groundwork for competency development.   |
| <b>2. Digital Literacy Competencies for ABE/GED Teaching</b>   | Presented four digital literacy frameworks—DigComp 2.2 (Vuorikari et al., 2022), the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS) (Pimentel, 2013), the UNESCO Digital Literacy Global Framework (Law et al., 2018), and the Digital Literacy Framework for Adult Learners (Maryland Department of Labor, 2021)—and demonstrated their classroom application. |
| <b>3. Digital Literacy Competencies for Instructional Practice</b>                                       | Focused on designing curriculum-aligned instructional activities using digital competencies. Explored lesson-planning approaches grounded in the competency-based frameworks.  |
| <b>4. Digital Literacy Skills for ABE/GED Learners’ Entry and Participation in the Workplace</b>         | Addressed workplace readiness and the digital skills needed for employment. Explored strategies for aligning instruction with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014) priorities.   |
| <b>5. Assessment Strategies for Determining ABE/GED Learners’ Acquisition of Digital Literacy Skills</b> | Examined formative and summative approaches to assessing learners’ digital literacy. Provided tools for evaluating learning progress and identifying instructional next steps.   |

## Webinar Topics: Bridging Knowledge and Practice

The webinar series addressed the multifaceted needs of educators seeking to integrate digital literacy into their instructional practices. Each of the five sessions focused on a specific aspect of digital literacy, progressing from foundational concepts to applied strategies. An average of 50 educators registered for each webinar, representing various roles (i.e., instructors, program directors) and instructional settings (i.e., higher education, adult literacy). By combining theoretical frameworks, practical tools, and interactive engagement, the webinars offered educators a structured and scaffolded professional development experience. Table 1 summarizes each webinar's focus, demonstrating how the program bridged knowledge with classroom application.

This sequence of webinars equipped educators with a well-rounded understanding of digital literacy and actionable strategies for instruction. Integrating national and global frameworks and tools such as Northstar Digital Literacy and GCF Learn Free enabled educators to align their teaching with educational and workforce readiness goals. By linking knowledge to practice, the webinar series fostered the development of digital literacy instruction that is relevant, accessible, and responsive to learners' needs.

## Multimodal Approach for Sustained Learning

In this program, we introduced an innovative feature by using a multimodal approach that integrated various content formats—text (blog posts), audio (podcasts), and live/recorded video (webinars)—to support diverse learning preferences and reinforce key concepts. These resources, accessible via the Information Literacy category of the Adult Learning Exchange Virtual Community (SCOC Consulting, 2026), were explicitly curated to align with the webinar topics, allowing educators to delve deeper into key concepts at their convenience. The blog posts provided insights into practical strategies, instructional techniques, and case studies. At the same time, the podcast episodes featured expert discussions and interviews that contextualized digital literacy within the broader scope

of adult education. This multimodal approach enriched the educators' understanding and addressed diverse learning preferences by offering visual, written, and auditory formats. These resources acted as a bridge between the live sessions and educators' ongoing professional development, allowing them to revisit and apply the knowledge long after the webinars concluded. By leveraging these digital platforms, the program demonstrated a forward-thinking strategy for creating a sustained and dynamic learning environment.

## Guiding Design Principles: Focus on Learner Experience

The professional development program was grounded in learner experience design (LXD) principles, as Conceição and Howles (2021) articulated. LXD emphasizes intentional, participant-centered learning environments integrating learner needs, relevant content, and interactive engagement. These principles informed our choices around structure, delivery, pacing, and resource integration to ensure the program was responsive to the realities of adult educators.

A core tenet of LXD is centering the learner's context. We identified educators' time constraints, instructional challenges, and digital skill levels. In line with adult learning principles, highlighting the importance of self-direction and relevance in adult education (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), we offered live and recorded webinar options and asynchronous blogs and podcasts. This flexible format allowed educators to access content on their terms, promoting autonomy and increased participation (Conceição & Howles, 2021).

To reduce barriers to engagement, we prioritized a clear and coherent structure. Each session had specific learning objectives and a logical progression built on previous content. Educators moved from foundational knowledge of digital literacy frameworks to more advanced applications like curriculum design and assessment strategies. For example, we presented five occupational case scenarios in lesson plans relating job requirements to digital competencies based on a literacy framework. This approach supports effective adult learning by providing scaffolding and reinforcing continuity, helping educators connect theory to practice (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Interactive elements were embedded throughout the program to encourage reflection, collaboration, and dialogue. These included real-time polls and peer discussions. This design reflects the principles of social learning and constructivism, which suggest that learning is deepened through shared meaning-making (Vella, 2002). Educators also had access to the Adult Learning Exchange Virtual Community, which extended learning beyond the webinars and supported sustained professional networking.

In alignment with LXD, we designed for multimodal engagement by incorporating a range of formats—visual, auditory, and experiential. Podcasts and blog posts allowed educators to revisit key concepts differently, enhancing retention and offering flexibility in how content was consumed (Conceição & Howles, 2021). These diverse materials supported educators with varying learning preferences and levels of comfort with digital platforms.

The program emphasized authentic application by giving educators multiple opportunities to use what they learned in real-world contexts. Activities included designing lesson plans with digital literacy frameworks, exploring tools like Northstar Digital Literacy, and engaging in workplace-related instructional planning. This hands-on focus aligns with research on effective professional development, consistently highlighting the importance of job-embedded, practice-oriented learning (Sainz & Wang, 2022).

Assessment and feedback were integrated to support educators' reflection. Formative assessments, including polls, helped educators track their learning during sessions, while end-of-session surveys offered a space for deeper feedback. This continuous feedback loop is central to learner-centered design and ensures the professional development remains adaptive to educators' needs (Conceição & Howles, 2021).

By drawing on LXD and adult learning principles, the program created an informative and empowering professional development experience. Educators were supported in developing skills, building confidence, and translating new knowledge into instructional practices that support digital equity.

## Program Evaluation

Designing and implementing this professional development program offered important insights into the opportunities and challenges of supporting educators in building digital literacy competencies, as documented through the formative and summative evaluations required for the Crabtree grant. The formative evaluation revealed strong participant engagement and appreciation for the content's relevance to ABE instruction. Educators valued integrating digital literacy into existing curricula, the practical application of instructional frameworks, and the usefulness of strategies for supporting learner persistence and addressing real-world challenges. They reported increased confidence in teaching digital skills, designing competency-based instruction, and assessing learner progress. While some noted a need for a slower pace, the overall feedback was positive, with interest in future sessions focused on differentiated instruction, plain language, and digital communication.

The summative evaluation confirmed that participants found the series valuable, informative, and professionally enriching. They highlighted the content's engaging facilitation, practical strategies, and immediate applicability, particularly its connection to workforce readiness and peer collaboration. Educators also appreciated the flexibility of recorded sessions, reinforcing learning and accommodating scheduling needs.

## Lessons Learned

As program developers, we reflect on several design-related lessons that informed our approach's effectiveness and areas for growth. A key lesson learned was the importance of flexible design to meet the diverse needs of adult educators. Offering live and recorded webinar sessions allowed educators to engage with the content according to their schedules and time zones, increasing accessibility. However, this flexibility introduced a design challenge: creating a cohesive learning experience across synchronous and asynchronous formats. Educators who relied on recordings often missed opportunities for peer interaction, limiting their engagement with the program's collaborative aspects. In future iterations, we plan to integrate structured, asynchronous discussion prompts and peer exchanges to extend the community experience to all educators.

Another important takeaway was the value of practical, hands-on activities embedded within each session. Educators responded positively to activities such as designing digital literacy lesson plans and applying assessment tools, describing them as immediately applicable. While this application-based design strengthened relevance, we encountered a challenge in managing pacing and cognitive load. Some sessions attempted to cover too much content quickly, leaving little room for reflection or deeper exploration. Future program design will strategically space sessions and incorporate follow-up assignments or asynchronous extensions to support reflection and practice.

Our multimodal approach was another effective design element that supported different learning preferences and reinforced core content. However, integrating these resources also posed navigation and access challenges for some educators, particularly those with limited digital skills or restricted access to specific platforms (e.g., institutional firewalls blocking podcast access). These challenges highlighted the need for clearer instructions, simplified access points, and alternative formats such as transcripts and printable summaries to ensure universal accessibility.

We also learned that while the program's learner-centered

design promoted relevance and autonomy, it required a more differentiated structure to accommodate educators' varying levels of digital fluency. Some educators desired more advanced content, while others needed foundational support. Designing for this range within a single program was difficult. Future iterations may benefit from offering tiered pathways or optional breakout sessions tailored to different experience levels.

Lastly, collaborative elements like discussions and the Adult Learning Exchange Virtual Community supported professional dialogue and peer learning. However, sustaining engagement in the online community beyond the live sessions proved difficult without built-in structures or ongoing facilitation. This revealed the need to design for continuity, possibly by including post-program activities, discussion prompts, or a facilitator's presence to maintain momentum and deepen connections.

These lessons underscore the importance of designing flexible, inclusive, practically grounded professional development responsive to educators' varied experiences. By addressing the design-related challenges encountered, such as pacing, access, digital fluency variation, and asynchronous engagement, future programs can better support educators as they build the skills needed to integrate digital literacy into adult learning contexts.

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