VOLUME 8 | ISSUE 3 | 2026
ISSN 2642-3669

Adult Literacy Education

The International Journal of
Literacy, Language, and Numeracy

ProLiteracy®

Adult Literacy Education:

The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy

Adult Literacy Education
is published three times a year by ProLiteracy in collaboration with Georgia State University.

CO-EDITORS:

Elizabeth L. Tighe, Ph.D.
Georgia State University

Daphne Greenberg, Ph.D.
Georgia State University

M Cecil Smith, Ph.D.
Eastern Illinois University

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS:

Heewon Lee-Laminack, Ph.D.
Georgia State University

Ifedola Owoeye, M.A.
Georgia State University

BOOK AND RESOURCE REVIEW EDITOR:

Kristine Kelly
ATLAS, Hamline University

TECHNOLOGY AND ADULT LEARNING

Vi Hawes
VH Ed Tech Consulting, LLC & Pima Community College

STAFF:

Lauren Osowski
Project Manager

Cathi Miller
Graphic Designer

Manuscripts should be submitted directly to the Journal through the online submission platform which can be found at: https://proliteracy.org/ALE-Journal. Full details, and author guidelines can be found online.

Copyright Permission:
Permission request to photocopy or otherwise reproduce material published in this journal should be submitted to ProLiteracy at ALEJournal@ProLiteracy.org.

MISSION STATEMENT

The journal's mission is to publish research on adult basic and secondary education and transitions to college and career programs. It informs practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and funders about best practices in adult literacy, numeracy, and English language education in publicly funded, community and volunteer-based programs in a wide range of contexts. Each issue will consist of research articles focused on a particular theme plus other content of interest to readers (e.g., resource reviews, opinion pieces, and debates and discussions on timely topics of interest to the field).

CONSULTING EDITORS:

Judith Alamprese
Abt Associates (retired)

Sonya L. Armstrong
Texas State University

Jim Berger
Georgia College & State University

Katherine Binder
Mount Holyoke College

Stephanie Cronen
American Institutes for Research

Sondra Cuban
Western Washington University

Aydin Yücesan Durgunoglu
University of Minnesota Duluth

Iris Feinberg
Georgia State University

Susan Finn Miller
LLIU13 Community Education

Anke Grotlüschen
University of Hamburg

Allan G. Harbaugh-Schattenkirk
Longwood University

Tom Heaney
National Louis University (emeritus)

Bob Hughes
Seattle University (emeritus)

Erik Jacobson
Montclair State University

Laura Ruth Johnson
Northern Illinois University

Yvonne Hunter-Johnson
Southern Illinois University

Anna Kaiper-Marquez
National Center for Families Learning

Jennifer Kobrin
University of Tennessee Knoxville

Clarena Larrotta
Texas State University

Sasha V. Lotas
Academy of Hope Adult Public Charter School

Ron Mottern
Ashford University

Richard Orem
Northern Illinois University (emeritus)

Amy Pickard
Indiana University Bloomington

Ingrid Piller
Macquarie University

Esther Prins
Pennsylvania State University

Stephen Reder
Portland State University

David J. Rosen
Newsome Associates

Elizabeth A. Roumell
Texas A & M University

Leah Katherine Saal
Loyola University MD

John Sabatini
IIS/University of Memphis

Steven W. Schmidt
East Carolina University

Joni Schwarz-Chaney
CUNY La Guardia Community College

Ralf St. Clair
University of Victoria

Jenifer Vanek
World Education

JoAnn Weinberger
Center for Literacy (retired)

Keiko Yasukawa
University of Technology Sydney

EVERY ADULT HAS A RIGHT TO LITERACY. 4534206641

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Special Issue Part 1: Exploring Adult Learners' Experiences

Introduction to the Special Issue Part 1: At the Confluence of Adult Lives, Literacies, and Learning Landscapes 4
Leah Katherine Saal

Research Articles

Practice and Practices: Three Adult Literacy Learners' Interactions with Text in Daily Life 6
Alisa Belzer, Sandra Schamroth Abrams

I Write Outside of Here: Adult Learners' Writing Ecosystems and Experiences of Corrective Instructor Feedback 17
Jessica Kubiak

Understanding Adult Learners through the Development of Persona Profiles 29
Jen Vanek, Jill Castek, Kathy Harris, and Gloria E. Jacobs

Viewpoint

A Snapshot of Adult Education in Nigeria 45
Ifedola Morayooluwa Owoeye

Reports from the Field

Navigating Power, Voice, and Equity in Community Adult Education: Lessons from The Welcome Table 50
Jennifer Kobrin, Paul Barrett, and John Boccanfuso

Finding the Missing Piece: Book Clubs Supporting Adult Literacy 56
Josie Voorhies

Technology and Adult Learning

Mentimeter for Engagement and Assessment 61
Vi Hawes

Special Issue Part 1: Exploring Adult Learners' Experiences

Introduction to the Special Issue Part 1: At the Confluence of Adult Lives, Literacies, and Learning Landscapes

Leah Katherine Saal, Loyola University Maryland

A year ago, the response to the Special Issue Call for Papers demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm for exploring adult learners' experiences. Authors from diverse contexts across the field submitted thoughtful and creative examinations of learners' journeys, practices, strengths, challenges, and sources of support across formal and informal learning landscapes. The breadth and quality of these contributions affirmed both the continued salience of the special issue's focus as well as the field's commitment to understanding literacy learning with and from the perspectives of adults, the educators who work alongside them, and their extended learning communities. The abundance of high-quality submissions led the editorial team to expand the special issue into a two-issue series, enabling the journal to feature a fuller range of scholarship and practitioner perspectives than a single issue could accommodate.

Together, the two issues reflect the richness and complexity of adult learning across literacy, language, numeracy, digital learning, and related contexts. Organized around the subtheme *At the Confluence of Adult Lives, Literacies, and Learning Landscapes*, this first issue examines how adult literacy learning is shaped by and shapes work and family responsibilities, personal identities, community participation, institutional access, social relationships, and everyday literate practices in face-to-face and digital environments. Understanding these intersecting influences can help educators, researchers, and policymakers both recognize the value of adults' knowledge as well as use these perspectives to address barriers to participation and strengthen the resources that support authentic literacy learning.

The three Research Article contributions in this issue illuminate how adult learners' identities, print-based and digital literacy practices, relationships, responsibilities, and communities shape learning across workplace, every day, and postsecondary landscapes. In *Understanding Adult Learners Through the Development of Persona Profiles*, Jen Vanek, Jill Castek, Kathy Harris, and Gloria E. Jacobs use empirical data to develop multidimensional profiles of working learners in employer-supported education and training. These personas reveal learners' varied backgrounds, assets, goals, challenges, and the often competing priorities within profiles, offering educators and researchers a practical framework for centering adults' lived realities in program planning and instructional decision-making. Moving from the workplace to everyday life, Sandra Schamroth Abrams's *Practice and Practices: Three Adult Literacy Learners' Interactions with Text in Daily Life* examines developing readers′ practices beyond the classroom. Through three learners' experiences, the study shows that adults′ roles, beliefs about reading development, literacy sponsors, relationships, purposes, and material conditions shape both opportunities and motivation to read. These findings position reading development as socially situated and suggest ways teachers can more intentionally support practice beyond instructional hours. Extending this attention to literacy across settings, Jessica Kubiak's *"I Write Outside of Here": Adult Learners' Writing Ecosystems and Experiences of Corrective Instructor Feedback* examines how college writers interpret instructor feedback through networks of everyday literacy practice, digital mediation, family, friends, and peers. The article shows that learners bring writing identities and support systems developed across

Correspondence: lksaal@loyola.edu

multiple spaces/landscapes into classroom encounters, with important implications for instruction that build on existing strengths and relationships. This perspective invites instructors to treat feedback as a relational and contextualized practice rather than as an isolated correction of errors in a single academic text.

Next, the Viewpoint Article further broadens the issue's examination of learning landscapes by foregrounding the structural and geographic conditions that shape educational access. In *A Snapshot of Adult Education in Nigeria*, Ifedola Owoeye Morayooluwa uses the story of Rakiya to illustrate how socioeconomic and gender inequality, cultural expectations, geography, stigma, and limited public investment shape access to literacy learning. By connecting an individual learner's experience to national and community-wide conditions, the article demonstrates why flexible, locally relevant, and sustainably funded literacy landscapes are essential to learning participation and empowerment.

The two Field Reports included in this issue also showcase how community-based literacy learning landscapes can expand or contract adult learners' opportunities for literacy, connection, agency, and belonging. Josie Voorhies's *Finding the Missing Piece: Book Clubs Supporting Adult Literacy* describes READ Out Loud, an inclusive, student-driven book club that complements structured literacy instruction with collaborative meaning-making, high interest literate activities, and social connection. The report shows how accessible literacy-rich spaces can strengthen confidence, motivation, belonging, persistence, and participation within and beyond specific programming. In the second report, Jennifer Kobrin, Paul Barrett, and John Boccanfuso's *Navigating Power, Voice, and Equity in Community Adult Education: Lessons from The Welcome Table* examines the opportunities and tensions involved in creating genuinely learner-centered community education. By confronting questions of power, positionality, material need, and community voice, the authors deepen understandings of how equitable learning landscapes must be developed with—not merely for—the adults and communities they are intended to serve. Their reflections offer practical guidance for building partnerships that share decision-making power and remain responsive to community priorities. Finally, the Technology Report highlights the affordances of digital adult learning landscapes. In *Mentimeter for Engagement and Assessment*, Vi Hawes shows how anonymous responses and real-time data can reduce barriers, increase participation, and support responsive teaching across adult literacy education settings.

Taken together, these contributions reveal adult learning as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process. They show that literacy development and lifelong learning are shaped not only by access to instruction, but also by work and family responsibilities, everyday practices, social supports, community and institutional structures, and public policy. Most importantly, they remind us that adult literacy learners are not simply recipients of educational services; they are knowledgeable participant/creators whose experiences, assets, and aspirations should guide the design of teaching, programs, and policy which serve them. By examining the confluence of learners' lives, literacies, relationships, and environments, educators, researchers, and policymakers can gain a richer understanding of how to create meaningful, equitable, and effective learning environments.

The ALE Editorial Team and I are grateful to the authors who responded so generously to the call, the peer reviewers whose thoughtful feedback strengthened the work presented here, and the adult learners, educators, and communities whose experiences animate these contributions. We hope the voices and perspectives in this first issue inspire educators, researchers, and policymakers to collaborate with adult literacy learners in creating and sustaining learning landscapes that reflect their diverse experiences, strengths, needs, and aspirations.

http://doi.org/10.35847/ABelzer.SAbrams.8.3.6

Research Article

Practice and Practices: Three adult literacy learners' interactions with text in daily life

Alisa Belzer, Professor, Rutgers University

Sandra Schamroth Abrams, Research Fellow, University of South Africa; Visiting Professor, University of Sheffield

Abstract

A clear relationship between reading practice and reading achievement has been established for young developing readers. Yet, little is known about what adult developing readers participating in adult basic education programs understand and do to improve their reading outside of class. Given that they often have relatively little time in class to practice reading, addressing this question is particularly important to support reading skill development. This case study of three adult learners' interactions with text outside of class indicates that their motivation and capacity to practice reading is influenced not only by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, occupation, and educational level, but also by their adult roles, their beliefs about how to improve their reading skills, and the role of literacy "sponsors" (Brandt, 2001). This cross-case analysis points to the importance of teachers explicitly and strategically encouraging and supporting out-of-class reading for adult literacy learners.

It takes many hours of instruction and practice for adults with low literacy skills to increase their chances of making significant reading progress. For example, Comings et al. (2000) found it took 150-175 hours of instruction for 75% of students to make a grade level gain. Miller and Johnson (2020) found that the odds of increasing skills by one educational functioning level (indicating progress in either reading or math) increased by 77% if they participated in a class for at least 100 hours. Yet, adults who enroll in adult basic education (ABE) programs may have as little as 3 hours of instruction per week. Programs that provide more instructional hours often focus on developing a diverse set of skills that might only tangentially include reading. Direct reading instruction and time spent on reading practice may make up a relatively small fraction of instructional time. Even when reading is taught more intensively, there may be little time left over to practice reading connected and extended texts during class time.

Thus, outside of classroom reading practices may be critical to their success. Because of the importance of reading practice(s) and limited opportunities to spend time reading during class, the purpose of this study was to understand more about learners' interactions with text outside of class time. Descriptions that capture adult literacy learners' practice(s) can help practitioners clarify their role in strengthening the relationship between in-class learning and day-to-day literacy practice(s).

The study was guided by two intersecting concepts using nearly the same word but representing different perspectives: reading practice and reading practices. From a learning perspective, *practice* means doing something repetitively and deliberately to develop new skills and understandings (Ericsson, et al., 1993). Here, the assumption is that reading more, especially with engagement and intentionality, can lead to reading better. From a sociocultural perspective, literacy *practices* "are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives... [They] are what people do with literacy...[and] involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships"

Correspondence: alisa.belzer@gse.rutgers.edu

(Barton, 2007, p. 15). Thus, engaging in literacy activities in day-to-day life is mutually reinforced interaction between practice and practices. For this paper, these two concepts will be shown as interrelated by combining them as practice(s) on the assumption that both contribute to how and what learners choose to read in their daily lives and what assumptions they have about reading and how to improve their reading skill.

Many adults with low literacy skills carry narrow school-like conceptions of literacy, low self-confidence, and high levels of doubt regarding their reading skills. These are often shaped by powerful messages conveyed during years spent in primary and secondary school (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Rogers, 2004) and may curtail motivation to engage with text voluntarily. Yet, researchers find that reading identity is malleable. This suggests that practitioners can help learners reconstruct their literate identities in ways that change their relationship to reading practice(s) (Hall, 2020). An important first step in understanding how to do this is learning more about the day-to-day literacy interactions adult learners have with text as well as how they understand the role of practice(s) in their literacy development. While other studies have documented literacy practices of adults with low skills, they have done so for other purposes (e.g. Barton, 2007).

Documenting these interactions addressed the following research questions: What reading practice do these adult developing readers engage in purposefully and incidentally outside of class? What factors influence these activities? What supports and inhibits their desire and ability to practice reading outside of class? Addressing these questions can contribute to an enriched understanding of appropriate instructional strategies to support increased outside reading practice(s) that is informed by, and responsive to, the realities of adult learners' day-to-day lives and experiences.

The intersection of Practice, Practices, and Motivation

It is a truism that practice makes perfect, and much research has been conducted to demonstrate its applicability to reading achievement. Reading more is repeatedly correlated with improvement in a range of reading component skills and overall reading achievement (Allington, et al., 2021; Cipielewski, et al., 1992; Krashen, 2004; Mackenzie, 2025; Sparks, et al., 2014). However, these benefits are not automatically accrued; they depend on quantity of time spent reading, number of texts read (Allington, 2014; Sparks et al., 2014), quality of engagement (Ericsson, et al., 2019; Topping, et al., 2007) and the type of texts encountered or sought out (Anderson et al., 1988). Correlational studies make it impossible to know the causal relationship between reading practice and reading proficiency. However, Cunningham et al. (2011, as cited in Sparks et al., 2014) argued that various quantitative analysis strategies "[make a strong case for the] reciprocal nature of strong reading skills...and engagement in reading" (p. 209) suggesting a meaningful interrelationship.

Research has also demonstrated a relationship between adult reader characteristics and engagement with text (Purcell-Gates, et al., 2002; Smith, 2000; Smith, et al., 1999). Additionally, Smith (1999) and Mellard et al. (2007) demonstrated a correlation between reading practices and reading proficiency in adults. Smith analyzed data on adults across proficiency levels; Mellard et al. focused on low-skilled adult learners. Although Smith explains that cognitive psychology research demonstrates a relationship between practice and performance, practitioners know that adult responsibilities due to family, work, and community involvement as well as access to reading materials play a role in whether ABE participants practice newly acquired skills outside the classroom. Similarly, Mellard et al. (2007) found that "multiple personal and contextual dimensions influence adults' reading behaviors" (p. 207) including age, employment status, educational attainment level, and gender. A practices perspective suggests that values and cultural assumptions also play a role.

Based on findings from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL), Reder (2009) found "there is...a strong chain of evidence linking program [participation] to increased engagement in [literacy] practices and linking practice engagement over longer periods of time to increased proficiency levels" (p. 47). Reder's Practice Engagement Theory (Reder, et al., 2020) asserts "that frequent engagement in reading, writing and math activities [in everyday life] fosters the growth of underlying literacy and numeracy proficiency" (p. 269). This creates a virtuous cycle by which literacy practice

contributes to proficiency, and proficiency contributes to increased practice (Reder, 2009)

Literacy ethnographers, who tend to study literacy use in a variety of contexts, focus on the ways that individuals interact with text and the social and cultural contexts that shape these interactions. Barton and Hamilton (2000) and Street (2003) have differentiated between the observable patterns of activity in which texts play a central role (literacy events) and the more conceptual notion of literacy practices which are enacted during literacy events and reflect "the broader cultural conceptions of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2003, p. 79). Studies that focus on literacy practices as defined by these researchers "underscore the fact that reading and writing serve many functions, appear in many places, take many forms. They demonstrate how people achieve literacy by various avenues, how reading and writing and learning about them go on in many contexts beyond formal schooling, and often hand in hand with other cultural activities" (Brandt, 2001, p. 7).

These kinds of studies led to detailed descriptions and analyses of how, why, with whom, and under what circumstances adults read, uncovering the multiple ways reading is shaped by social contexts that were seminal and have continued to shape literacy research since then (Barton, et al., 1998; Neilsen, 1989; Taylor, et al., 1988). This ethnographic work, although dated and not designed as such, helps explain the readership research because it demonstrates the ways in which socio-cultural contexts influence the quantity and quality of reading events in which adults engage. Additionally, it highlights the complex and varied ways there are to read, as well as the ways race, class, gender, and other positionalities influence how texts are used and understood. However, this work does not explicitly consider the choices adults with low literacy skills make around engagement with text as a way to improve their literacy skills.

Motivation can play an important role in explaining reading practice(s). Studies on children have found that access to a wide range of texts and print exposure, the capacity to continue reading when difficulty is encountered, reading self-efficacy, and a positive attitude about the value of reading can encourage more reading practice (Gambrell, 2011; Mackenzie, 2025; McQuillan, et al., 2001; Schraw, et al., 1999; Sparks et al., 2014; Wigfield, et al., 1997). Self-report studies have documented similar relationships among adults (Mellard et al., 2007; Smith, 1996). However, adults participating in ABE programs increase their literacy practices when taught using authentic texts and tasks (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Shore, et al., 2013) and when given access to an extensive library and opportunities and encouragement to engage in extensive reading during class time (Rodrigo, et al., 2014). Guthrie and Wigfield (1999) note that having task mastery goals, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, personal interactions, and transactional beliefs also play an important role in reading motivation.

Negative feelings about reading can shape and be shaped by reading identity (how individuals describe themselves as readers) which often gets established in school (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009). Benson (2010), for example, found that school experiences had an abiding impact on perception of literacy ability and ideas about literacy and learning more generally. This is consequential for those who struggled to gain literacy skills as children because "when school becomes the only lens through which literacy is viewed, adults can easily see themselves as lacking" (Benson, 2010, p. 139). Rogers (2004), identified a different way of understanding the impact of reading identity which she describes as domain specific and sometimes conflicting. This is especially salient when it comes to conceptions of reading and reading practices in daily life. Adults in her study saw school reading as distinct from engagement in daily reading tasks and generally assessed their reading skills/identity through a school lens. This suggests that adult literacy learners may need support to broaden their concept of literacy practice(s).

Those adults who define literacy largely as school-literacy and who have a negative self-identity in relation to that definition could experience diminished motivation to engage with avoidable literacy interactions. Fortunately, researchers have found reading identity to be malleable (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Glenn, et al., 2018; Hall, 2020; Saal, et al., 2014). Brandt's (2001) work suggests that adult educators acting as "literacy sponsors" — those influencers who shape perspectives on literacy — can play an important role in revising literacy identity (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Glenn et al., 2009) and helping adults seeking to develop their literacy skills gain a greater sense of efficacy and motivation.

Expectancy-value theory (EVT) (Wigfield, et al., 2017) might be a particularly helpful way to understand reading motivation in adults who face the double challenge of negative reading identity and limited time to focus on reading practice(s) outside the literacy classroom. EVT posits that learners consciously or unconsciously make choices about engaging in learning tasks based on assessment of likely success (i.e. expectancies) and the value and costs of doing so. As part of this process, learners evaluate psychological, emotional, and social costs associated with the tasks. If they are too high, the task will not be undertaken, especially when there is also a fear of failure which may be tied up with school-formulated reading identities (Wigfield et al., 2017). Importantly, researchers have found that expectancy and values, like identity, are malleable; they can be influenced by interventions in the classroom (Wigfield et al., 2017). The research on EVT shows promise both for understanding what might be at play when adult literacy learners make choices about spending time reading outside of class and pointing to specific strategies instructors could use to motivate learners to read more.

Taken together, research on reading practice(s) and motivation provided the lens for collecting and analyzing data for this study. It shaped the assumption that it is useful to understand both the way reading practice is implemented and the beliefs and values (practices) brought to the task. Lytle and Schultz (1991 as cited in Benson, 2010) make this argument well: "We need to find ways to comprehend more fully and with a critical perspective adult learners' own images, practices, plans, and perceptions of literacy..." (p. 132). There is little prior research on the ways adult literacy learners use literacy, purposefully or not, to practice their literacy skills outside the classroom.

Research Design

This study drew on self-report, interview, and observational data to learn more about how reading practices and reading practice intersect for three adults enrolled in an ABE program. They were participating in a large, urban, program offering classes from beginning literacy to adult high school, workforce development, and ESL. Although Edna and Juan are bilingual and Edna's first language is Spanish, they were not in ESL classes. They were selected by recommendation from their teachers based on the duration and consistency of their participation in the program, their potential to be reflective and communicative, and their willingness to participate for which they received $100.

We conducted three types of observations: (a) classroom observation, (b) shadowing (McDonald, 2005), and (c) self-report logs. The intent of observing in these ways was to capture as naturalistic a picture of participants' reading practice(s) as possible by having the researcher spend time with them and by having them self-document their activities.

During the classroom observation, we noted what the participants read, with whom, and how. We spent 6-13 hours shadowing each participant during the course of one day to document a "typical day" of text interactions. While shadowing the participants, we also conducted informal interviews to understand their beliefs, values, and intentions regarding observed literacy practices and to understand how typical they were. Additionally, the participants observed their own text interactions by talking into an audio recorder at several points during another day to further document their practice(s). They described what and how they read, where, with whom, why they did so, and how they felt about the activity.

We also conducted three interviews centered on each participant: (a) one teacher interview and (b) a preliminary and (c) a debriefing participant interview. The preliminary interview focused on learning about reading goals and needs, typical interactions with text, and beliefs and practices regarding improving reading. The debriefing interview (for which Juan was not available) was an opportunity to clarify and discuss areas of interest that arose during data collection.

Although length of data collection activities was relatively short, our multiple sources enabled us to triangulate (Merriam, 1998) the data and gave us confidence that the case descriptions we composed of the participants' interactions with text were reasonably authentic portrayals of their actual day-to-day reading lives.

As a first step in the analysis process, all observation field notes, interview transcripts, and audio log transcripts were read and annotated with preliminary codes and researcher notes. A description of each case (participant) was then

developed which provided "a detailed view ...[of] the 'facts'" (Creswell, 2007, p. 163). To conduct a cross-case analysis, these descriptions were compared along a number of dimensions including the types of texts the participants encountered in their day-to-day lives; the kinds of reading tasks they engaged in to address their adult roles and responsibilities; and their attitudes and beliefs about reading, learning to read, and practicing reading. In addition, the kinds of contexts in which interactions with text took place were noted. As part of this process, we used categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995) to identify similar instances of interaction with texts across cases and the "constant comparative" (Strauss, et al., 1990) method to examine the cases against each other.

Outside of School Practices

Edna, Juan, and Margaret did not have access to a classroom library, nor were they particularly encouraged by their teachers to read outside of class. In other words, their program experience did not prompt or explicitly seek to increase reading practice(s) or seek to understand their practice(s). Yet, each interacted with text in their day-to-day lives. The case studies below describe these interactions.

Edna

Edna was enrolled in adult high school classes and was the most proficient reader[1] of the three participants. She was 54 at the time of the study, married, and a mother of five adult children. She was born in Guatemala and came to the US at about age 16. Literate in Spanish, she earned her GED in English when her children were young. She has recently returned to school to improve her skills after being laid off from an air conditioning factory where she worked for 24 years.

Outside of school she likes to read in both English and Spanish and does so daily. Edna reported that she reads the local newspaper, the Bible, and other religious texts several times a week. She also reads magazines that her daughters share with her, or she finds in doctors' offices, if they look interesting. She scans headlines and a Guatemalan newspaper on her computer. Additionally, she spends much of whatever spare time she has between household chores working in reading, writing and grammar, and math workbooks (not assigned as homework) and completing homework worksheet packets.

Edna feels her skills have improved since enrolling in the program and attributes this to doing school-like work at home and the support of her teachers. She also credits being able to ask her daughters and a family friend for help. Edna believes that reading books would help her improve her skills, but she does not do this often. She expressed interest in getting a library card to borrow books that are "stories about people." However, due to what she called "difficulties," she has not actually done this.

Quite a bit of text is visible in Edna's house including mail and newspapers sitting on her dining room table; books on the desk and shelves in her computer room; notices, coupons, and recipes stuck to her refrigerator door with magnets; and a framed passage hanging on the wall entitled "The Unknown Guest" (referring to God). On the day we spent observing her, Edna went to class, the grocery store, the bank, and then returned home. She was surrounded by texts in all these places and seemed to interact comfortably and fluently with them. For example, at the grocery store, she compared labels looking for specific ingredients; at the bank she filled out a deposit slip without hesitation. When friends from church came in the evening to worship together, their collaborative Bible reading and discussion affirmed our observation that reading is fully integrated in Edna's day-to-day life.

Juan

Juan was in an intermediate level class. At the time we collected data, he was 21 with two-and-a-half-year-old twins who were living in another city with their mother. Juan lived with his mother. He was born in the U.S. but had spent extended periods living in Puerto Rico with his father. He described himself as bilingual in English and Spanish. After a serious car accident at age seven, Juan reported that he was always in trouble at school. He was sent to a disciplinary high school and dropped out at age 16. He then spent five years living in Puerto Rico with his father. Soon after he returned, he decided to return to school.

1 We did not collect NRS levels or assessment information. Our understanding of level was determined by program class assignment.

Juan reported that, outside of school, "Sometimes I write; I don't hardly read." He is not assigned any homework and does no schoolwork at home. He reads in school because that is expected, but "when I'm home, that's my freedom, and I do what I want." When the program's counselor offered him books to read over the summer break, he refused them saying, "I've done enough. I don't want to read no more." When asked why he does not read, he said, "It's 'cause I got things I got to do." He also explained that reading just "doesn't attract my attention...I look for something...that's more comfortable for me."

Juan measured his progress since starting school by how many pages in his school workbooks he had completed. He could not identify anything that he could do to make himself a better reader other than completing assignments at school. He does this only halfheartedly, admitting that he often rushes through the tasks his teacher gives him and answers multiple choice questions without thoroughly reading the passages to which they refer. His teacher described him as a "restless reader" who always chooses to read the shortest things possible. She said, "If it's not for some purpose that he's comfortable with or happy with, he won't read it. Anything... that's more than 3 or 4 pages—he gets very bored with."

Unemployed, Juan's days are somewhat unstructured, although he described himself as the person everyone in his family counts on to help with whatever is needed. Although we spent many hours with him, Juan did not take us through a typical day, and he did not invite us into his home. Based on our discussions and his self-report and given the parameters of his life, however, it seems he generally avoids interacting with text. He could do this because he seemed to operate in a world devoid of reading demands. He does not drive, work, have a bank account, or grocery shop. He reported that there are no books or magazines in his home.

Margaret

Margaret, who was participating in the most basic level reading class at the program, was a 42-year-old African American woman who had worked as a presser at a dry cleaner but was unemployed at the time of the study. She was pregnant and had a 10 ½ year old daughter who lived with her grandmother but visited Margaret on the weekends. She lived with her fiancé in a two-story townhouse. Margaret dropped out of high school, at age 18, just weeks short of graduation, when her father kicked her out of the house. She reported that school had been hard for her. Her goals for enrolling in the ABE program were to gain closure and to do what she felt was best for her and her daughter. "I want to get something for my life, for my daughter; and so she can get an education, and I can get a education, and we can learn something together. That is the best thing for my daughter, for me." Margaret felt she had improved her reading skills and her confidence. She asserted that the main ingredient in accomplishing this is spending time in school. When asked if there was anything she could do outside of school to help herself, she said, "not right now."

On a typical day, Margaret rode the bus or took a cab to school if she could afford it; otherwise, she stayed home. When she could attend, she went straight home afterwards. She reported that at home, she looks at her mail and newspapers and reads text she sees on the always turned on TV. She reads the Bible and other religious materials and directions and recipes on food boxes. She gets no homework assignments and does no schoolwork at home. When she has difficulty decoding something, she seeks help from her fiancé. He often reads the newspaper aloud to her. Her main outing is to go grocery shopping. There, she says, "I have to read stuff... to buy something because I might buy the wrong thing [otherwise]." Because she spends a lot of time at home, her interactions with text outside of school are mostly limited to anything with print that is in, or comes to, her house. However, there is little print material there, and the time she spends engaged with it is limited.

The Relationship Between Reading Practices and Reading Practice

Given the research on the relationship between reader characteristics and "readership," it is expected that the three research participants practices vary. Research indicates that their different ages, occupational experiences, parenting responsibilities, reading abilities, and other characteristics play a role in these differences. At one end of the spectrum, Edna reads a range of texts every day. She reads to fulfill her adult responsibilities, to stay informed, for spiritual reasons, and to do additional, voluntary school-like work. At the other end of the spectrum, Juan finds little reason, outside of class, to

read at all. Margaret, the most struggling reader of the three, seems to use reading more in her day-to-day life than Juan. Although isolated, with little access to print, she does read some every day. However, the differences in their reading behaviors seem shaped by factors beyond demographic characteristics or reading levels. In our cross-case discussion, we focus on how their roles as adults, their beliefs about reading improvement, and "literacy sponsors" (Brandt, 2001) shape their reading practice(s).

Influences of adult roles on reading practice

The roles that Edna and Margaret fulfilled as adult members of their families and communities had a clear impact on what they read as well as where and with whom they did it, creating unplanned opportunities to read through day-to-day interactions with text. For example, because Edna was responsible for food shopping and banking, she regularly interacted with texts in the world of commerce. Margaret had some similar responsibilities, but in a more limited way. By virtue of their adultness, they received and read mail. They read religious texts because of their faith. They also sought information through newspapers, dictionaries, TV, and the Internet. There was some text in their homes, and they could read there as well as in stores and banks. In contrast, Juan seemed to be in a sort of twilight between adolescence and adulthood, with few real responsibilities. His position limited his exposure to many kinds of text that Margaret and Edna encountered regularly. Even though he was able to read, he rarely needed to and never chose to.

Edna, Juan, and Margaret demonstrate that adulthood may create incidental opportunities to read that could easily be turned into purposeful opportunities to practice, but it can also interfere. For example, Edna made clear that were it not for her adult worries and responsibilities, she would probably read more. None of the research participants were directly responsible for the care of school-aged children, but it is likely that parenting responsibilities would add additional interactions with text that could be a source of reading practice as well as time demands that might detract from reading practice(s).

Beliefs about how to improve reading

The amount of time that the participants spent reading seems tied to their beliefs about the value of investing time in this activity. While adultness seems naturally to create incidental interactions with text for Edna and Margaret, these interactions were not necessarily construed or constructed as opportunities to practice reading. Yet it is in the deliberateness of practice that real improvement can accrue (Ericsson et al., 1993). For all three, school experiences and school literacy held a powerful grip on their understanding of reading practice(s). Indeed, Edna and Margaret expressed their belief that the only reading that could improve their skills was school-related reading. Margaret felt that the only place she could do this kind of reading was in school, and Juan seemed to feel that the reading he did in school was adequate for reaching his goals. All three participants seemed to share the assumption that doing traditional school reading tasks (e.g., reading short passages and answering comprehension questions) in school or at home, is the main route to improved reading in general. Even Edna, who said she believed she should read more books, put her considerable effort primarily into completing workbook pages rather than engaging in more authentic reading tasks as a purposeful way to improve. When asked what she could do to help herself improve her skills, she replied, "If I do my homework, I will be better in everything that I want to do. If I come to school, and I don't do my homework, I would never learn."

Of course, Margaret and Edna did do some reading for pleasure, information, or to get things done in their day-to-day lives because of their adult responsibilities and commitments. However, they separated reading that they had to or chose to do from reading to improve their skills and did not perceive the former as opportunities to practice. Rather, these three adults' understandings of what they could and should do to improve their reading seem largely shaped by "powerful, not always helpful, messages about reading from their years in school" (Belzer, 2002,, p. 111). Thus, their own notions of reading, shaped by their experiences and contexts, seem to work against the likelihood of their engaging in purposeful, extensive reading practice outside of class. The motivation to practice reading as a way to improve skills must be preceded by a belief that practice can help. Only Edna seemed to understand this, but all were limited by a very narrow view of reading practice(s).

The role of "literacy sponsors"

Brandt (2001) defines literacy sponsors as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy... (p. 19). While the sponsoring role of teachers and parents is often assumed to be significant in the development of literacy skills for children (Baker, et al., 1997; Topping et al., 2007), Edna, Juan, and Margaret's daily interactions with text also demonstrate this same kind of important sponsoring role that teachers and relatives play in shaping their interactions with text. For example, because both Edna and Margaret had benefit of reading help from family members, they could regularly interact with texts that may have been too challenging to undertake by themselves. Edna gave several examples of her family's support and involvement in her reading development and learning more generally, including that her daughters gave her an electronic dictionary as a gift, help her with schoolwork when she needs it, and recognize and exclaim over her progress. Her husband bought her a math workbook.

In contrast, Margaret and Juan have little support or encouragement for their efforts. They both seem to be working against a negative self-image of themselves as learners that they report was planted by their fathers. Although Margaret's fiancé sometimes acts as a literacy "assistant" by reading the newspaper to her and helping her with personal business, she did not report any involvement on his part in her learning. Similarly, though his teacher reported that Juan's mother frequently checked up on his attendance when he first came to the program, she seemed to pay no attention to the work that he was doing or his progress while he was there. Neither Margaret nor Juan had the positive literacy sponsors that Edna enjoyed. While all three reported positive relationships with their teachers, who presumably functioned as literacy sponsors within the program, there was little evidence that they made any explicit effort to encourage reading practice outside of school and largely focused on providing access to just one kind of text in school--instructional texts.

Discussion: Implications for Practice

Because research suggests that reading identity is malleable and that reading identity and practice(s) are connected, teachers can function not just as instructors but as literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2001) who play an important role in encouraging learners to see themselves as readers who have agency in improving their own reading skills through increased reading practice(s). This is especially relevant if, like Edna, Juan, and Margaret, learners have negative feelings about reading and low motivation to engage in practice(s) or see reading improvement as tied only to school-like reading activities. Specifically, they can increase both expectancy and value (EVT) regarding reading practice(s) by helping learners understand its importance, building their expectations and strategies for success, increasing access to text and understanding appropriate text selection (with regard to difficulty level), and overcoming barriers to reading practice(s). Although how instructors enact these recommendations needs to be adjusted to learners' reading strengths and challenges, the overall goal of encouraging learners to engage in more reading practice(s) should be the same regardless of reading level and potential or diagnosed learning disability.

To varying degrees each of the focal adults in this study spent some time reading outside of class, but none of them indicated that they understood this as a way of improving their reading skills. Their reading beliefs and practices seemed to limit their reading practice. They, and probably other adult learners like them, could benefit if teachers explicitly encouraged reading outside of class. They can do this by explaining the relationship between reading more and skill development, making clear the importance of reading widely from a range of texts and for a range of purposes, and clarifying that school-like reading tasks can be helpful but all kinds of reading support their progress.

Understanding the "pay off" of engaging in varied reading practice(s) is an important motivational ingredient according to expectancy-value theory (EVT) (Wigfield et al., 2017). One strategy that may be helpful in conveying the importance of reading in support of reading motivation and to increase reading time is keeping a reading log. Earl (1997) implemented several strategies to increase the time her students spent reading, but experienced only limited success until she asked them to use a reading log. This not only seemed to serve as a reminder to read but also conveyed a strong and clear message about the importance of reading outside of class and provided a

structure for tracking reading engagement. In addition, as the students read more, they talked to each other about what they were reading. Although teachers cannot hope to change the culture of support for learners in their homes (for better or worse), Earl provides an example of how to create peer literacy sponsors by building interested and supportive networks of learners who share and discuss their reading likes and dislikes, triumphs, and challenges. This may help adults over the hump when their spouses, partners, or children are unable, unwilling, or unaware of the importance of doing so.

EVT also suggests the importance of working to raise learners' expectations for success. To accomplish this, learners may need ways to revisit, revise, and "restory" (Clark, et al., 2008) their beliefs about reading and themselves as readers. This involves reflection and analysis of past and current reading experiences in and out of school in ways that increase self-efficacy and release negative self-blame. To experience success, they may also need to learn how to identify texts at an appropriate level of challenge to avoid frustration. Additionally, learners need explicit strategies that enable them to keep reading without barriers. This includes knowing how to and being encouraged explicitly to deploy decoding and comprehension strategies that they are learning in class. "Positive experiences with texts... over time...[can] create new histories, identities, and habits" (Hall, 2020, p. 681). The idea here is that when learners are invited to (re)construct a positive sense of self and gain positive reading experiences, motivation to engage with text increases.

Even with the best of intentions, learners may have difficulty spending time reading a range of text because of poor access and other barriers. An important starting point for increasing access to text and simultaneously communicating the importance of reading outside of class could be providing a classroom or program library with a range of books, magazines, and other print materials in a variety of genres and difficulty levels from which students can borrow to read at home. AI may be helpful in generating or modifying texts at varying levels of difficulty. Beers (1996) points out that choice of texts is important, but that it should be limited so as not to overwhelm. She also suggests that uncommitted or unmotivated readers may prefer non-fiction and need a lot of visual cues in the text to help them picture what they are reading about. Ensuring that classroom texts are not only engaging but relevant and connected to learners' daily lives can also increase interest in reading and help learners see the connection between school literacy and daily life (Mellard, et al., 2007; Noreen, et al., 2025).

Even with the most effective instructional strategies along with high-quality motivation, learners' busy lives may leave them feeling they do not have the time to read. To address this reality, teachers could help learners understand that even short bursts of regular reading could be helpful. A class activity could involve learners collaboratively identifying ways to find such opportunities several times each week. Periodic discussions about how they are (or are not) finding time to read could also offer helpful input and new ideas.

Conclusion

Although an important first step, simply telling adult students that they should read more is probably not enough. The sample size here, limited by resources, is small enabling only an exploratory inquiry, and no generalizations can be made. However, Edna, Juan, and Margaret's stories are illustrative of important implications for practice that may be appropriate for many adult literacy learners. They suggest that educators may need to help adult learners re-evaluate their beliefs, values, and goals regarding reading to encourage reading practice(s). This may be especially true if belief systems are bound by images of school-like reading which may inhibit motivation and the range and quality of interactions with texts outside of the classroom. Teachers can also emphasize and maximize the conditions that can support increased reading practice. It may seem like a simple idea to argue that adult struggling readers need encouragement and help to read more as an important part of becoming fluent and capable readers. The data presented here, however, suggest that learners' understanding of this or their capacity to act on it cannot be taken for granted cannot be taken for granted. Adult learners can do a great deal to help themselves improve their reading, but they may need substantive help from others to get started so that they can change their reading practice(s) and amplify the outcomes of participating in adult education.

References

Allington, R. (2014). How Reading Volume Affects both Reading Fluency and Reading Achievement. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *7*(1), 13–25.

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. M. (2021). Reading Volume and Reading Achievement: A Review of Recent Research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *56*(S1), S231–S238. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.404

Baker, L., Scher, D., & Mackler, K. (1997). Home and family influences on motivations for reading. *Educational Psychology*, *32*(2), 69–82.

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. Routledge.

Belzer, A. (2002). *I Don't Crave to Read: School Reading and Adulthood*. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 46(2), 104–113. https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.46.2.2

Benson, S. (2010). Negotiating Literacy Identity in the Face of Perceived Illiteracy: What Counts as Being Literate as an Adult and Who Decides? *Adult Basic Education & Literacy Journal*, *4*(3), 131–139. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=59373847&site=ehost-live

Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. Cambridge University press.

Cipielewski, J., & Stanovich, K. E. (1992). Predicting growth in reading ability from children's exposure to print. *Journal of experimental child psychology*, *54*(1), 74–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-0965(92)90018-2

Clark, M. C., & Rossiter, M. (2008). Narrative learning in adulthood. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2008* (119), 61–70. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.306

Comings, J., Sum, A., & Uvin, J. (2000). *New skills for a new economy: Adult education's keyrole in sustaining economic growth and expanding opportunity.* . https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241474711_Persistence_Helping_Adult_Education_Students_Reach_Their_Goals

Compton-Lilly, C. (2009). Disparate Reading Identities of Adult Students in One GED Program. *Adult Basic Education & Literacy Journal*, *3*(1), 34–43. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=38216956&site=ehost-live

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd Edition ed.). Sage.

Earl, D. (1997). Learning to love reading. *Focus On Basics*, *1*(1), 3–4.

Ericsson, K. A., & Harwell, K. W. (2019). Deliberate Practice and Proposed Limits on the Effects of Practice on the Acquisition of Expert Performance: Why the Original Definition Matters and Recommendations for Future Research. *Frontiers in psychology*, *10*, 2396. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02396

Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance. *Psychological review*, *100*(3), 363–406. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.100.3.363

Gambrell, L. B. (2011). Seven Rules Of Engagement: What's Most Important to Know About Motivation to Read. *The Reading Teacher*, *65*(3), 172–178. https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01024

Glenn, W., Ginsberg, R., & King-Watkins, D. (2018). Resisting and Persisting: Identity Stability Among Adolescent Readers Labeled as Struggling. *Journal of adolescent research*, *33*(3), 306–331. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416684953

Guthrie, J. T., & Wigfield, A. (1999). How motivation fits into a science of reading. *Scientific studies of reading*, *3*(3), 199–205.

Hall, L. A. (2020). How Youth and Adults With Negative Reading Histories Found a Way to Enjoy Reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *63*(6), 675–682. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1046

Hamilton, M., & Barton, D. (2000). The international adult literacy survey: What does it really measure? *International Review of Education*, *46*(5), 377–389.

Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The power of reading : insights from the research* (2nd ed.). Libraries Unlimited.

Mackenzie, N. (2025). The power of independent reading. *Qualitative research journal*, *25*(1), 60–65. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-09-2024-0200

McDonald, S. (2005). Studying actions in context: a qualitative shadowing method for organizational research. *Qualitative research : QR*, *5*(4), 455–473. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794105056923

McQuillan, J., & Au, J. (2001). The effect of print access on reading frequency. *Reading Psychology*, *22*(3), 225–248.

Mellard, D., Patterson, M. B., & Prewett, S. (2007). Reading practices among adult education participants. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *42*(2), 188–213.http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspxdirect=true&db=aph&AN=24604084&site=ehost-live

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass.

Miller, C. M., & Johnson, R. (2020). *An Examination of the Relationship Between Adult Education Engagement with Student Knowledge Gains and Future Educational Atainment*. P.D.o Education https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Data%20and%20Statistics/Research%20and%20Evaluation/Adult%20Education%20Engagement%20Student%20Knowledge%20Gains%20and%20Future%20Educational%20Attainment-Full%20Report.pdf

Neilsen, L. (1989). *Literacy and living: The literate lives of three adults*. Heinemann.

Noreen, S., & Iqbal, Z. (2025). Effectiveness of the social practice approach: Enhancing the application of basic literacy in daily life among adult learners: Effectiveness of the social practice approach: Enhancing. *International Review of Education*, *71*(4), 561–589. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-025-10129-6

Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S. C., Jacobsen, E., & Soler, M. (2002). Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *37*(1), 70–92.

Reder, S. (2009). Scaling Up and Moving In: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in adult education. *Literacy & numeracy studies*, *16*(2-1). https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v0i0.1276

Rodrigo, V., Greenberg, D., & Segal, D. (2014). Changes in Reading Habits by Low Literate Adults through Extensive Reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *26*(1), 73–91.

Rogers, R. (2004). Storied Selves: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Adult Learners' Literate Lives. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *39*(3), 272–305.http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ684711&site=ehost-live http://dx.doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.39.3.2

Saal, L. K., & Sulentic Dowell, M.-M. (2014). A Literacy Lesson from an Adult "Burgeoning" Reader. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *58*(2), 135–145. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.325

Schraw, G., & Bruning, R. (1999). How implicit models of reading affect motivation to read and reading engagement. *Scientific studies of reading*, *3*(3), 281–302.

Shore, J. R., Sabatini, J. P., Lentini, J., & Holtzman, S. (2013). Changes in reading practices and perceptions in low-literacy-level adult learners. *Reading Psychology*, *34*(6), 550–568.

Smith, M. C. (2000). The real-world reading practices of adults. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *32*(1), 25–52.

Smith, M. C., & Stahl, N. A. (1999). *Adults reading practices and activities: Age, educational and occupational effects*.

Sparks, R., Patton, J., & Murdoch, A. (2014). Early reading success and its relationship to reading achievement and reading volume: replication of '10 years later'. *Reading & writing*, *27*(1), 189–211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-013-9439-2

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage.

Street, B. (2003). What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, *52*(2), 77–91.

Taylor, D., & Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988). *Growing up literate: Learning from inner-city families*. Heinemann.

Topping, K. J., Samuels, J., & Paul, T. (2007). Does practice make perfect? Independent quantity, quality, and student achievement. *Learning and Instruction*, *17*(3), 253–264.

Wigfield, A., & Guthrie, J. T. (1997). Relations of children's motivation for reading to the amount and breadth of their reading. *Journal of educational psychology*, *89*(3), 420–432.

Wigfield, A., Rosenzweig, E. Q., & Eccles, J. S. (2017). Achievement Values: Interactions, interventions, and future directions. In A. J. Elliot, C. S. Dweck, & D. S. Yeager (Eds.), *Handbook of Competence and Motivation : Theory and Application* (2nd Edition ed., pp. 116–134). Guilford Press.

http://doi.org/10.35847/JKubiak.8.3.17

Research Article

"I Write Outside of Here": Adult Learners' Writing Networks and Experiences of Corrective Instructor Feedback

Jessica M. Kubiak, Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, Associate Professor of English: University of Pittsburgh at Bradford

Abstract

As U.S. institutions of higher education increase opportunities for adults to earn short-term, job-ready credentials, more learners will have access to college-level writing coursework without basic or developmental prerequisites. With this access comes the risk of corrective feedback on language use, a process that may be felt as painful or even violent. This article details findings from a study that explored how adult learners at a rural, open-access community college experience such feedback. Thirty students responded to focus group and interview questions about corrective feedback received in the context of first-year composition. Findings focus on participants' daily reading and writing practice, digital mediation of feedback, and the friends, family, and peers who support participant writing. These elements of adult learners' writing networks contribute to the framework through which learners experience feedback, perhaps explaining why participants' emotional experience of corrective feedback on their language use was not prominent in their discussion of feedback encounters. Implications exist for instructional design that leverages learners' existing practices and supports.

Introduction

Community colleges often function as an adult's steppingstone back into formal education and training. With dual missions supporting both prospective transfer students and students seeking career programs such as practical nursing and welding, these open-access institutions offer both credit and non-credit pathways to immediate employment. Increasingly, students can complete industry-driven formal credentials in one semester of full-time study, with adult learners further incentivized by the prospect of earning credit for prior learning. Efforts within the field of developmental education have further cleared the way for students to complete short-term, post-secondary credentials in months. Specifically, corequisite literacy reforms have meant more "under-prepared" learners are beginning their post-secondary journeys in college-level writing coursework, bringing with it opportunity for expedited training but also the potential for negative experiences that come with critical feedback on language use.

This potential for negative experience with feedback on adult learners' language prompted me to study adult first-year writing students at a multi-campus, open-access community college in southwestern New York State. My IRB-exempted study used focus group methodology to explore the experience of corrective feedback with 30 community college students enrolled in first-year writing coursework. Though I posited that corrective feedback encounters might be experienced as a kind of violence against learners' identities, findings point to a nuanced experience for adult learners situated in a unique literacy network.

Context and Literature Review

Historically, students deemed "under-prepared" for college-level math and English courses have been placed

Correspondence: jmk67@pitt.edu

via timed, standardized assessments into developmental coursework; these classes, considered "pre-collegiate," do not count toward program completion. Placement into pre-requisite, non-credit-bearing courses may extend the time required to complete what should be single-semester micro-credentials or one-year certificates by up to 100%.

In recent years, completion of fast-track, employment-focused training and education within intended shorter timeframes has become more feasible for under-prepared learners as a result of corequisite efforts. Corequisite models, championed primarily among literacy and numeracy practitioners in community college English and Math departments, allow under-prepared learners to enroll directly in college-level, credit-bearing coursework when those learners enroll concurrently in targeted support courses (Kubiak, 2022). Likewise, where trades-focused courses require demonstrated reading ability, corequisite support courses in literacy skills make way for learners to enroll in both trades-focused coursework and reading support coursework at the same time. In this way, students who would have required an entire semester of non-credit, pre-collegiate coursework prior to beginning employment-focused coursework can now make progress at the same rate as peers deemed "college-ready."

As such, the research and practice of writing studies—as manifested in college-level reading and writing instruction—is now tied up with college transition studies more than ever. A specific point of concern I have arrived at through a lens of adult literacy and writing studies regarding adult learners' experience is how learners' identities and markers of identity are supported or challenged as a result of instruction, a concern that cuts across fields that focus on adult literacy learners.

One thread of scholarship within the field of writing studies and aligned disciplines is concerned with affective response to language use and its correction. Though research on the affective experience of language correction has largely been limited to the experience of the hearer—typically instructors (e.g., Dowden et al., 2013) but also more broadly (e.g., Alim, 2023)—less attention has been paid to the experience of the *person being corrected*. Throughout my years teaching developmental and college-level English, I have grown increasingly concerned about the nature of that experience, especially among learners whose primary discourses present as non-standard. This study focuses on adult first-year composition (FYC) learners at my rural, primarily White, northern Appalachian, open-access community college and their experience of having their written language use corrected.

This project is therefore partly about the way I approach my work as a practitioner of adult literacy in the context of FYC instruction. For most of my career I heeded Delpit's (1992) call to teach learners the language of power, arming them with the turns of phrase and grammatical "correctness" that ensure access to wherever they want to be in life. At the same time, I have seen learners' identities dismantled by formal literacy and language instruction. I have wondered for the last several years, how do we adult literacy instructors strike a balance between empowering learners and respecting their primary discourses? And how do we teach a dominant/dominating discourse of power when, on the one hand, that discourse is entrenched and evolving glacially (Devitt, 1989), and on the other, it is a moving target that seems to follow the whims of the powerful and privileged (Bourdieu, 1991)?

More precisely I wondered: How do adult, "native" English-speaking FYC students report their experience of receiving corrective feedback on their language use? Scholars from across sociolinguistics and literacy and writing studies have signaled what they believe this experience is like for various populations of learners. Stuckey (1991), Smitherman (1995), Worsham (1998), McCarty and Watahomigie (2001), Bridwell-Bowles (2003), Strickland and Crawford (2003), Bartholomae (2005), Lyiscott (2017), Myers (2019), Inoue (2020), Baker-Bell (2020), and others have pointed to the pain associated with literacy and language learning, with several suggesting that this pain is tantamount to a kind of violence. Scholars across disciplinary contexts have contended with this and similar conclusions to varying degrees.

Within the fields of foreign and additional language learning, a narrowing gap has been identified in research that addresses learners' emotional experiences of corrective feedback. In 2009, Garrett and Young called for additional "studies that focus on the affective responses of the learner to the language learning experience" (p. 209), noting that "few studies have examined the first-person experiences of language

learners or attempted to relate their experience of emotion to their individual successes and failures in language learning" (p. 211). Arnold (2019) suggested a decade later that "now more and more attention is also given to affective factors" (p. 11) in language learning. Azamnouri et al. (2020) confirm this, noting although emotion had been "neglected in language instruction and studies earlier" (p. 31), recent decades saw increased focus on learner emotions. Although this research gap has been closing, I posit that the affective experience of having one's home discourse corrected is different from having a newly acquired language corrected, such that conclusions drawn from this emerging research may not be applicable to the FYC population.

More limited is K–12 research focused on learner emotion in grammar and usage instruction, as most of this research focuses instead on the *efficacy* of contextualized grammar instruction (e.g., Andrews et al., 2006; Collins & Norris, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Myhill & Watson, 2014; Myhill et al., 2013). Exceptions can be found in the scholarship of critical literacy scholars such as Baker-Bell (2020), who argues the need for an antiracist Black language pedagogy by studying changes to "students' language attitudes" (p. 49) after instructional interventions on the history and culture of Black language. Her project focuses on the unique experiences of Black K–12 English education learners in the U.S., noting that "linguistic racism and oppression, especially as experienced by Black people, tend to get overlooked or are undertheorized" even in frameworks like critical race theory (p. 12). Though Baker-Bell's study focuses primarily on learners' *intellectual* reactions to corrective feedback on language use, it concludes that learners internalize negative assumptions about their identities because of how their language is policed by family, school, and communities. Baker-Bell's work confronts the experience of learners whose home discourse is corrected, but I struggle to generalize her findings to my study's population because of her K–12 setting.

Strickland and Crawford (2003) discuss the emotional experience of the FYC speaker or writer who has been, as the authors call it, "schooled" upon having their written language use corrected. The authors speculate specifically about the emotional experience of a group of Black learners they were teaching who, upon reading two writing samples, were unable to locate any value in the sample composed with Ebonics. Learner emotions proposed by the authors include shame, embarrassment, and disgust. Though Strickland and Crawford's work addresses the population and phenomenon I wish to explore, they did not directly ask learners about their emotional experiences regarding feedback on their language use.

Others within writing studies have approached the question of student experience more empirically, as seen in scholarly dialogue about FYC student *understanding of instructor response* to their writing (Bowden, 2018; Bowles, 2020; Brannon & Knobloch, 1982; Sommers, 1992; Sommers, 2006; Sommers, 2012; Straub, 1997). Some scholarship includes limited focus on FYC learners' *emotional experience of feedback in general* (Calhoon-Dillahunt & Forrest, 2013; Gee, 1972; Rupiper Taggart & Laughin, 2017; Treglia, 2008), with a subset focusing on learners' *emotional experience of feedback on language use* in particular. While these latter studies come closest to exploring the phenomenon that my study focuses on, selected methodologies call into question their usefulness. The most common method of data collection about learners' experiences is closed response survey (e.g., Li & Lindsey, 2015; Rupiper Taggart & Laughlin, 2017), limiting the extent to which learners' voices shape findings.

The study I undertook in 2022, then, was an attempt to explore how such feedback is experienced by learners in their own terms. Study questions focused on adult FYC learners' emotional experiences of having their language corrected via instructor feedback, questions born of my concern regarding how corrective feedback on language use might function as a kind of instructional violence.

Methodology

The task of articulating others' potentially painful experiences isn't to be taken lightly. Therefore, I sought a methodology that would create safe opportunities for participants to narrate experiences, venues in which I could avoid imposing my assumptions. Focus groups, when designed as a constructivist method, invite collaboratively arrived-at observations, reflections, and conclusions that come about through generative and empathetic conversation about shared experiences. One argument for this methodology is its collective

nature, which suits people who might struggle to articulate their thoughts, providing collective power to marginalized people (Liamputtong, 2011, p. ix), such as "underprepared" FYC adult learners. Focus groups afford conversation among participants, and peers' presence ensures participants are not exclusively enacting the role of student vis-à-vis an instructor or other authority figure.

Harding et al. (2018) point to the following benefits of focus group methodology and data collection. They:

- Are "well suited to exploring ideas on a particular topic and the complexities of opinions and attitudes."
- "Foreground interaction between group members as they respond to, agree with, or challenge each other on different topics: co-constructing meaning and shared understandings."
- "Enable researchers to study how individuals collectively make sense of phenomena and why they feel the way they do."
- Are "more likely" to evoke "attitudes, feelings, and beliefs" because of focus groups' "more naturalistic" setting of "social gathering and interaction." (p. 12)

I aimed to take advantage of the elements of focus groups aligned with adult literacy andragogy imperatives as modeled by Vetter and Moroz's (2019) protocol and Harding et al.'s (2018) reflections. I relied on Morgan's (1996) guidance on focus groups as social science research methodology to establish the study design, supplementing this framework with Liamputtong's (2011) work and further refining it for the writing classroom context with an eye to Banks et al. (2019).

Study Protocol

The study setting was an open-access, public, two-year community college in southwestern New York State, the northern-western corner of the U.S.'s Appalachian region. The college is rurally situated, and all but about 200 of roughly 2,000 matriculated students commute. Of the four rural New York State counties with the highest "share of population in poverty" in 2020, three of these make up the college's service area, with one of the three atop that list with 16.3% of citizens living at or below the economic poverty line (New York State Comptroller, 2022).

Participants recruited for this study came from three instructional sites, each with unique contexts and different student populations. Two campus sites are located 50 miles from each other, and the extension center site is a 40-minute drive from the main campus and an 80-minute drive from the other. Student characteristics and populations differ from site to site, and local demographics make each site's context distinct. A few markers of common institutional culture can be found across the three sites, but not many, resulting in some ambiguity regarding the scope of this study and therefore its generalizability.

Some participant characteristics may influence experiences of feedback. All but a few of my study's thirty participants are *adults* as defined in ways consistent with the field of Adult Education, referring not only to non-traditional learners, but also to eighteen-year-olds with significant life experience who might otherwise be called "traditional." A related characteristic is participants' matriculation at a *community college*. Toth (2023) notes that community college learners likely share many characteristics with adult learners: both are "historically underrepresented in postsecondary education" (p. 37) and are typically first-generation college students, poor, caretakers, and workers. Finally, the participants and the site of this study are all *rurally situated*.

All matriculated students taking at least one face-to-face, campus-based FYC course were eligible for recruitment. In Fall 2022, 462 students were enrolled as such, and 309 were recruited for this study. Those enrolled in online (either asynchronous or synchronous) courses were not explicitly excluded from study recruitment, but were implicitly excluded due to a combination of COVID-19-related restrictions and study parameters.

Seven focus group sessions and three interview sessions were held during the four-week data collection period. Focus groups ranged from three to seven participants, and thirty participants engaged in focus groups or interviews. Participants ranged from 18 to 51 years old and were sorted into homologous groups based on characteristics related to gender identity, racial identity, and adulthood characteristics to increase likelihood of participant comfort. Sessions consisted of semi-structured discussions with questions designed to establish rapport, focus on FYC instruction, and identify

responses to feedback.

Data Analysis

Because I sought to convey the experiences of learners through their own voices, transcription, coding, and analysis work deemphasized any a priori frameworks. I re-read transcripts with an eye toward both initial thematic and interaction codes and my research question, which drove axial coding and thematic framework development, an approach that is distinct from grounded theory analysis as transcript coding remained open throughout the initial coding process.

Social interaction expands the material available but is not always incorporated in analysis, as focus groups are often employed as a method of efficiency, rather than a methodology of co-constructed knowledge-making. However, attention to social interaction during analysis facilitates the process of identifying thoughts that are meaningful for both the speaker and others in the group. Social interaction analysis also allows for attentiveness to dissenting opinion, especially when carried out in conjunction with thematic analysis.

Working with such multi-layered focus group data allows for a kind of immediate triangulation, what Janesick (2003) calls data "crystallization" (p. 67). Where participants come together in agreement—or express dissent—via discussion, or where participants arrive at a conclusion together, data may point more definitively to "the discourses or themes that are produced within the group context" (Liamputtong, p. 175). That is, by reading focus group data not only for discrete content but for indicators of engagement via social interaction analysis, results should provide a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon discussed.

Both discourse analysis and thematic analysis pointed to significant ideas and levels of agreement around those ideas, leading to three thematic domains consisting of twenty sub-themes. Each sub-theme's agreement factor was determined in order to locate both broadly significant issues and matters of concern to specific focus groups. To check my thematic framework, I shared domains, sub-themes, and transcript-derived examples of each sub-theme with participants three months after session completion; 30% of participants provided feedback on or affirmed initial analysis.

Findings

The question prompting this study was: How do adult, "native" English-speaking FYC students report their experience of receiving corrective feedback on their language use? This question drove discussion that touched not only on this phenomenon, but on a holistic profile of what it means to be a FYC student in a post-pandemic, technology-infused, anxiety-ridden world. While data collection yielded sufficient information to support analysis and discussion of learner experience of instructor feedback, the following reflects what participants brought to the focus group table.

The findings shared here reflect what I posit is a unique experience for adult learners in FYC instructional contexts. Participants recounted emotional experiences of feedback ranging from positive to negative, but for these learners, instructor feedback on language use (and perhaps feedback in general) is only one element of a broad and complex network of similarly broad and complex factors experienced in their writing lives. In particular, of the twenty sub-themes that I developed in analysis, seventeen speak more to the material, the procedural, and the familial than to participant emotions about instructor corrective feedback on language use. These sub-themes—three of which are unpacked below—are not distractions from the matter of adult learner experience of feedback. Rather, they are elements of the framework *through which* learners experience that feedback.

Reading and Writing in Daily Lives

One sub-theme is participants' reading and writing for non-academic purposes. Reading as a discrete activity was introduced by participants as a point of explanation for their general attitude toward FYC. Additionally, several shared that they not only maintain vigorous daily writing practices but have developed strategies for composing, both of which have been cultivated outside the confines of formal writing instruction.

Nicole detailed her consumption of various media and other sources of linguistic input, along with how she sees that language consumption positively benefitting her vocabulary, a result of intentional practice:

> I think I have a wide vocabulary because I read a lot every day. Like, I try to learn something new every day. On top of that, I listen to a lot of music, and it's not just the same type of music. It's different music, so different

> words, I always hear, it's coming to me. And I pay attention to what people say. So like, if somebody says something, that will stick with me, then boom, I learned a new word just like that. And then I really try to read signs, posters, just little stuff like that, because I know, reading the littlest stuff, really expand[s] your vocabulary. But I really think it's music 'cuz I know a lot of music. And it's just, yeah, helps me with my vocabulary, I feel like.

More effusive was participants' enthusiasm for writing in their non-academic lives. Some emphasized specific kinds of writing, and some pointed to the relevance of academic genres to daily life, while most gestured generally to the fact that they write outside of academic contexts. Some participants introduced their affinity for writing after commenting on their experience in FYC. One shared: "Some of my other English classes are more literature focused, but this one has just been writing and I like writing a lot." Another indicated that they liked composing a process analysis in FYC, pointing out "how applicable it is," because of its daily application. Others share, while talking about FYC, that they "love rhetoric" or "like think pieces."

Most participants who spoke about daily reading and writing didn't anchor these practices in terms of academic experiences. In the following, Jane does the opposite:

> ME: You've mentioned this phrase "writing voice" a few times.
>
> JANE: Yes.
>
> ME: So that seems like something that you value a lot.
>
> JANE: For sure. Yeah. Because I write outside of, outside here.

I later learned that Jane's FYC class and affiliated workshop both took place in the classroom where our focus group was held. Jane's "here" can be read as the classroom where writing instruction takes place, or as college in general.

Other participants located their writing practices outside of academic settings, providing specific information about what they write. Lily discussed one endeavor:

> The only other time I've written a story was for my friends. And I'm still technically writing it but it's not finished yet. I'm writing them a fairytale novel -- not really a novel, just a little thing, but I'm writing it for them.

Though Lily clarified the description of what she was writing, this self-correction points to a desire to define the genre in which she was working. Ultimately, the technicality regarding whether this was a story or a novel became unimportant, as Lily broadened (yet minimized) her description, calling it "just a little thing" before re-emphasizing her work's intended audience.

Beyond expressing positive stances toward reading and writing, participants drew connections between those practices and college-sponsored literacy work of FYC. They sought to define the reading and writing they engage in outside of formal reading and writing instruction, and they reported mutual benefits across the settings in which they read and write. One implication, then, is that opportunity exists to extend established significant reading and writing practices into formal instructional efforts, with instruction inviting learners to reflect on the reading and writing they already do, leveraging that existing practice for the sake of formal instruction. For instance, Lily's alertness to audience and genre would provide an ideal framework for full-class discussion about rhetorical awareness. Such an emphasis on existing understanding can go beyond instructional sequencing, and may influence revision of programmatic or course-level student learning outcomes, which could include translation of the non-academic to the academic. Taken a step further, instructional efforts might be fully reshaped to focus on the literacy events that learners themselves know are most critical in their lives.

In terms of corrective feedback on language use, this finding suggests that participants were alert to the kinds of linguistic inputs that prompt language learning. As such, alternatives to corrective feedback on language use could include assigning learners to track observations regarding language they see and use daily.

Technology

A second sub-theme is technological mediation. When discussing instructor feedback, participants spoke about digital technologies mediating feedback encounters, often at the expense of more substantial discussion about feedback content or emotional experience of that feedback. Overall, corrective feedback's digital technological mediation is viewed by participants either as a hindrance to engaging with feedback or as a neutral yet evident framework for the feedback experience.

One participant announced mid-focus group that they were logging in to the college's learning management

system (LMS) in order to share instructor feedback verbatim. Orpheus's report touches on both the content of instructor feedback and the experience of accessing LMS-mediated comments.

> ORPHEUS: I was just opening Brightspace. Just to remember all the feedback, 'cuz uh we get our essays and anything we sent basically sent back to us, along with a comment, and then [the instructor] will go in to the actual essay, and highlight things or add a comment, being like, "This should be a comma," or like, "I didn't get what you get here," and mainly just being like, "Hey, add clarification," [or], "I would like to see more ethos here," or, "Explain more." Just stuff like that.

Orpheus introduced the LMS-specific process of accessing and understanding instructor feedback, including a holistic comment appearing to the side of the marked-up essay, the essay itself, points highlighted within the essay, and point-specific comments that appeared some other way. While Orpheus did not seem bothered by the technologies used to dispense or read feedback, their description of that feedback event is heavily framed by imagining an instructor's actions relative to digital tools.

The various feedback delivery modes and functions used by instructors didn't seem to faze several participants, who rattled off where and how they accessed feedback, as well as how that feedback appeared. Like Orpheus, Sage referenced the college's LMS: "Let's see, my professor, they do the comments. Like when we turn the essay into Brightspace, they do it in the comments." Equally prevalent were references to cloud-based document management systems, as indicated by Jane: "Um, so we email and then they'll just leave a comment, like right, like through Google to the doc. And then you just open the doc and it's there. They'll highlight it, and then they'll write on it."

On occasion, the use of digital technology for submitting work and accessing feedback was seen as an obstacle. Max shared this frustration, calling it "irritating," and saying, "It's hard to get past." Such commentary was typically followed by expressed desire for "physical" assignments and feedback. One focus group bemoaned the difficulty of accessing LMS-housed feedback, sharing that they struggled to locate feedback. One noted, "I click on everything," a striking and likely familiar-sounding description of the embodied experience for both faculty and learners as they navigate the digitally-mediated feedback encounter.

At times, the LMS-mediated nature of instructor feedback on grammar and language not only influenced learner understanding of the feedback itself, but it also seemed to trump any instructive element of feedback content.

> SAGE: Oh, yeah. I got feedback on that, like, run on sentences, I had a lot in one of my essays.
>
> ME: What did that feedback look like?
>
> SAGE: Um...
>
> ME: Like, how did your instructor communicate that to you?
>
> SAGE: They put it in a box to where the sentence led on. So.
>
> ME: Did you have a sense of what to do about it after the instructor pointed it out to you?
>
> SAGE: Kinda, kind of not.

Such exchanges touch on both feedback modality and feedback perceived as non-instructive. Whether Sage's uncertainty about what to do with instructor feedback regarding run-on sentences use was a function of that feedback's LMS-constrained design and digital mediation isn't clear.

Variability in feedback technology played a role in participants' discussions of feedback experiences. For some, comments regarding feedback technologies led to group comparison, including a protracted discussion among five participants about one group member's feedback. Sammy had announced that the feedback received on her latest essay was limited to "grammar errors" without further explanation or instruction. The discussion that ensued focused on determining whether instructor feedback was in fact limited and general, or whether Sammy was simply not finding additional feedback on the LMS.

> SAMMY: Um, I don't know. This just says, "Essay meets all expectations, but there's grammar errors," and that's the only comment I have.
>
> ORPHEUS: What?
>
> MULTIPLE: <overlapping talk> "Wait," "No way," "I can," "I think."
>
> ORPHEUS: Is this for your whole essay?
>
> NICOLE: Yeah, [our instructor] doesn't do a lot of commenting.
>
> SAMMY: This is my, this is my only comment. So I don't know.
>
> NICOLE: [Our instructor] doesn't comment a lot.

> SAMMY: This is all I have.
>
> ALEXIS: What did you get on the essay?
>
> ORPHEUS: No, wait, okay
>
> SAMMY: An 82.
>
> ALEXIS: Ok so there has to be more that you did wrong.
>
> ORPHEUS: No wait, wait. Do you want to see the feedback you should be getting? It should look like this.
>
> SAMMY: I don't think I get any of this.
>
> MICHELLE: Is it inline?
>
> NICOLE: Oh, I don't get papers like that.
>
> ORPHEUS: Yeah, I get the full thing like this.
>
> MICHELLE: The whole thing like that, yeah.

While Nicole, who has the same instructor, responds on Sammy's behalf, the rest of Sammy's fellow focus group participants are concerned and indignant on her behalf. Here, the digitally-mediated nature of FYC feedback prompts confusion, uncertainty, points of comparison, and the need for clarification. Nicole's justification for a perceived lack of instructor feedback, Orpheus's distress, and Alexis's sympathizing might suggest the pervasiveness of this kind of experience.

The sub-theme of technology as a hindrance to successful learner engagement with FYC via feedback was prominent in this study. One implication of this finding is the need to be alert to the limitations of technology-mediated feedback, and to the fact that learner engagement with this feedback may be conceived of not in terms of its content but in terms of the tool used. Therefore, when helping students recall specific pieces of feedback, instructors may wish to begin by describing not *what* was shared through feedback, but *how* it was shared (e.g., in a comment attached to a specific highlighted phrase). Additionally, instructors who rely on such mediated feedback should consider incorporating some analog feedback encounters. For instance, especially given the persistence required to access such feedback, post-feedback instruction might include modeling how to access and engage with feedback. And regardless of technologies used to share feedback, instructors should consider creating mechanisms for learners to confirm receipt of and respond to feedback with clarifying questions.

Family, Friends, and Other Peers

Finally, people who are not formally associated with writing instruction are introduced across participant contributions. Though some feature as obstacles to successful composing (including infant nephews who turn off computers mid-sentence), individuals in participants' lives are largely reported as playing significant, positive, and active roles in learners' experience of feedback on their writing, both personal and academic.

Orpheus reported an established sequence of working with instructor feedback and then seeking additional feedback from others:

> I usually have my draft feedback and then I send it off to my foster sister, who also looks over my essays. And then I get feedback from her and usually I have someone else also read over it. I have like, thousands of people look after and be like, "Okay," and, "It's good." Usually the content's always good. It's just the grammar and spelling that needs fixing and, not from my teacher, but I always get the comment from my foster sister being like, "Commas won't hurt you! Use them more." Which I think is very funny, because I usually remove some commas. 'Cuz I'm like, "This seems like too many…"

Noteworthy here is not only that Orpheus actively seeks feedback from such a large number of non-FYC-affiliated people, but that they have a clear sense of how their writing is typically received by others. Orpheus's note about content versus grammar and spelling includes a careful distinction about where this bit of corrective feedback comes from: not an instructor, but a sibling.

Indeed, most references to feedback received from family members and others involved grammar or punctuation correction, such as this from Sammy: "I just make my roommate read my essays 'cuz she's really smart. She fixes them. Like she puts the words in and everything." More rare were cases where learners' networks provided more conceptual support: "I reach out or I talk to one of my buddies who knows what they're doing because I need to know exactly what I'm doing or I can't do it." Here, Walker notes his tendency to stall on or not complete writing assignments before identifying someone within his network who functions as a bridge to FYC assignment expectations.

One participant reported experiencing various kinds of affective engagement with instructor feedback during focus group discussion. Here, Jane reports an ambivalent emotional response to having her language use

commented on with specific but non-evaluative feedback, and in the process touches on all of the elements addressed above and more.

> ME: What about other feedback on your language use?
>
> JANE: Um, for my language use? No, but they said mine's very different. Like, instead of, "however," I use, like, "consequently." [The instructor] says it's just a very different way. They said they've never really seen that before. So I'm not really sure if that's good or bad. But they just say I have a different way of explaining things.
>
> ME: How did that make you feel?
>
> JANE: Good and bad because I'm not like everybody else, I guess, because we are allowed to read other students' [writing] through our websites. So I don't know if that struck [my instructor] as like, "Wow." Or should I be concerned? But they had left me "excellent" on my rubrics, so I'm assuming that I'm doing okay. But that's generally my writing voice. And I'm not going to change it for somebody, right? You know, yeah, I will improve but I won't change it.

Jane responded first to my explicit inquiry about feedback on language use and then to my follow-up question about any feelings she had in response to that feedback. Though Jane at first responded that she hadn't received any feedback on her language use, she then recalled with specific detail the feedback her instructor had given on her language use. Perhaps because this was more of an observation as opposed to a bit of correction or advice, this didn't register as feedback as such. Further, left without a sense of what this feedback indexed regarding her instructor's feelings, Jane herself seemed unsure how to feel. She's first unsure if the feedback *is* "good or bad," and, perhaps consequently, she's then left *feeling* "good and bad."

Learners' networks of writing practice and support include college peers, but also family, friends, and others not formally connected to instruction. One potential implication of this is that the role of the instructor in the experience of writing instruction and practice is relatively limited, as instructor feedback is modulated as a result of other elements of these networks. Specifically, adult learners may have a cultivated, well-established network of peers who read, comment on, copyedit, and otherwise correct their writing. This finding calls into question, then, one of the primary functions of the classroom peer review process. While non-adult learners may require instructor-driven peer feedback events for the sake of prompting revision, this may be less necessary for adult learners. Likewise, this finding establishes the fact that even if an instructor wishes to withhold sentence-level feedback early in the writing process, adult learners may seek corrective feedback via their established networks. Rather than discourage such interactions, instructors might leverage learners' networks by asking learners to establish specific goals for these interactions. Crafting explicit goals and outcomes for network engagement may provide a sense of ownership of the writing process for learners, in a way that can extend to other resources, including generative AI tools.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings suggest that for the adult FYC learners at one rural, open-access community college, instructor feedback on language use (and perhaps in general) is only one component of a broad and complex network of similarly broad and complex factors. To my question of whether participants experience corrective feedback as a kind of violence, the answer is "no." However, one potential reason for this is that corrective feedback encounters are experienced through the lens of writers' broad literacy networks, which themselves may include other sources of corrective feedback and established beliefs about language and feedback.

One pair of generalizations made by adult learning theorists is that adult learners are more self-motivated and have more critical demands on their time and attention than non-adults. The demographic realities that make these likely—caretaking responsibilities, employment status, and chronological age—are likewise found among community college learners. The implications of being a community college-attending adult, then, are already significant: learners are likely to have major demands on their time and energies, sometimes leading them to deprioritize the obligations that come with formal learning. However, the sources of these non-academic demands—family, work, healthcare, etc.—may also function as *resources* for meeting formal learning obligations. Compounding and refining these likelihoods are the unique material and ideological realities that come with living and learning in rural U.S. contexts. Though ruralness manifests differently, historical and contemporary relationships among literacy education, higher education, and the rural U.S. are fraught. As I found

through this study, these factors may shape learners' experience of corrective feedback on language use, both in terms of how learners perceive instructor feedback and regarding the network of supports and resources learners have at their disposal.

This finding supports Toth's point regarding what she calls the ecological realities of two-year college transfer learners: "alongside-school identities are often embedded in relationships, forms of cultural participation, sources of motivation, and access to financial and other resources that sustain students as they pursue their degrees" (p. 37). Indeed, findings suggest that learners' writing ecosystems interact with instructor feedback encounters, and that participants' situatedness as adult learners at an open-access, rural community college is an important component of their "experiences and social networks" (p. 56). That is, adult learners in these rural FYC contexts draw upon complex networks of factors that are "self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic" (p. 4) in ways that reflect Syverson's (1999) definition of writing ecologies.

Indeed, adult learners' writing ecosystems offer additional feedback sources and frames of reference for instructor feedback. For example, despite an absence of the singular emotional reaction I expected to elicit, Jane's response to my question, "How did that make you feel?" included an array of elements located within her writing ecosystem: peers, digital portfolios, instructional texts, and uncertainty about her instructor's emotions. Her "neutral" emotional response to instructor feedback on language use points to the idea that in the face of so many factors common to the adult learner, feedback encounters themselves feel less significant than we might expect.

Ultimately, Jane's response to my question about feelings illustrates that even feedback on language use that isn't discernible as feedback nevertheless reverberates among the various elements of adult learners' writing ecosystems. In the case of rural community college-attending adult learners, these reverberations (a) mobilize learners' long-standing beliefs and attitudes about themselves, language, feedback, and writing, and (b) are refracted by learners' existing writing supports, experiences, and practices. The literate lives of adult FYC students are expansive and nuanced in ways that may not only shape learners' emotional experiences, but should shape the work of instruction. Though responses to questions about learners' emotional experience of corrective feedback may be nonexistent, nondescript, or speculative, this may be a function of how relatively minor such feedback encounters feel in the face of so many other factors, and emotional reactions may be more a function of the writers' broad and networked literacy contexts than the feedback itself.

References

Alim, H. S. (2023). Inventing "the white voice": Racial capitalism, raciolinguistics & culturally sustaining pedagogies. *Daedalus, 152*(3), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02023

Andrews, R., Torgerson, C., Beverton, S., Freeman, A., Locke, T., Low, G., Robinson, A., & Zhu, D. (2006). The effect of grammar teaching on writing development. *British Education Research Journal, 32*(1), 39–55.

Arnold, J. (2019). The importance of affect in language learning. *Neofilolog, 52*(1), 11–14.

Azamnouri, N., Pishghadam, R., & Meidani, E. N. (2020). The role of emotioncy in cognitive load and sentence comprehension of language learners. *Issues in Language Teaching, 9*(1), 29–55.

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy.* Routledge.

Banks, W. P., Cox, M. B., & Dadas, C. (2019). *Re/orienting writing studies: Queer methods, queer projects.* Utah State University Press.

Bartholomae, D. (2005). *Writing on the margins: Essays on composition and teaching.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power.* (J. Brookshire, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 1984.)

Bowden, D. (2018). Comments on student papers: Student perspectives. *Journal of Writing Assessment, 11*(1), 1–17.

Bowles, B. (2020). The texts within the context: Examining the influence of contextual documents on students' interpretations of teachers' written feedback. *Journal of Response to Writing, 6*(1), 6–41.

Brannon, L., & Knoblauch, C. H. (1982). On students' rights to their own texts: A model of teacher response. *College Composition and Communication, 33*(2), 157–166.

Bridwell-Bowles, L. (2003). Discourse and diversity: Experimental writing within the academy. In G. E. Kirsch, F. S. Maor, L. Massey, L. Nickoson-Massey, & M. P. Sheridan Rabideau (Eds.), *Feminism and composition: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 294–313). Bedford.

Calhoon-Dillahunt, C., & Forrest, D. (2013). Conversing in marginal spaces: Developmental writers' responses to teacher comments. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College, 40*(3), 230–247.

Collins, G., & Norris, J. (2017). Written language performance following embedded grammar instruction. *Reading Horizons, 56*(3), 16–30.

Delpit, L. (1992). Acquisition of literate discourse: Bowing before the master? *Theory Into Practice, 31*(4), 296–302.

Devitt, A. (1989). *Standardizing written English: Diffusion in the case of Scotland 1520–1659.* Cambridge UP.

Dowden, T., Pittaway, S., Yost, H., & McCarthy, R. (2013). Students' perceptions of written feedback in teacher education: Ideally feedback is a continuing two-way communication that encourages progress. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 38*(3), 349–362. 10.1080/02602938.2011.632676

Garrett, P., & Young, R. F. (2009). Theorizing affect in foreign language learning: An analysis of one learner's responses to a communicative Portuguese course. *The Modern Language Journal, 93*(2), 209–226.

Gee, T. C. (1972). Students' responses to teacher comments. *Research in the Teaching of English, 6*(2), 212–221.

Harding, J., Pauszek, J., Pollard, N., & Parks, S. (2018). Alliances, assemblages, and affects: Three moments of building collective working-class literacies. *College Composition and Communication, 70*(1), 6–29.

Inoue, A. B. (2020). Stories about grading contracts, or how do I like through the violence I've done? *Journal of Writing Assessment, 13*(2). https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zw9h7p9

Janesick, V. J. (2003). The choreography of qualitative research design: Minuets, improvisations, and crystallization. In N. K. Denizen & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.) (pp. 46–79). Sage.

Jones, S., Myhill, D., & Bailey, T. (2013). Grammar for writing? An investigation of the effects of contextualised grammar teaching on students' writing. Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 26(8), 1241–1263.

Kubiak, J. M. (2022). Putting ACCUPLACER in its place: Expanding evidence in placement reform at Jamestown Community College. In J. Nastal, M. Poe, & C. Toth (Eds.), Writing placement in two-year colleges: The pursuit of equity in postsecondary education (pp. 151–172). WAC Clearinghouse.

Li, J., & Lindsey, P. (2015). Understanding variations between student and teacher application of rubrics. *Assessing Writing, 26*, 67–79.

Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principles and practice.* Sage.

Lyiscott, J. (2017). Racial identity and liberation literacies in the classroom. *English Journal, 106*(4), 47–53.

McCarty, T. L., & Watahomigie, L. J. (2001). Language and literacy in American Indian and Alaska native communities. In E. Cushman, E. R. Kintgen, B. M. Kroll, & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 488–507). Bedford.

Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology, 22*, 129–152.

Myers, K. A. (2019). Unspeakable failures. *Composition Studies, 46*(2), 48–67.

Myhill, D., & Watson, A. (2014). The role of grammar in the writing curriculum: A review of the literature. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 30*(1), 41–62.

Myhill, D., Jones, S., Watson, A., & Lines, H. (2013). Playful explicitness with grammar: a pedagogy for writing. *Literacy, 47*(2), 103–111.

New York State Comptroller's Office. (2022, December). New Yorkers in need: A look at poverty trends in New York State for the last decade. https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/new-yorkers-need-look-poverty-trends-new-york-state-last-decade.

Rupiper Taggart, A., & Laughlin, M. (2017). Affect matters: When writing feedback leads to negative feeling. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 11*(2), 1–11.

Smitherman, G. (1995). "Students' right to their own language": A retrospective. *The English Journal, 84*(1), 21–27.

Sommers, N. (1992). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication, 33*(2), 148–156.

Sommers, N. (2006). Across the drafts. *College Composition and Communication, 58*(2), 248–257.

Sommers, N. (2012). Beyond the red ink: Teachers' comments through students' eyes [Video]. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKfLRz7h7gs.

Stuckey, J. E. (1991). *The violence of literacy.* Heinemann.

Strickland, D., & Crawford, I. (2003). Error and racialized performances of emotion in the teaching of writing. In D. Jacobs & L. R. Micciche (Eds.), *A way to move: Rhetorics of emotion & composition studies* (pp. 67–79). Heinemann.

Straub, R. (1997). Students' reactions to teacher comments: An exploratory study. *Research in the Teaching of English, 31*(1), 91–119.

Syverson, M. (1999). *The wealth of reality: An ecology of composition.* Southern Illinois University Press.

Toth, C. (2023). *Transfer in an urban writing ecology: Reimagining community college–university relations in composition studies.* NCTE and CCCC.

Treglia, M. O. (2018). Feedback on feedback: Exploring student responses to teachers' written commentary. *Journal of Basic Writing, 27*(1), 105–137.

Vetter, M. A., & Moroz, O. (2019). Engl 101: Writing in Wikipedia. *Composition Studies, 47*(2), 193–202.

http://doi.org/10.35847/JVanek.JCastek.KHarris.GJacobs.8.3.29

Research Article

Understanding Adult Learners Through the Development of Persona Profiles

Jen Vanek, World Education, a division of JSI Research and Training Institute

Jill Castek, University of Arizona

Kathy Harris, Portland State University

Gloria E. Jacobs, Independent Researcher

Abstract

The information conveyed in this manuscript includes figures published in a research report and on presentation slides previously shared in research and practitioner conferences. However, the manuscript is made up of original writing not previously published or under review.

Generative AI was used to support spell checking and grammatical editing. The authors take full responsibility for content.

Keywords: Workplace learning, adult learner needs, program development, ecological model, relationality

We hereby confirm the assignment of first publication rights to the manuscript named above in all forms to Pro-Literacy, effective if and when it is accepted for publication in *Adult Literacy Education: The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*. We warrant that our manuscript is original work and has not been accepted for publication by another periodical. We further warrant that our work does not infringe upon any copyright.

Understanding Working Learners Through the Development of Persona Profiles

This research uses an empirical methodology of persona profile development, based on pooled qualitative data, to examine the experiences of adult working learners who participate in employer-supported education and training initiatives. Three descriptive, data-driven persona profiles are offered as examples to illustrate that working learners are diverse in their experiences and backgrounds. Persona profiles humanize learners and illustrate that adult education programs benefit when educators appreciate learners' challenges and competing priorities in their lives. Showing how persona profiles were developed offers researchers and adult educators' insight into learner experiences, revealing who adult learners are, what assets they bring, and the goals they set for themselves.

Understanding Adult Learners Through the Development of Persona Profiles

Learner experience encompasses learners' needs, goals, lived realities, and challenges, as best expressed in their own voices. Learner experience research is important in adult education for developing learner-centered approaches that inform policy and shape programs to meet the diverse needs of adult learners in a rapidly changing world. Yet gaining a holistic view of learner experience can be challenging.

This paper introduces an empirical methodological approach for capturing learner experience. We demonstrate how developing composite profiles

Correspondence: jcastek@arizona.edu, harriska@pdx.edu, glojacobs@gmail.com

called personae (plural of persona) can help adult educators understand their learners' motivations and challenges. In our multi-year 21st Century Learning Ecosystem Opportunities (21CLEO) research initiative, we examined the real-life experiences of adult frontline service workers engaged in employer-supported adult education and training (hereafter, ESAET, for brevity), a type of adult education programming. We define ESAET as the range of educational activities offered to workers by their employers, including workplace English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), computer literacy, tuition reimbursement, and industry-specific technical training. Conducting research to develop data-driven persona profiles allowed us to capture the breadth and depth of learner experience. The audience for this paper includes researchers and those who design programs for adult learners, especially, but not exclusively, for employer-supported education and training programs, as well as anyone who works with adult learners and would benefit from a better understanding of their learners' experiences.

Historically, research on ESAET has focused primarily on the employer's perspective, emphasizing how employer investments in education yield returns on investment and boost workforce productivity (Deloitte & Aspen Institute, 2015; National Research Council, 2012; Rho et al., 2020; Shechtman et al., 2016). While these economic and bottom-line viewpoints are important, they often overlook learners' voices, failing to reveal learners' needs, values, motivations, and experiences with these programs (Castek et al., 2022). This can leave a gap in the understanding necessary to develop meaningful educational opportunities that may lead to actual career advancement and wage gains for adult learners. Moreover, the gap may limit the potential for successful education and training for employees. To mitigate this shortcoming, our study highlights findings that describe learners' perspectives and characteristics to better understand how adult learners engage with, benefit from, and are affected by ESAET programs.

We collected qualitative data, conducted a rigorous analysis, and developed persona profiles. Grounded in user experience research (Kouprie and Visser, 2009), our expanded data-driven process involved reflexive iteration and careful consideration of ESAET contexts. We developed data-driven persona profiles from detailed, relational descriptions of learner archetypes drawn from our pooled qualitative interview data. These personae served three purposes: to illustrate the persona development methodology, to describe who working learners are, and to identify program features that promote their persistence and success.

What Are Personae?

Personae are "detailed descriptions of imaginary people constructed out of well-understood, highly specified data about real people" (Pruitt & Adlin, 2006, p. 3). A persona represents a collective identity, offering a vivid portrayal of an individual with defined characteristics. The persona profile methodology fosters a shared understanding of learners. Alan Cooper popularized the use of personae in the 1980s, describing them in *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum* (1999) as fictional characters representing user archetypes derived from user research and interviews. Ward (2010) interpreted personae profiles to help librarians better understand their patrons. In engineering design, Kouprie and Visser (2009) argue that personifying individuals enables a better understanding of and anticipation of their needs, goals, and challenges. The term persona, meaning mask in Greek, underscores the idea that designers must reflect on the experiences and perspectives of the individuals they serve.

While persona development has been used since the mid-1990s across disciplines, this process is not commonly used in adult education research. Some qualitative research in education has employed a similar approach, using composite case study or composite narrative methods, in which data from multiple individuals are synthesized into a single, illustrative narrative that represents broader perspectives (Baaki et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2023; Sanders et al., 2024). Given that the research literature offered few details on how to use data to create personae, we documented our adaptations, carefully articulating the analysis steps we worked through to create empirically derived, data-driven relational examples as findings.

Recognizing the Needs of All

We undertook a methodology driven by persona development in this study, taking into account the needs of institutions that offer ESAET, adult education providers, and learners themselves. We recognize that complex relationships and competing priorities exist for each

group. For example, institutional needs may center on return on investment, while learner needs may focus on economic advancement anchored in learning. Learners may feel a need for higher pay or a different or better job within the institution as a result of participating in a learning experience. There may indeed be mutual benefit for both learners and providers/institutions; however, we prioritized learners' voices and experiences to advance equitable, relatable, and responsive ESAET.

Theoretical Framework

We adopt an ecosystem lens (21CLEO Research Team, 2019a) to explain the complex interactions described in this study. Just as the natural environment is made up of interconnected components, an ecosystem perspective views learning experiences as connected across place and time and across a range of contexts. The idea of the ecosystem has been taken up within the social sciences and human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a way to understand how the many pieces of the human experience fit together. The purpose of an ecosystem metaphor, like any model, is to represent a complex system in a straightforward way. However, Chang and Guetl (2007) highlight that the components captured within an ecosystem can themselves include highly complex interactions and are further complexified when seen as an interactive system. While applying an ecosystem lens is not without its limits, its application as a theoretical frame offers opportunities to think through aspects of a complex system, how they interrelate, what elements converge, and which diverge. An ecosystem lens offered useful framing for this study, as complex interactions and systems provided a conceptual model for understanding institutional and learners' needs at multiple levels. Woven into the fabric of learning ecosystems lies an additional lens that framed the way we created personae, that of relationality (Hickey & Riddle, 2023). Relationality adds an essential human dimension to an ecosystems lens because it centers relationships that form an essential part of complex learning interactions.

Literature Review

To contextualize our focus on learner experience and the use of persona development to amplify learners' voices, we begin by reviewing relevant literature. We examine the characteristics and challenges of frontline service workers and then outline the ESAET landscape, including those located in the workplace and beyond. Finally, we explore the barriers that inhibit learner participation and persistence in these programs. Taken together, these bodies of literature position our research within current discussions about access, equity, and learner-centered design in ESAET, especially for those whose lived, learning, and professional experiences are often overlooked in ESAET activities.

Front-Line Service Workers

Frontline service workers are employees who directly interact with customers or clients; they often serve as the first point of contact for the public and play a key role in delivering services (Bergson-Shilcock, 2017). At the time of our data collection, the literature suggested that approximately 40% of frontline service workers were employed in the retail, healthcare, food service, or hospitality sectors. The majority earned less than $30,000 annually, reflecting the prevalence of low-wage positions within these industries. About 30% of this group were under age 35, indicating a relatively young workforce. Notably, between 60% and 70% faced job-limiting challenges due to foundational skill gaps in literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving, which can hinder career advancement and long-term economic stability (Constantakes & Noakes, 2019). Twenty-nine percent spoke a language other than English as their first language (Bergson-Shilcock, 2017). Although they are often viewed as unskilled workers, they handle tasks that require strong interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Aspen Institute, 2015). During the pandemic, it became apparent that frontline service workers had limited flexibility for remote work, resulting in higher exposure to workplace risks (Nyashanu et al., 2020).

More recent analyses show that frontline jobs are disproportionately held by women, people of color, and immigrants. A 2020 Center for Economic and Policy Research labor market analysis (Rho et al., 2020) illustrates this pattern. Women account for 64.4 percent of frontline workers, with especially high representation in health care (76.8 percent) and childcare and social services (85.2 percent). People of color make up 41.2 percent of frontline workers overall and are heavily

represented in building cleaning services and care-related occupations. Immigrants make up 17.3 percent of frontline workers, with substantially higher concentrations in building cleaning services (38.2 percent), warehousing and storage (22.5 percent), grocery wholesalers (23.9 percent), and home health care (23.9 percent).

Employer-Supported Adult Education and Training (ESAET)

ESAET encompasses a wide array of formal and informal learning opportunities. Workplace learning constitutes a substantial component of these activities, delivered within the employment setting. Structured on-the-job training programs, including apprenticeships, internships, and occupational training, align with employer hiring needs and often result in the attainment of certificates or industry-recognized credentials (Bergson-Shilcock, 2017; Magee et al., 2018; Upskill America & Fall, J., 2017; US DoL, nd). Additionally, workplace ESOL classes (Jain & Vázquez, 2021) are available in some places.

ESAET also extends beyond the workplace. These formal initiatives are available through community colleges, four-year institutions, adult learning centers, and community-based organizations. These programs may confer degrees, certificates, or adult secondary education credentials. When integrated with adult basic education, formal learning may focus on developing foundational academic skills and providing literacy instruction. However, employer-sponsored tuition assistance for formal degree and certificate programs remains limited, with only a small percentage of service-sector employees receiving financial support for postsecondary education (Bergon-Shilcock, 2017).

Learners engage with any of these options for diverse reasons, including learning foundational skills (e.g., workplace ESOL or digital skills), advancing along a structured, credentialed career pathway (e.g., progressing from home health aide to certified nursing assistant), meeting job-specific requirements (e.g., demonstrating understanding of HIPAA or workplace safety), earning a degree (tuition reimbursement or payment for college courses leading to a 2- or 4-year degree), or learning for personal interest or future (e.g., digital literacy) (21CLEO Research Team, 2019b).

Barriers to Participation

Despite the availability of various learning opportunities, frontline workers face barriers similar to those adult learners encounter in other settings, most notably engagement and persistence. We draw on Cross (1981) and Patterson (2018), who identify dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers in adult education programs. Dispositional barriers stem from attitudes or beliefs that influence motivation and participation; situational barriers reflect life circumstances that affect learners' ability to engage; and institutional barriers—such as a lack of employer-supported release time, training costs, and limited buy-in or support from immediate supervisors—impede participation. Logistical challenges, including limited time and resources, scheduling conflicts, and family responsibilities, are also frequently cited by frontline workers seeking educational opportunities (Bergson-Shilcock, 2017).

Condon et al. (2025) identified additional barriers for adults with literacy needs. Of the 2,000 adults surveyed, awareness of adult learning opportunities was limited: "80% of respondents did not know about available adult education programs in their community" (p. 9), and more than half believed these opportunities were available only at high cost. Amid expanding learning options and persistent barriers, understanding the working learner is essential to designing impactful, flexible learning opportunities that meet their needs.

Our Focus

Much of the existing literature on ESAET privileges employer perspectives, offering limited insight into learners' experiences. Our research addresses this gap by examining the characteristics of ESAET that support learner engagement and success, grounding the analysis in the lived experiences of frontline working learners. Central to this effort was developing a methodological approach that relationally represents learner perspectives, shifting from employer-centric narratives to learner-centered understanding.

To this end, we adopted persona development as an innovative, data-driven methodological tool for capturing and conveying participants' experiences. This research-based approach enabled us to examine how learners navigate educational opportunities within complex

personal and professional contexts and how instructional design and programming might better align with their needs. Our study demonstrates that data-driven persona development is a useful and innovative methodology for capturing and illustrating learner experience.

Methodology

Grounded in qualitative analysis and user-centered design, a persona-based approach enabled us to synthesize individual learner narratives into composite representations that highlight key motivations, challenges, and contextual factors shaping participation in ESAET. In the next sections, we describe the study participants, outline the multi-phase process for developing the personae, and detail the focus groups conducted to assess their relevance. Each step reflects our commitment to centering learner voice and provides a practical framework for communicating findings to educators, employers, and policymakers.

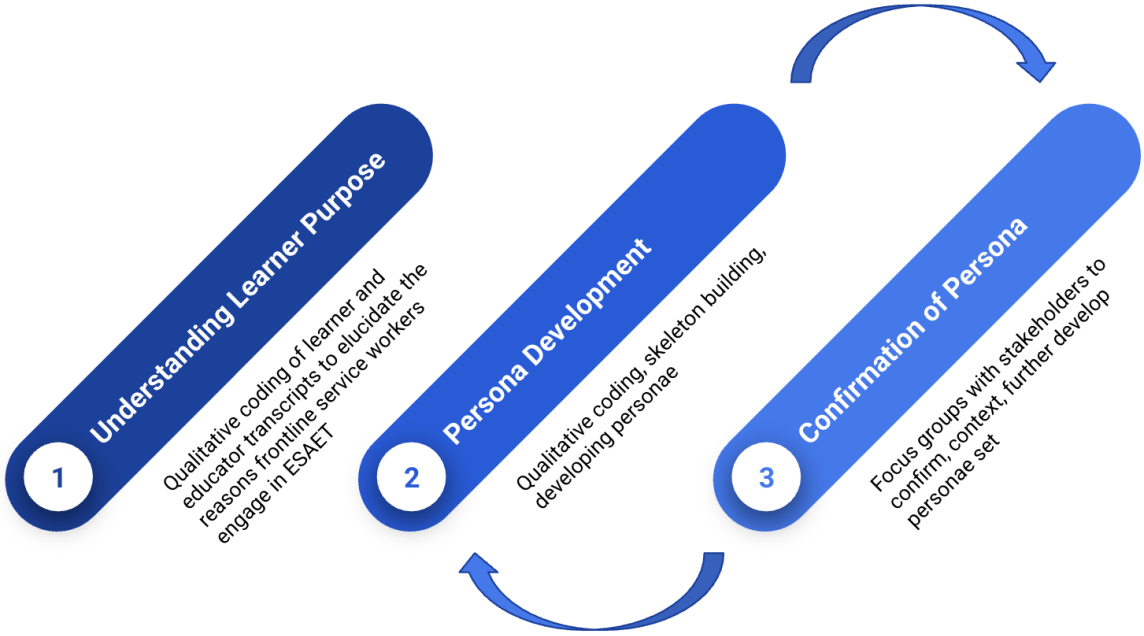
Participants

Study participants were drawn from eight geographic locations across the United States. Each region included multiple sites offering work-based educational programming, shaped by instructors, support service providers, and employees. We focused primarily on participants working in retail, hospitality, restaurants, and healthcare, while also including individuals from other fields referred through workplace development programs, adult education providers, or immigrant and refugee support services. Participants included 27 working learners and 16 adult education instructors, support service providers, and employees who helped shape educational programming.

Data Collection

Over three years, we interviewed 43 individuals across eight sites. Twenty-seven were working learners, each interviewed by two researchers. Most interviews were conducted in person, with video calls used when necessary. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and verified by research team members to ensure accuracy. In our initial qualitative coding pass, we examined why participants engaged in ESAET; our inductive process identified four purposes: 1) foundational skill development to return to a prior career, 2) foundational skill development to start a new career, 3) required training to remain in a current position, and 4) earning a degree or certificate. In a subsequent step, we revisited the dataset to examine participants' experiences within ESAET as they worked toward these goals.

FIGURE 1. Research process.



The full sequence of research activities is shown in Figure 1. This paper focuses on steps 2 and 3. Persona profiles and the analysis process for developing them are intertwined. The process itself is a human-centered approach that centers the voices of our participants and shapes the presentation of our findings.

Developing Working Learner Personae

We crafted our persona guided by the work of Jacobs, Dreessen, and Pierson (2008), who argued that personae can deepen understanding of research findings and motivate action based on those findings. Their process consists of: 1) identifying the different kinds of learners; 2) gathering and analyzing data (e.g., demographic information, interviews) to reveal patterns of behavior, expectations, and motivations; 3) creating a 'skeleton,' or a bulleted list of characteristics; 4) prioritizing the listed characteristics by relevance; 5) transforming the 'skeleton' into descriptive personae with names, faces, socio-demographic information, goals, competencies, tasks, expectations, and relationships; and 6) returning to the data to evaluate how accurately the personae reflect the learners, revising as needed to improve accuracy.

Building on this framework, our systematic process ensured that the personae were firmly grounded in data collected from our participant sites. To address our research questions and support persona development as an analytic and representational strategy, we employed a layered qualitative analysis. Rather than a single linear coding pass, analysis proceeded through multiple iterative phases, each aligned with a distinct analytic purpose in constructing the personae. This approach allowed us to remain grounded in participants' accounts while progressively organizing the data around the conceptual components needed to develop analytically robust and usable persona profiles (Jacobs et al., 2008). The following steps outline the specific process we employed.

Phase 1. Initial Tagging Guided by Research Questions

The research team began by reading interview transcripts, conducting an initial coding pass guided by the study's research questions and the overarching goal of understanding learners and their experiences in ESAET. This initial phase focused on broad analytic dimensions needed to interpret learner experience and support subsequent persona development. The primary analytic dimensions included:

- Learner characteristics
- Learning opportunity description
- Reasons, goals, feelings, emotions (regarding the learning they were doing)

These dimensions served as inclusive organizing lenses rather than fixed analytic endpoints and were leveraged to include all potentially relevant aspects of learners' experiences captured in early analysis.

Phase 2. Sorting Transcripts by Primary Learning Purpose

Next, we divided learner transcripts into three groups based on the primary purpose learners reported for participating in the ESAET discussed in the interviews:

- To learn foundational skills
- To satisfy a job-specific requirement
- To earn a degree or certificate (without identifying a specific career goal)

Again, this sorting was analytic rather than a final and definitive classification, allowing us to revisit transcripts and reconsider classification as our analysis progressed.

These initial two phases align with Jacobs et al.'s (2008) emphasis on identifying different types of learners as a precursor to persona development. They can be placed within Activity One in Figure 1.

Phase 3. Inductive Coding to Elaborate Persona-Relevant Dimensions

After the initial sorting, we reread and reanalyzed each set of transcripts using an inductive coding process. This phase focused on identifying patterns and dimensions that would later form the components of a persona skeleton, including work context, learning preferences, technology access, supports, barriers, and career orientation. Rather than limiting analysis to pre-established categories, the research team documented and discussed emergent insights, refining, combining, or rearticulating codes as needed to surface patterns that would support persona construction.

For example, within the analytic dimension of learner characteristics, we grouped codes such as current position, family, learning preference, and technology

access and use (see Table 1 for additional examples). This phase aligns with Jacobs et al.'s (2008) second step, which emphasizes analyzing patterns of behavior, motivations, and expectations in relation to participants' demographic and work contexts to inform persona development.

Phase 4. Elucidating Persona Dimensions and Defining Categories

We reviewed the analytic categories and codes associated with each persona dimension across the three learning-purpose groupings. The goal of this phase was to identify recurring configurations of characteristics, motivations, and constraints that meaningfully differentiated groups of learners. These configurations became the defining categories that shaped each persona, representing the core components required to describe learners' goals, contexts, and experiences within ESAET. This stage can be considered the initial

TABLE 1. Example of analytic dimensions and categories used to inform persona development

TAG - Persona Dimension	Analytic Category	Codes (illustrative data feature)
Learner Characteristic	Work	Current position
Learner Characteristic		Job tasks
Learner Characteristic		Work preferences
Learner Characteristic		Prior work: What is your person's professional background?
Learner Characteristic	Learning	Making learning fit into
Learner Characteristic		Larning preference
Learner Characteristic		Prior learning experience
Learner Characteristic	Career Mind-Set	Talking about career preference
Learner Characteristic		Credentials, certification, degrees
Learner Characteristic		Knows the system
Learner Characteristic		Experience meets opportunity
Learner Characteristic		Description of career path
Learner Characteristic	Technology	Tchnology access and use
Learner Characteristic	Supports	Family
Learner Characteristic		Support at work
Learner Characteristic	Barriers	Immigrant experience
Learner Characteristic		Individual needs
Learner Characteristic		Personal challenge
Learner Characteristic		Taking on too much
Learner Characteristic	Personal Drivers	Self-efficacy
Learner Characteristic		Success strategy
Learner Characteristic		Personal attribute
Learner Characteristic		Self-Awareness

development of a persona "skeleton," as suggested by Jacobs et al. (2008, p. 83).

Phase 5. Developing Persona Skeletons and Narrative Profiles

We created a spreadsheet to document persona dimensions, analytic categories, and codes, along with analytic notes and representative excerpts from the interview transcripts. This synthesis enabled the research team to examine how patterns manifested across participants within each learner grouping, ensuring that persona development was informed by collective evidence rather than by individual cases. We then developed narrative descriptions that captured how these patterns appeared across the full set of transcripts within each grouping.

Throughout this iterative process, we regularly returned to the original transcripts to verify interpretations and ensure that analytic categories and defining characteristics remained grounded in the data. This back-and-forth between synthesis and source data helped keep persona development aligned to participants' experiences. Table 1 provides an example of the analytic dimensions, categories, and codes used to inform persona development. These were iteratively developed and refined through multiple passes through the data by four researchers working both individually and collaboratively.

It is important to note that rather than a strictly linear process, there was constant iteration as we checked and refined the coding to develop the personae. For example, we initially focused on two of the three learning opportunity categories: a) foundational skill development and b) satisfying a job requirement. Further analysis revealed that the foundational skills development category required a more detailed description to reflect trends in the data, leading to the creation of an additional persona profile within this category.

Midway through the analysis, we reassessed our interpretive approach in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and broader conversations about social and racial inequity. This reflection prompted deeper consideration of how our backgrounds and perspectives as researchers, with lived experiences different from those of many frontline service workers, shaped our interpretations. In response, we foregrounded factors such as economic vulnerability and disparities in access when shaping two of the personae shared below (Regina and Dani). This reflexive process underscores the importance of researcher positionality in qualitative analysis. Through ongoing interrogation of our insights and attention to personal bias, we arrived at a comprehensive set of categories and characteristics, strengthening the persona profiles to reflect the full range of learner experiences in our dataset.

Through this reflexive process, we reached analytic thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2017) and agreed that further analysis would not yield additional themes. We ultimately developed a persona "skeleton," a core set of characteristics used to shape each persona (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Persona Skeleton



Finally, we wrote narrative descriptions for each persona, drawing on demographic and participation data from our dataset. Phases three through five described above fall within Activity Two in Figure 1. Throughout this process, the research team worked collaboratively to mitigate bias and remained mindful of the potential risk that personae

could contribute to sweeping generalizations about a population. Collaborative discussion supported research objectivity; we diligently kept our insights tightly focused on the data, aiming to accurately reflect the voices of the study participants. The resulting personae highlight that working learners are not a homogeneous group; each learner has a unique story, yet there are identifiable patterns across these individual stories that can be used to evaluate the relevance of ESAET design.

Working Learner Personae

We offer three exemplar personae to illustrate the end product of the process and to show how pooled data can be compiled into snapshots of a diverse group of participants, highlighting their backgrounds, motivations, barriers, and experiences at work and within ESAET.

Alimayu: College-Educated Retail Worker Learning English

Alimayu represents many of the working learners interviewed who were highly educated in their home countries and are English language learners in the US, building the language skills needed for workplace or career advancement. Alimayu holds a four-year university degree in information systems from his country of origin and currently works in retail. He embodies the perspectives and experiences of individuals seeking to enhance their English proficiency as a steppingstone to better-paying jobs and meaningful work.

His employer offers a weekly on-site English class, which he attends. Importantly, his supervisor ensures that his work schedule and class time align so that he is paid for his participation and does not need to make a separate trip to the workplace for class. Alimayu uses English regularly with customers and co-workers in his retail job. He is particularly focused on mastering American English pronunciation to prevent misunderstandings. He views improved English skills as essential to returning to his desired career path in information systems.

Alimayu faces time and financial constraints. He works two jobs, often 16 hours a day, leaving him with limited free time. He also faces financial constraints as he supports his family and sends money to relatives in Ethiopia. His attempts to enroll in affordable English classes at a local Adult Basic Education program were unsuccessful due to scheduling conflicts with his work hours and the expense and time required to commute to the classes. Alimayu actively uses the internet for self-directed learning on his computer or smartphone, benefiting from Wi-Fi access at home. However, he expresses frustration when encountering paywalls for online educational resources. Despite his demanding work schedule and financial responsibilities, Alimayu demonstrates agency by allocating time to independent learning, highlighting the proactive role that working learners often take in their education. The completed persona skeleton is pictured in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3. Alimayu's persona skeleton as pictured in 21CLEO Research Team (2021a).



Neberu: Working to Feel Comfortable Interacting with English Speakers

Neberu represents frontline service workers focused on improving their foundational English skills to increase their comfort with English in workplace interactions in monolingual English settings. His experience illustrates the challenges and motivations of individuals who need English proficiency to succeed on the job, even in roles with limited customer interaction.

Neberu works full-time as a cook at a fast-food restaurant in a multi-business food court and part-time as a prep cook at another restaurant. Both positions are primarily 'back of the house,' with limited, regular customer interaction. However, when customer interactions are necessary, Neberu does not feel comfortable communicating in English. Unlike Alimayu, Neberu has not yet completed a secondary credential. Neberu aims to improve his English as a steppingstone toward less physically demanding work, possibly even launching his own business.

The organization that operates the food court offers a weekly on-site English class for employees across its restaurants to support their upward mobility within the organization, including transitions to front-of-house positions that require greater English proficiency. Neberu's supervisors encourage his attendance and adjust his schedule so he can participate during his off time, meaning he is not compensated for his class time. Neberu identifies the limited opportunities to speak English at work as a significant barrier to his language development. He expresses a desire for more frequent and longer English classes.

Like Alimayu, Neberu engages in self-directed learning on his computer (using home Wi-Fi) and smartphone. However, he wishes he had stronger computer skills to support his independent learning. Despite not being compensated for class time and having limited English practice at work, Neberu demonstrates agency by proactively seeking learning opportunities in his personal time, highlighting the dedication of many working learners. See Figure 4 for the completed skeleton.

FIGURE 4. Neberu persona skeleton as pictured in 21CLEO Research Team (2021b)



Regina: Healthcare Worker Seeking to Establish a Career

Regina represents frontline healthcare workers who are striving to earn a degree or certificate as a pathway to a stable career. Her experience highlights the challenges of balancing work, education, and family responsibilities while navigating complex systems for career advancement.

Regina is a high school graduate who held various entry-level jobs before securing a position at a retirement facility. She took advantage of an employer-sponsored training program to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), a benefit that attracted her to the job and encouraged her to

recommend it to her friends. Regina is bilingual in Spanish and English, but she feels constrained by her current English proficiency and computer skills. Regina's short-term goal is to build skills that enhance her performance as a CNA. Her long-term goal is to identify and pursue a career in the healthcare sector, ultimately earning a bachelor's degree. She understands that the required job training is insufficient for her long-term career aspirations, so she is seeking additional educational opportunities.

In addition to the mandatory CNA training, Regina is taking English and financial literacy classes. She is also using financial aid to enroll in preparatory classes at the local community college, which will enable her to pursue credit-based healthcare courses. However, she has not yet decided on a specific field (e.g., registered nurse, phlebotomist, pharmacy tech, or pharmacist). Access to a computer and the internet is crucial for Regina's coursework. She uses a laptop and home internet for non-work-related studies and occasionally uses computers at the community college library. She uses her employer's computer for mandatory training and has not encountered significant technological barriers.

Regina's most significant obstacles are a lack of time, money, and confidence. She feels considerable fatigue from her full-time job and studies. Regina relies on her religious faith and the support of her mother and grandmother to persist through her demanding schedule. A career navigator has also been vital in guiding her through the system, identifying beneficial learning opportunities, and providing encouragement. She practices positive self-talk and is highly motivated to create a better life for her child. See Figure 5 for the completed persona skeleton.

FIGURE 5. Regina's persona skeleton as pictured in 21CLEO Research Team (2021c)



Why Personae Are Helpful

These persona profiles illustrate the ways in which working learners are a diverse population with varied backgrounds, motivations, goals, and aspirations. They actively exercise agency in their learning journeys, making strategic decisions about how to allocate their time and financial resources based on their circumstances and ambitions. They do so in the hope that participating will lead to more meaningful and well-compensated work.

Confirming Our Process and Persona; Deepening Our Understanding

To further confirm the relevance of the developed personae, the research team convened an advisory board (activity three shown in Figure 1). This board consisted of practitioners and professionals who were a subset of the total participant pool. They were characterized by diverse backgrounds, including working learners, individuals who work directly with frontline workers, adult educators, workforce development professionals, and representatives from research and advocacy organizations. Feedback from this advisory board during these convenings provided valuable insights into the utility and limitations of the developed persona. Attendees generally recognized the working learners they had supported in the past within the presented persona set, noting that the descriptions

helped them visualize specific individuals. However, their deep knowledge and experience also enabled them to identify what was missing both within and beyond the resulting set of personae.

Gaps and Tensions in Existing Personae

The advisory board also identified gaps in the developed personae, noting the lack of explicit descriptions of learning styles and learning disabilities, family economics, digital access and skills, and the curriculum content used in training programs. These characteristics were not consistently captured across all participants' data, limiting their inclusion in the personae. Additionally, while some supports that facilitated learning were mentioned, attendees called for more detailed descriptions of these enabling factors. A key observation was that many education and training opportunities are designed to support a specific type of learner, potentially overlooking the needs of others. The persona of Dani (see Figure 6) was often cited as representing an 'ideal learner' who might be the target of many ESAET initiatives but is not necessarily representative of the broader population of working learners. Similarly, the rare instance of paid time for ESL classes (as experienced by Alimayu) was noted as uncommon in advisory board members' experiences.

The convening attendees also recognized that, although the developed personae were based on pooled data and careful analysis of working learner experiences, they are composites and therefore have inherent limitations. Although designed to be concise and to represent a firsthand perspective, the personae could benefit from more detailed information on support systems, curriculum content, personalization, and the role of teachers. The researchers also acknowledged the need for more comprehensive data to provide a fuller perspective encompassing these characteristics. While recognizing that the personae are not generalizable to a wider population beyond the study participants, the advisory board members agreed that they could serve as a valuable starting point for designing more effective ESAET initiatives.

Convening attendees suggested additional personae to more comprehensively reflect the range of frontline service workers engaged in ESAET. One suggestion highlighted the unnecessary burden immigrant workers face in demonstrating English language proficiency for employment and advancement, even in skilled trades where English proficiency might not be essential. Another suggestion focused on creating a persona of an adjudicated youth striving to connect with training initiatives and better employment opportunities, emphasizing the resilience and self-efficacy inherent in their efforts to enter the workforce. While the researchers acknowledged the value of these suggestions, they noted that without interviewing individuals with these specific characteristics, they could not introduce these personae grounded in their existing data.

The Importance of Contextual Factors

The convenings revealed both the strengths and limitations of the personae, depending on how closely they aligned with the real learners that participants had supported, taught, or designed programs for. These discussions reinforced the importance of considering contextual factors when interpreting learner experiences. In particular, one persona, Dani, highlighted how external influences, such as access to mentoring, supervisor encouragement, and awareness of the potential outcomes of ESAET, shape a working learner's participation.

Dani: Hourly Front-Line Supervisor. Dani is a college-educated front-desk supervisor at a major hotel chain, where she has advanced from an entry-level role over many years. A woman of color, she represents frontline supervisors who are pursuing certification to transition into salaried management roles but face limited advancement opportunities within their organizations.

Motivated and proactive, Dani pursues multiple training opportunities, including online hospitality courses from her employer, a supervisory certification program at a local community college, and LinkedIn Learning courses funded by her local workforce office. She completes coursework on her own time, using her personal laptop and home broadband, and is confident troubleshooting technical issues with resources like YouTube. Her learning in interpersonal skills and conflict management directly enhances her current job performance.

Dani benefits from emotional support at home and has no caregiving responsibilities, giving her flexibility to pursue professional growth. However, her primary barrier is the lack of internal networks and visibility within the company. Although her immediate supervisor is supportive, advancement may require external mentorship, insider

knowledge, or even a job change. She also prioritizes free training options to avoid debt.

FIGURE 6. Dani's persona skeleton as pictured in 21CLEO Research Team (2021d)



Dani's experience underscores that training alone is not enough. Career progression also depends on access to mentorship, networks, and equitable advancement pathways. Her persona highlights systemic and contextual barriers that hinder the upward mobility of skilled and motivated workers from underrepresented backgrounds. Our advisory board focus group participants also noted that, although the personae were developed to elevate learner voice and experience, these voices are deeply shaped by context, that is, the systemic and workplace conditions that learners must recognize and navigate.

Discussion and Implications: Relevance of Our Process and Resulting Personae

The development of these working learner personae was motivated by a recognition that existing literature often portrays working learners as a homogeneous group and in relatively passive terms. Nisulu and Metso's (2019) research on vocational training programs in Finland demonstrated the importance of a positive climate and support for learner success, a challenge to achieve if training is not designed with an understanding of learners' perspectives. The 'persona skeleton' we created offers insight into learner characteristics. These personae elucidate a nuanced reality that, if recognized, might lead to more relevant and fruitful education and training experiences. This includes understanding who working learners are, identifying factors that support their persistence in employer-supported learning, and clearly communicating those findings to interested parties with a hand in shaping participant experience in ESAET.

Persona profile development is a research tool that can add depth and relatability to work that centers the learner experience. Persona profiles humanize learners and show that programs function more optimally when they see, understand, and appreciate learners' challenges and competing priorities in their lives. Thoughtfully considering ways to listen actively and get to know learners offers exponential benefits in supporting their learning. Not all adult learners are the same; learners must be considered in the design of programs meant to support their learning.

The research revealed that the investigated programs for working learners are often best suited to particular types of learners, and the personae highlight the tensions and alignments that exist for different individuals. For instance, learners like Alimayu and Regina adapt to make learning feel relevant and useful to their specific situations. For learners like Dani, extensive investment in learning may not translate into career advancement within her company, and those like Neberu may participate in ESOL classes that do not fully meet their language learning needs. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for identifying the

characteristics of learning opportunities that truly meet the needs and expectations of working learners.

Ultimately, educational programming must align with the diverse motivations and goals of institutions and prospective participants to prevent a mismatch between learners' aspirations and employers' objectives. Such mismatches can incur high costs, leading to missed opportunities for working learners and underutilization of their potential by employers. Furthermore, a narrow focus in program design can inadvertently worsen systemic inequality, as those who can easily take advantage of employer-sponsored learning may differ demographically from those who cannot, perpetuating exclusionary systems despite good intentions.

Limitations

The personae developed from this research are not intended to be translated and applied into direct practice recommendations. For example, we recognize that the persona categories and profiles we offer are not sufficient to guide all instructional decision-making. By creating approachable representations of aggregated interview data, personae served as both a tool for internal understanding of the research data and a means of sharing findings with the broader field. This approach speaks directly to learner experience and addresses our research goals of illustrating the empirical persona methodology. Personae can inform but cannot comprehensively shape instruction. Instead, we developed personae as a tool to illustrate how different adult learners engaged with available learning opportunities in distinct ways and for varying purposes, thereby tangibly demonstrating the importance of considering learner experience. We acknowledge the limitations and barriers many adult education programs may face in addressing learner experience, as well as the learner-centered changes the research suggests.

We acknowledge the limited generalizability of the research, as practitioners may lack the time or resources to enact it. Still, illustrating the persona process advances methodological innovation. The methods need not be replicated exactly by practitioners; instead, they should be understood more deeply as reflective of learner experience. Principled adaptations could be made to developing personae that reflect a streamlined process that could fit into practitioners' busy schedules, given their competing priorities. We recognize that research conducted with specific populations often fails to be directly translated into practice. We do not ascribe to a simple view of research implementation, and we are realistic about the effort, time, and resources necessary to engage in enacting personae.

Conclusion

The persona development process undertaken in the 21CLEO research provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of adults participating in ESAET initiatives. By moving beyond monolithic descriptions and centering these individuals' voices, the research highlights the critical need for a more nuanced, learner-centered approach to workforce development. The exemplar personae, Alimayu, Neberu, Regina, and Dani, vividly illustrate the varied motivations, challenges, and aspirations of working learners, underscoring that they are agentive individuals who make strategic choices in pursuit of education and career advancement.

Data-driven persona profile development is a useful methodology for researchers seeking to elucidate learner experiences in adult education and support program development. Feedback from working learners, practitioners, and professionals who served on advisory boards further validated the utility of the persona methodology as a tool for understanding and interpreting the experiences of working learners. Discussions also highlighted important gaps in the current set of personae. Still, the data-driven persona profiles offered a useful lens for capturing the complex realities of the working learner population.

Ultimately, the success of employer-supported adult education and training hinges on its ability to effectively meet the diverse needs and goals of the working learners it serves. By embracing a learner-centered perspective to foster deeper understanding, stakeholders can work toward creating more equitable, relevant, and impactful learning opportunities that benefit both workers and employers, contributing to a more skilled and engaged workforce.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research advisors, Kathy Hinchman, Erik Jacobsen, Steve Reder; our stakeholder advisory group; and the educators and learners from whom we learned so much throughout this research initiative.

References

21CLEO Research Team. (2019a, December 11). What is a learning ecosystem? [Blog post]. 21CLEO Research Project Blog Posts. Portland State University. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cleo_blog/7/

21CLEO Research Team. (2019b, May 15). Defining employer-supported learning opportunities (Blog Post No. 4). 21CLEO Research Project Blog Posts. Portland State University. https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/37429

21CLEO Research Team. (2021a, January 26). Alimayu: College-educated retail worker learning English (Blog Post No. 12). 21CLEO Research Project Blog Posts. Portland State University. https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/37441

21CLEO Research Team. (2021b, March 2). Neberu: Working to feel comfortable interacting with English speakers (Blog post No. 13). 21CLEO Research Project Blog Posts. Portland State University. https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/37442

21CLEO Research Team. (2021c, March 3). Regina: Healthcare worker seeking to establish a career (Blog post No. 15). 21CLEO Research Project Blog Posts. Portland State University. https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/37444

21CLEO Research Team. (2021d, March 19). *Dani: Front-Line Supervisor Paid Hourly Seeking Certification for Advancement* [Blog post]. 21CLEO Research Project Blog Posts. Portland State University. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cleo_blog/16/

Aspen Institute. (2015). *A guide to upskilling America's frontline workers: A handbook for employers.* https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/guide-upskilling-americas-frontline-workers/

Baaki, J., Maddrell, J., & Stauffer, E. (2017). *Designing authentic and engaging personas for open education: An open educational resource*. Old Dominion University. https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1087&context=stemps_fac_pubs

Bergson-Shilcock, A. (2017). *Foundational skills in the service sector: A report on frontline workers.* National Skills Coalition. https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/foundational-skills-in-the-service-sector

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Harvard University Press.

Castek, J, Harris, K, Jacobs, G, and Vanek, J. (2022). 21st Century Learning Ecosystem Opportunities: Research and Findings. Language. Literacy, & Technology Research Group and World Education. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cleo_findings/10/

Chang, V., & Guetl, C. (2007). E-learning ecosystem (ELES): A holistic approach for the development of more effective learning environments for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In *Proceedings of the 2007 Inaugural IEEE International Conference on Digital Ecosystems and Technologies* (pp. 420–425). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/DEST.2007.372010

Condon, J., Chattin, B., Green, R., Goodman, A., & Cacicio, S. (2025). *Breaking barriers to adult literacy access: Insights from adults with low literacy across the United States.* The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network & FTI Consulting. https://allinliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Breaking-Barriers-to-Adult-Literacy-Access.pdf

Constantakes, P., & Noakes, S. (2019). *Tapping data for frontline talent development*. Digital Promise. https://digitalpromise.org/tapping-data-frontline-talent-development/#current-ecosystem

Cooper, A. (1999). *The inmates are running the asylum: Why high-tech products drive us crazy and how to restore the sanity.* Sams Publishing.

Cross, K. P. (1981). Adults as learners. Increasing participation and facilitating learning. https://www.instructionaldesign.org

Deloitte, & Aspen Institute. (2015). *A guide to upskilling America's frontline workers: A handbook for employers*. http://www.upskillamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Upskilling_Employer_Handbook_042015.pdf

Hickey, A., & Riddle, S. (2023). The practice of relationality in classrooms: beyond relational pedagogy as empty signifier. *Teachers and Teaching*, *29*(7–8), 821–832. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2023.2202389

Jacobs, A., Dreessen, K., & Pierson, J. (2008). 'Thick' personas – Using ethnographic methods for persona development as a tool for conveying the social science view in technological design. *Observatorio* (*OBS*) *Journal*, 5, 79–97. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=1ec9323a3525c5bb2f835955891ae4015a8f9700

Jain, R., & Vázquez, V. (2021). *Unpacking the work of work-based learning*. Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Unpacking-the-Work-of-Work-Based-Learning.pdf

Johnston, O., Wildy, H., & Shand, J. (2023). Student voices that resonate: Constructing composite narratives that represent students' classroom experiences. *Qualitative Research,* 23(1), 108–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211016158

Kouprie, M., & Sleeswijk Visser, F. (2009). A framework for empathy in design: Stepping into and out of the user's life. *Journal of Engineering Design*, 20(5), 437–448. https://doi.org/10.1080/09544820902875033

Magee, C., Hammond, J., & Astashkina, T. (2018). *The state of workforce EdTech: A look at funding & innovation in modern workforce education*. LearnLaunch, Inc.

National Research Council. (2012). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century.* J. W. Pellegrino & M. L. Hilton (Eds.), Committee on Defining Deeper Learning and 21st Century Skills, Board on Testing and Assessment and Board on Science Education, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/13398

Nisula, A.-M., & Metso, S. (2019). Factors fostering vocational students' workplace learning success in the real workplace environment. *Journal of Education and Work*, 32(6–7), 552–569. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2019.1673884

Nyashanu, M., Pfende, F., & Ekpenyong, M. S. (2020). Exploring the challenges faced by frontline workers in health and social care amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Experiences of frontline workers in the English midlands region, *UK*. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 34(5), 655–661. https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2020.1792425

Patterson, M. B. (2018). The forgotten 90%: Adult nonparticipation in education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 68(1), 41–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713617731810

Pruitt, J., & Adlin, T. (2006). The persona lifecycle: Keeping people in mind throughout product design. Elsevier.

Rho, H. J., Fremstad, S., & Brown, H. (2020). *A basic demographic profile of workers in frontline industries*. Center for Economic and Policy Research. https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-Frontline-Workers.pdf

Sanders, J., Donovan, S., Myers, J., & DeFauw, D. L. (2024). Methodologies for lifespan writing research: Using composite narratives in narrative inquiry. In *Improvisations: Methods and methodologies in lifespan writing research* (pp. 51–65). The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/per-b.2024.2289.2.03

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2017). Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity,* 52(4), 1893–1907. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8

Shechtman, N., Yarnall, L., Stites, R., & Cheng, B. (2016). *Empowering adults to thrive at work: Personal success skills for 21st century jobs. A report on promising research and practice*. Joyce Foundation. https://www.sri.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/joyceempoweringadultstothriveatwork_4.pdf

United States Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Workforce system and apprenticeship partnerships* [PDF]. U.S. Department of Labor. https://www.dol.gov/apprenticeship/pdf/RA-WS-Partnerships.pdf

UpSkill America, & Fall, J. S. (2017, June 1). *Upskilling playbook for employers*. Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/upskilling-playbook/

Ward, J. (2010). Persona development and use, or, how to make imaginary people real. In *Proceedings of the Library Assessment Conference.* University of Washington Libraries. https://digital.lib.washington.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2eb6ce19-80d4-46e3-805d-c78011dd0d45/content

http://doi.org/10.35847/IOwoeye.8.3.45

Viewpoint

A Snapshot of Adult Education in Nigeria

Ifedola Morayooluwa Owoeye, *Georgia State University*

Keywords: adult education, literacy, Nigeria, gender disparity, socio-cultural barriers.

Although it has been nine years, I still remember Rakiya (pseudonym), as if it were yesterday. After all, although I knew that there were adults who lacked foundational academic skills, she was the first person to make me genuinely think about the prevalence of low adult literacy in Nigeria. She was nineteen years old when she came to work for my family in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. She had arrived from a rural village in northern Nigeria and came to my city in search of better economic opportunities. Due to her lack of access to any formal education as a child, she had extremely limited options and could only qualify for jobs involving physical labor. A church member who knew that my parents were seeking a housekeeper eventually connected her to us.

Growing up in Nigeria, I was surrounded by a rich mix of ethnic groups, each speaking their unique language (for example, my family is Yoruba, so we mainly spoke Yoruba at home, while Rakiya is Hausa and therefore spoke Hausa). English, as Nigeria's official language introduced during British colonization, is used in schools, formal settings, and for communication between people from different regions. Therefore, even though I was raised speaking my native language, I was taught as a child to become fluent in English because it was the language of education and public life. However, because Rakiya did not attend school as a child, she knew only Hausa and no English. Therefore, for Rakiya, in addition to not possessing rudimentary reading, writing, and numeracy skills, her inability to speak English also limited her job options.

Rakiya did not share her academic difficulties with my family. Instead, it was through my daily interactions with her that I quickly realized her inability to read, write, or perform basic arithmetic. One day, Rakiya asked me shyly to teach her some basic English words. We started with greetings like "Good morning" and "How are you?" Once she saw that I was more than happy to teach her, she asked me to teach her how to count money, how to recognize numbers, tell time, and perform simple addition. I also taught her how to hold a pen and write different letters of the alphabet. Although she initially felt embarrassed by her lack of academic knowledge, she remained determined to grow. Every new skill that she mastered brought a big, proud smile to her face. These foundational skills were instrumental in enabling her to eventually pursue training as a hairstylist and manicurist. After five years, she left my family and returned to her hometown to start a small hair styling and nail manicure business.

Adult Education in Nigeria

Unfortunately, there is a prevailing societal belief in Nigeria that adults like Rakiya are responsible for their lack of academic knowledge and are therefore often labeled as lazy, unmotivated, or disinterested in education, rather than recognizing the structural barriers that hindered their educational opportunities as children (Aderinoye, 2008). Although the Nigerian government officially provides free primary education, there are additional costs such as textbooks, uniforms, Parent Teacher Association dues, and transportation, which make schooling inaccessible for low-income households (UNICEF, 2022). These financial barriers are a major reason many children from poor backgrounds in Nigeria never attend school. In addition, due to discouraging societal attitudes toward children who grow up to be adults without basic academic skills, people like Rakiya typically have no interest in joining adult literacy classes. In fact, most Nigerians (both educated and uneducated) do not view adult education as valuable. Unfortunately, Nigerians hold a widespread belief that

Correspondence: iowoeye1@student.gsu.edu

adults are "too old to learn" and that education must occur in childhood (Preece & Hoppers, 2011).

The widespread issue of low adult literacy and numeracy in Nigeria remains a pressing concern, particularly among underserved populations segmented by gender, location, age, and wealth. Gender disparities are especially striking. For instance, while the national literacy rate for individuals aged 15 and over is approximately 62%, this figure masks a significant gender gap: 70% of men are considered literate, compared to just 53% of women (FAWCO, 2022). The situation is even more alarming among older adults. Among Nigerians aged 65 and above, only 28% are literate: 40% of men and a mere 18% of women. Many females, like Rakiya, grow up without attending even a single day of school. In many parts of Nigeria, girls are often required to assume domestic responsibilities from as young as age six, and by their teenage years, they are often expected to marry. As a result, many girls either never enroll in school or drop out early (Saka, 2019; UNESCO, 2022; UNGEI & Girls Not Brides, 2021). [1]

Geographic disparities also play a significant role in literacy rates throughout Nigeria. Adults in rural communities often have limited access to education due to inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and long distances to the nearest school (Aderinoye, 2008). This results in substantially lower literacy rates in rural areas compared to urban centers. For example, 86% of men in urban areas are literate, compared to just 59% in rural areas. Among women, the gap is even wider: 74% in cities are literate, whereas only 35% in rural areas can read and write (UNESCO, 2022)

Economic status further compounds this divide. Numeracy skills, which are essential for daily functions such as handling transactions, show a marked disparity based on household wealth. Only 44% of adults aged 50–59 in the poorest households is considered proficient in numeracy, compared with 63% among their wealthier counterparts (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2022). [2]

Adults who decide to attend adult literacy classes often experience social stigma when they attempt to return to learning environments that were never designed for them. Adult education programs often operate under models meant for children or younger students, failing to account for the unique needs, schedules, and life experiences of adult learners (Preece & Hoppers, 2011). This mismatch can make adult learners feel out of place, embarrassed, or even ashamed to participate. In many communities, returning to school as an adult is seen as a sign of past failure, which further discourages enrollment (UNESCO, 2020). Without inclusive, flexible, and respectful approaches to adult education, many continue to feel excluded from opportunities for growth and empowerment.

Despite the widespread need for adult education, the Nigerian government has done little to make it accessible. Only a few adult literacy programs in Nigeria are run and funded by the government. Instead, the majority are organized and supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, or local community-based initiatives (Olawale & Olabisi, 2024). In some Nigerian states, faith-based groups and international partners have launched learning centers and vocational training programs designed to be flexible and culturally acceptable for women.

While these efforts are valuable, they are often limited in scope and resources and rarely reach remote areas where education is most needed. However, even when these programs are available, adults face multiple obstacles, such as shame, rigid schedules, limited resources, and a lack of transportation, that make participation difficult.

Adult Literacy Initiatives

Notwithstanding the challenges, efforts are underway to provide basic skills programs that empower adult learners, especially women. For example, the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC: https://www.nmec.gov.ng/) is a federal agency

1 Note: The terms "literate," "can read and write," and "proficient in numeracy" are used by the cited sources without clearly specifying the level of competence (e.g., third-grade, secondary, or expert-level ability). These terms should be interpreted with caution, as they may represent different thresholds across reports.

2 Note: The terms "literate," "can read and write," and "proficient in numeracy" are used by the cited sources without clearly specifying the level of competence (e.g., third-grade, secondary, or expert-level ability). These terms should be interpreted with caution, as they may represent different thresholds across reports

tasked with coordinating policies, programs, and initiatives to promote mass literacy, adult education, and non-formal learning across Nigeria. NMEC works to establish literacy centers, develop instructional materials, and train adult education facilitators. The agency also collaborates with state governments and civil society organizations to implement literacy campaigns targeting out-of-school youth, women, and marginalized populations. However, its impact is often limited due to inconsistent funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited personnel, especially in rural and underserved regions (Olawale & Olabisi, 2024).

The Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA; https://www.wrapanigeria.org/) is an NGO that addresses the educational and socio-economic needs of women, particularly in northern Nigeria. WRAPA provides functional literacy and numeracy programs tailored for women, often integrating these with human rights education, reproductive health awareness, and legal support services. The organization emphasizes culturally sensitive approaches, such as engaging religious and community leaders to promote girls' and women's education in conservative communities. Another key NGO is the Literacy Enhancement and Advocacy Project (LEAP Africa; https://leapafrica.org/), which focuses on leadership training, education, and capacity-building. LEAP Africa offers literacy-based interventions as part of its broader mission to equip young people with the skills needed to become socially responsible leaders. Programs often include reading clubs, entrepreneurship training, and life skills development. LEAP also engages in advocacy work, pushing for policy reforms to improve access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities across Nigeria.

While non-governmental initiatives are important, they are not enough on their own. Their reach is often limited to urban areas, and they often rely on donor funding that is neither stable nor long-term. Many programs lack curricula, trained facilitators, and follow-up support for learners. Most importantly, they often fail to center the voices and needs of adult learners themselves in the learning environment (D'Angelo, et al., 2023). Adult learners are not just beneficiaries; they are key stakeholders whose lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and learning goals should help shape program design and delivery. Without adult learners' input, the programs become irrelevant. Many adults, especially in rural areas, remain unreached, not because they are unwilling to learn, but because the system continues to overlook their realities, silence their voices, and ignore their potential. However, the broader structural barriers must also be addressed. Learners' interests and willingness to learn are important, but they must be matched with accessible opportunities.

Challenges to Adult Literacy Education

Nigerian adult education advocates question why there is such an excessive dependence on NGOs. In other words, why is the government not doing more? Education is a basic human right, and yet adult basic learners are often overlooked in national policy and budgeting decisions. While the Nigerian government has signed on to global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; https://sdgs.un.org/), which call for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, the reality on the ground tells a different story. The SDGs consist of a set of 17 goals established by the United Nations to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and education by 2030; however, implementation at the national level has often fallen short. Despite Nigeria's commitment, achieving this goal has been hindered by limited funding, weak policy enforcement, and infrastructural challenges (United Nations, 2015). Without clear policies, dedicated funding, and a serious commitment to making adult education accessible and respected, adults like Rakiya will continue to fall through the gaps. The government must take real action by investing in childhood and adult education programs, training instructors and facilitators, reducing stigma, and ensuring that no one, regardless of age, gender, wealth, or region, is denied access to quality education.

To address the challenges facing adult education programs in Nigeria, several promising models from other African countries could offer insights. For instance, South Africa has implemented effective community-based health literacy initiatives that provide accessible, culturally relevant education to underserved populations (The Status of Financial Education in Africa, 2012). These programs often combine basic literacy with practical knowledge, such as HIV awareness and healthcare

navigation, making them especially impactful in rural areas (Sørensen et al., 2024). As a result of sustained government investment in adult and non-formal education, Zimbabwe and Seychelles have implemented successful adult literacy campaigns, with an estimated 87.5% of Zimbabweans and 95.9% of Seychellois aged 15 and older who are now able to read and write. [3] These efforts have been instrumental in reducing generational literacy gaps and promoting functional literacy across both countries (CIA.gov - The World Factbook 2021; https://intelpoint.co/insights/adult-literacy-rates-of-african-countries/).

Recommendation

The struggle for adult education in Nigeria is shaped by a mix of socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic challenges, including gender inequality, rural-urban disparities, and limited government support. While the government has made formal commitments through global frameworks like the SDGs, progress on the ground remains slow and uneven. For Nigeria to move forward, it must prioritize adult education through inclusive governmental policies, sustainable funding, and collaborations between government agencies, NGOs, faith-based groups, and local communities. Programs should be flexible, community-based, and delivered in local languages to better accommodate adult learners, particularly women and rural populations. Literacy instruction should also be functional and relevant, linking skills to everyday needs such as health, employment, and civic participation. By investing in the education of its adult population, Nigeria would not only address a literacy gap but also unlock the potential of millions to contribute more meaningfully to their families, communities, and the nation at large.

3 Note: The term 'can read and write' is used by the cited source without specifying the level of competence, and therefore should be interpreted with caution.

References

Aderinoye, R. (2008). Literacy and communication technologies: Distance education strategies for literacy delivery. *International Review of Education*, *54*, 605-626.

D'Angelo, S., Cameron, L., Assane Igodoe, A., & Sheria Nfundiko, J. (2023). *Supporting teachers to improve teaching and learning: A GPE KIX scoping study working paper*. Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange.

FAWCO. (2022). *Nigeria: Education facts*. The Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas. Retrieved from https://www.fawco.org/global-issues/education/target-program-education/nigeria

Olawale, B. V., & Olabisi, A. F. (2024). *The roles of nongovernmental organizations in promoting literacy education: The Nigeria perspective*. International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities, *1*(2), 132–139. Retrieved from ResearchGate

Preece, J., & Hoppers, C. O. (2011). Lifelong learning in sub-Saharan Africa. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *30*(1), 1-3.

Saka, L. A. (2019). Parents' and community's supports of girl-child schooling in a local government area in Nigeria. *Social Science Education Journal*.

Sørensen, K., Knoll, V., Ramos, N., Boateng, M., Alemayehu, G., Schamberger, L., & Harsch, S. (2024). Health Literacy in Africa—A Scoping Review of Scientific Publications. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *21*(11), 1456. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21111456

The Status of Financial Education in Africa (OECD Working Papers on Finance, Insurance and Private Pensions No. 25; OECD Working Papers on Finance, Insurance and Private Pensions, Vol. 25). (2012). https://doi.org/10.1787/5k94cqqx90wl-en

UNGEI & Girls Not Brides. (2021). *Social norms barriers to girls' education*. UNGEI.

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team. (2022, March 22). *Basic numeracy skills have stagnated among Africa's poorest for decades*. World Education Blog. https://world-education-blog.org/2022/03/22/basic-numeracy-skills-have-stagnated-among-africas-poorest-for-decades/

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2022). *Global education monitoring report: Literacy rates by gender, location, and age—Nigeria* (adapted from GAL Country Profile).

UNESCO. (2020). *Embracing a culture of lifelong learning: Contribution to the Futures of Education initiative*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374112

UNICEF. (2022). *The state of children in Nigeria: An urgent call to bridge the education gap*. United Nations Children's Fund. https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/state-children-nigeria

Worldometer. (2025). *Nigeria population* (*Live*). Retrieved June 9, 2025, from https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/

http://doi.org/10.35847/JKobrin.PBarrett.JBoccanfuso.8.3.50

Report from the Field

Navigating Power, Voice, and Equity in Community Adult Education: Lessons from The Welcome Table

Jennifer Kobrin, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Paul Barrett, The Welcome Table, Philadelphia, PA
John Boccanfuso, The Welcome Table, Philadelphia PA

Abstract

This article explores approaches and related challenges to designing adult education programming that is authentically learner-centered through the lens of The Welcome Table (TWT), a community resource center in a low-income community in Philadelphia. As part of a social justice-oriented, Episcopal middle school, TWT's adult education program is influenced by Freirean approaches to being community-directed and led. By providing ongoing opportunities to understand adult learners' needs, we describe how the program strives to create equitable learning opportunities that reflect the voices of the community. We then offer a nuanced perspective on the challenges of community-based adult education that is genuinely learner-centered by reflecting on emergent tensions. These tensions include the power dynamics that exist when White and/or middle-class outsiders design and teach programs in marginalized communities of color, and our expansion from a more materially-based program distributing food to lifelong learning. The article concludes with recommendations for adult education programs interested in adopting more learner-centered approaches.

Keywords: adult education, community engagement, adult literacy, Freire, social justice

The Welcome Table (TWT) is a school-based community resource center located in North Philadelphia in the neighborhood of Allegheny West. Our core mission involves building a community of sharing where community members participate in programs, and we share our resources with neighbors. By fostering this spirit of community between program participants and staff, at our best, we are neighbors helping neighbors as opposed to practitioners helping clients. This commitment to a community of sharing is further enacted through our core value of "Reflection and Response," which centers on active listening and ongoing reflection:

> We strive to be active listeners within our community as we grow. Building community is beautiful but challenging work that happens when all who participate in its formation are open to learning and adjusting to better serve the needs of the whole. We foster an environment where reflection and growth are encouraged and built into all aspects of what we do.

Whether we are conducting a formal survey or talking to a participant after a class ends, we are constantly looking to learn more about our neighbors and how they experience our programs. As part of our orientation to this work, we acknowledge that in adult education programs like TWT, racialized power dynamics are often present (Sheared et al., 2010). White educators and others in positions of authority may cause harm to participants of color by not reflecting on power dynamics or reinforcing barriers through program policies that make it difficult for learners to participate. Critical reflection and open dialogue are key to disrupting these forms of bias. However, educators may feel uncomfortable, avoid complicity, and/or deny that a problem exists (Matias et al., 2017). Therefore, it is critical that we as educators and program leaders take time to engage in a process of reflexivity (Klein, 2024). A core part of this process is continually reflecting on our assumptions about the community we serve, day-

Correspondence: jkobrin@utk.edu

to-day interactions with community members, and our approaches to program development.

The purpose of this article is to share our reflections on our efforts to understand learners' needs and how race, class, and other forms of privilege often get in the way of this process. We hope our experiences can spark dialogue for other adult education practitioners. To write this article, we each reflected as individuals on racialized and other power dynamics at TWT and met several times to discuss as a group.

Positionalities

Paul is a Black male non-profit professional currently serving as the Director of TWT. Before arriving at TWT, Paul lived and worked in New York City for several years, working in various nonprofit programs and before that as a high school teacher.

John is a White, middle-class queer man working in the non-profit sector who currently serves as TWT Adult Education Coordinator. He previously taught foundational writing at a New Jersey community college, working primarily with disadvantaged and overlooked students of all ages and backgrounds. John's experiences in the classroom stoked a passion for lifelong learning and advocacy for nontraditional modes of education.

Jen is a White female assistant professor of adult education, serving as Special Advisor to TWT. She has previously worked in Adult Foundational Education (AFE), providing technical assistance to programs. While this experience provided insights into the challenges and opportunities of community-based programs, she also recognizes that her identity as White and middle-class may lead to bias.

As a whole, our experiences and identities shape our views on community-engaged adult education, driving our desire to enact equitable programming based on the needs and interests of community members. Given our positionalities, we also seek to challenge ourselves to understand the historical legacies of marginalization and embrace critical perspectives. One of the most valuable lessons we've learned is that we may not know as much as we think. The act of receiving and processing feedback has taught us as much about what our community wants and needs as any class we could have taken on nonprofit programming. Throughout this article, we continue to reflect on how our positionalities might shape our efforts to build a community of sharing at TWT.

Background and Context

TWT operates as part of St. James School (SJS), a free private faith-based middle school. As part of the Episcopal church, SJS welcomes and celebrates diversity as related to race, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, etc. TWT began as a ministry of the school's chaplaincy in 2019 with an initial focus on providing quality food at no cost for school families and other neighbors in our community through its Saturday farmer's market.

After two years of focusing almost exclusively on food access, we expanded to include adult education classes, starting with a needs assessment in 2021. This expansion sparked a new way of thinking about the power dynamics of serving a working-class Black community by a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). For example, the transition to adult education made us reflect on whether the farmer's market was truly progressive or in name only (i.e., by calling it a 'farmer's market' rather than a food pantry), especially when TWT was the giver, and community members were recipients.

To acknowledge these power dynamics and strive toward a more truly learner-centric adult education program model, we began the TWT program expansion by creating a vision for the program that reflected this goal. TWT's adult education program vision recognizes and celebrates literacies in all forms as reading the word, reading the world, and reading life. We aim to equip adults with the ability to decipher, interpret, and communicate information that is necessary to navigate and positively impact the different spaces they encounter in their lives. In the spirit of Paulo Freire and other progressive educators, our approach to adult learning is intended to be expansive and empowering (Freire, 2014). We also maintain a commitment to seeing neighbors hold the positions of learner and teacher and have ownership of the scope of our program offerings.

Rather than focusing on academics like GED classes (offered through a variety of other nearby organizations in Philadelphia), our adult education program provides a

range of offerings. These include digital literacy and senior activities meeting weekly, courses focused on physical fitness such as line dancing and meditation meeting monthly, and one-time workshops or enrichment-type classes such as cooking and visual arts. Most of these programs are offered year-round on a variety of days and times to support adults' diverse schedules. Our program design also aims to be community-engaged while supporting adults holistically. For example, line dancing, one of our most popular offerings, is a historically Black, culturally relevant activity that incorporates social engagement, learning new dance steps, and physical fitness. Attendance varies, but our more popular offerings like line dancing attract about 15 people per session, while other offerings might attract 5-10 people.

In realizing this program vision, we have encountered many challenges. In the sections below, we provide examples of how these challenges manifested and our learnings so far as we continue to work towards building an adult learning program that enacts a community of sharing.

Challenges

Replace with - Understanding the needs and interests of adults in Allegheny West has been critical to the adult education program design, especially building well-attended programs.

Initially, we saw the farmer's market, which is well-attended with approximately 100 adults weekly, as both a primary recruitment tool and an ideal space/time to get feedback from adults in the community regarding adult education classes by talking to adults informally, handing out paper surveys, distributing flyers, and passing out registration forms. However, this approach has been challenging. Adults at the market seem enthusiastic about classes and will even register to attend. However, we have noticed over time that these same adults will often "no-show" to the adult education classes. When we continue to ask, "what types of classes do you want more of" and/or "what can we do better," a common response is: "nothing, you do so much already." Although some classes are well attended, many have low retention and drop-offs.

We also try to get feedback through satisfaction surveys for class attendees and phone calls to participants who drop out. Despite this variety of ways we ask the community about their needs, we rarely receive feedback that will help us improve. Some of this might be related to access. While we intentionally used a paper survey in recognition that many of our adults may not have digital skills or access to technology, we could strengthen the ways we adjust the reading level of the survey for adults with low literacy.

Another key reflection for us relates to the racialized and class-based dynamics of a predominantly White school/program in a Black neighborhood. As White, highly educated, and/or middle-class practitioners, we initially assumed that people in the community would just tell us what they wanted if we asked in the right ways. Over time, we learned to pay attention to the silences (not answering certain survey questions) and outward politeness (signing up for a program in person and then not showing up) as their own form of communication. First, we wonder whether participants feel a sense of obligation to fill out the survey at the farmer's market because the market provides them with material resources, yet are hesitant to openly critique this program. In other words, if people say something negative, they worry the food will go away. If we put this hesitancy to offer criticism in the context of a city where residents of color have a justifiable mistrust of White-led institutions and authorities, this hesitancy makes sense. In Paul's words: "this big White-led institution that gives all this stuff for free...to me it's how do we help foster different orientations to this place than they are used to having."

We also wonder whether adults in the community have had prior negative experiences with K-12 education that cause them to feel hesitant about a program using academic language like "class" or "skills learning." Even though we try to avoid using this kind of school-based language, it often comes out, like during our digital skills classes. Coming to classes frequently taught by White and/or middle-class volunteers may also make participants feel othered, condescended to, and patronized. Previous experiences with White authority figures may keep POC learners from putting themselves in a potentially adverse or unfriendly situation.

Finally, we wonder about our initial assumptions that people coming to the farmer's market will also want to attend classes. At times, our positionalities as middle-class

outsiders have served as lenses through which we framed low-income communities as a monolith. In reality, people living here are very diverse. They represent different interests, generations, levels of free time given other responsibilities, etc. However, John and Paul differ on whether it is worth continuing to recruit from the farmer's market. While John feels that "the market people…come to the market," Paul feels that it may just take time, and that people are increasingly "making the transition over." These different perspectives show there is not one reality, and we may have different observations and conclusions, further complicating the process of understanding adult learners' needs.

Opportunities and Moving Ahead

One way we are meeting these challenges is by destabilizing the notion of education and moving away from lecture-style or rigidly planned curricula. For example, several months ago we launched digital skills learning circles led by peer facilitators rather than instructors, which run in eight-week cycles meeting weekly for one hour. Facilitators lend their expertise where necessary and guide class meetings, but the bulk of sessions focus on peers sharing their knowledge, experiences, and interests. We specifically recruited circle leaders from the community through flyers at the local library and senior center and at neighborhood coffee shops, so that neighbors would be leading neighbors.

While the learning circles are still new, we are noticing early indications of success. 80% of the attendees were there for the first time, meeting our goal of recruiting more individuals from the local community. One participant, who had contemplated attending over two years prior but never did, said, "I was always so scared to do this [computer class], and now I don't even know what I was scared of." We attribute this early success to having a peer leader who is from the community, not necessarily an expert on digital skills, and who can meet participants where they are.

TWT also prioritizes hiring instructors of color and/or with similar backgrounds to our neighbors. A digital literacy instructor on staff is bilingual; a graduate of SJS taught a course on using social media; other workshops are led by neighbors, from cooking classes to poetry workshops to lessons on how to use chopsticks. We want our neighbors to take ownership of the adult education program, to understand that this is *for them*, so topics should be things they want to know, learn, and share.

We are also expanding our offerings to more social enrichment opportunities, to reinforce the idea that any time spent listening to others, sharing ideas, and/or engaging in critical thinking is adult education. We have introduced a book club, where neighbors guide the discussion by first sharing their feelings and then addressing one element of the book they want to discuss. Paul led a workshop we called "Culture Dive," sharing elements of his Jamaican heritage, and that led to neighbors offering to lead sessions on *their* ethnic backgrounds and histories. Finally, we continue to seek ways to incorporate more community voice as an ongoing goal and part of our strategic planning, which includes listening both to what community members say directly and to the silences.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

The experience of launching and implementing TWT's adult education program over the past three years has nuanced our understanding of what it means to implement an adult education program that is rooted in community members' needs and interests. In this section, we offer recommendations for programs wishing to implement a more learner-centered approach.

First, truly including adult learners as collaborators, sharers, and engaged participants must involve rethinking practitioners' assumptions about adult education. As noted above, understanding community members' needs is a complex process that begins through reflexive practice (Klein, 2024). Being willing to grapple with how our positionalities and broader racialized power dynamics shape this localized context has allowed us to better understand community members' needs. Being learner-centered also must happen in an ongoing way and at all levels of program design and organizational structure: through visioning and strategic planning, individual staff reflection and dialogue, design of program offerings, and in everyday informal interactions with community members. As we learned, passing out a feedback survey

is not enough; gaining community input requires multiple opportunities for participation and gaining trust over time. Finally, we encourage practitioners to network with local organizations and seek out national adult education resources like the Open Door Collective, Skillblox, and CrowdED Learning. We offer these reflections as an invitation for adult educators to see learner-centered practice not as a static goal, but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by power, positionality, and the everyday work of building trust within communities.

References

Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary edition*. Bloomsbury Academic & Professional. Klein, M. (2024). Reflexive learning and reflexive practice. In J. E. Coryell, L. M.

Baumgartner, & J. W. Bohonos (Eds.), *Methods for facilitating adult learning* (1st ed., pp. 200–213). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003446019-16

Matias, C. E., Henry, A., & Darland, C. (2017). The twin tales of whiteness: Exploring the emotional roller coaster of teaching and learning about whiteness. *Taboo: The journal of culture and education*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.16.1.04

Sheared, V., Johnson-Bailey, J., Colin, S. A. J., Peterson, E., & Brookfield, S. D. (Eds.). (2010). *The handbook of race and adult education: A resource for dialogue on racism*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

http://doi.org/10.35847/JVoorhies.8.3.56

Report from the Field

Finding the Missing Piece: Book Clubs Supporting Adult Literacy

Josie Voorhies, Director of Programs and Community Relations, READ RVA

Introduction

READ Out Loud is a student-driven, multi-level, adult book club formed to supplement systematic literacy instruction for ABE students in the metro-Richmond, Virginia area. Supported by trained literacy tutors, students explore vocabulary, text structure, literacy terms, and extend concepts from each book.

Keywords: adult literacy, community literacy, book clubs, comprehension

For over forty years, READ RVA (formerly The READ Center) has been providing literacy instruction to adults in our Virginia community. Adult Basic Education (ABE) encompasses reading levels from beginning (K) through 8th grade equivalency. This large span is addressed by adult education providers that offer robust and varied programming. Locally, at READ RVA, we understand our role because our students dictate that role: our students want to read their prescriptions, get a driver's license, help their child or grandchild with their homework, read their religious text in church, and understand their mail independently. Eighty-two percent of enrolled students at READ RVA are native English speakers looking to improve their functional reading skills for personal improvement. Fifty-four percent are retired and/or are not interested in joining the workforce. Fifty-six percent of students already have a high school credential. And most importantly, Sixty-nine percent read below a 3rd grade equivalency. Everyone needs and deserves a literate life and the programming we provide supports that right.

Structured Literacy

As ABE service providers, we regularly analyze our programming. We challenge ourselves to consider if we could be improving, growing, and modifying instruction to better serve our student population. Literacy programming at READ RVA follows a structured literacy approach and includes phonemic awareness, phonics, the study of word elements, the study of the rules that govern English, high frequency word instruction, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Effective instruction must be systematic – planned, in a logically progressive sequence, with clearly designed objectives, and utilizing appropriate assessment tools (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

Our program utilizes a curriculum system shown to be effective for adults with or without dyslexia. Our team utilizes NRS (National Reporting System for Adult Education) approved adult curriculum assessments following test manual guidelines for administration and testing schedules. We recruit and employ highly trained, credentialed, professional teachers, and we leverage support from over 170 trained literacy tutors. We accommodate, adapt, and welcome our students in a non-judgmental, stigma-free, caring environment. Students enroll in leveled classes with low student-to-tutor and teacher ratios. Each programmatic decision is considered carefully to maintain high standards of instruction and quality in programming.

By following our approach, we see successes through standardized testing as well as anecdotally with reports of increases in confidence, self-reliance, and comfort in interactions with medical and school professionals. We celebrate when students share their stories of

Correspondence: josie@readrva.org

successfully navigating an airport, participating in their religious meeting, and understanding notes from their children's teachers. These are BIG wins, and they keep our community motivated and dedicated to the rigor of our programming.

Adding the Joy to Structured Literacy

BUT...what about the joy of reading? Don't we want our students to experience the feeling of curling up on a couch with a cup of tea and a good novel? The interaction of telling your partner about the most thrilling chapter? The desire to skip out on evening plans so you can flip to the next page and learn what the leading character will get up to next? Is hoping for the JOY of reading just fluff? Should we, as ABE providers, continue to maintain an almost exclusive focus on the realities and goals of functional literacy? Over 60% of prospective volunteer literacy tutors cite their love of reading as a primary motivator for volunteering with READ RVA. To them, reading is a key component of their lives, and they want to bring that feeling to individuals in their communities. During training, we explain all the reasons why a structured literacy approach is required and that it is the best solution to improve our students' lives. If a student finds happiness in reading, that would just be icing on the cake, right?

In September 2024, a READ RVA student, *IC*, and her digital skills tutor began discussing book clubs and *IC* revealed her secret desire to join a book club. She had been approached by a friend to join a community book club and separately by her pastor to join a bible study book group. She declined both invitations. Her refusal to join stemmed from a lack of confidence in her reading ability. Her tutor, Sharon, was motivated to help *IC* take the leap and join a book club. Sharon recounts that, "Our students show such a determination and a true burning desire to read. I get strength from our students' strength, and I just have to get involved." After much discussion, and buoyed by her tutor's encouragement, *IC* approached the READ RVA program team with a request: help her make a book club where all people are welcome and feel comfortable participating. When our students talk, it is imperative that members of the literacy community listen.

A Club Reimagined

In 1996, book clubs experienced a meteoric rise in popularity when talk show host Oprah Winfrey announced the creation of her book club. She sparked interest in collective reading for a generation of adults looking to share experiences surrounding text. Books by emerging authors, classics revisited, or sometimes hefty-in-theme tomes have gained wildfire-like intensity as much of the nation rushed out to purchase or borrow Oprah's latest pick. However, for adults that experience low literacy, Oprah's book club, and any other book club, are elusive and exclusive groups.

Biblioguidance book clubs have been utilized in K-12 educational settings for many years. Used as a strategy to interject content without overtly stating the material, educators leverage texts to generate desired outcomes. With a group of 10th grade students, researchers documented that book clubs provided psychosocial benefits to participants. Participants gained insight into other perspectives and experienced catharsis citing increased feelings of hope, validation, and reduced loneliness (Banas et al, 2024). Engaging with text creates an interesting dynamic between reader and the text. According to the transactional reader response theory, readers, the author, and the text take part in a transaction (Banas et al, 2024). The readers' personal experiences influence their interpretation of the text, and the text influences the readers. However, low level readers may not be able to connect with the story or evoke the same emotional response. To mitigate this disparity, educators can guide and lead readers to achieve the same outcome through prompting Banas, et al, 2024). With these benefits in mind, READ Out Loud participants work through text together, take breaks to discuss content, and leverage tutor support to ensure appreciation of the material. Book club participant *TW* explains that, "I relate to the experiences of the characters in the book by putting myself in their shoes."

Gaining reading comprehension skills is a key component of the book club design. The National Institute for Literacy explains that "Reading is a combination of many sub-skills combined to achieve the common goal of comprehension. Teaching reading sub-skills in an authentic setting ensures that there is never a moment when comprehension is not a factor." Reading together

during book club provides a simultaneously authentic and supported setting (*Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers*, n.d.). Additionally, more advanced readers benefit from partner work which encourages summarizing understanding of a text with a peer (Talwar, 2024). Student and book club member LB confirms this notion. "I like talking to someone else about the book. I like explaining what is happening in the book. I never did that before."

Multi-Level Design

Together, the READ RVA team and *IC* designed a multi-level student book club group. The most important element to *IC* was that every student must be invited, regardless of their reading level. At READ RVA, our literacy classes are leveled and follow a structured curriculum. However, in book club, we are not following that same approach. We allow time and grace for students to work through text or simply pass their turn if they prefer to listen. READ RVA tutor, Sharon explains, "This is a no judgement zone. Mistakes are okay. We demonstrate community and mutual respect." By opening the group to all reading levels, we extend and grow our students' exposure to one another and build connections across classes. Each student learns that they are part of a larger group, and they support individuals where they are in their personal literacy journeys.

With *IC* as our student leader, we selected a short, high interest book, and set ground rules for the execution of the inaugural session. To allow time for active participation from each student, we established an ideal group size of not more than 10 students. We recruited student members and promised that attendees would be familiar (classmates and trusted tutors) and by challenging the participants to help us determine if this experimental project was worth pursuing. This book club would be neither exclusive nor elusive – all levels of readers would be welcomed and supported. Today, participants meet weekly to read, consider, discuss, engage, and grow together as readers and book lovers.

The Process

Seated around a large table, the book club participants are armed with their books, pencils, paper, and strategically placed tutors. As a group, book club members agreed that the goal of book club is to enjoy text as a community. To succeed at that goal, the group brainstormed a few basic ground rules before the book's spines were even cracked.

- A leader is identified by the READ RVA team. The leader can be a staff member, a tutor, or an advanced student. The leader should be comfortable with the role and able to moderate conversation to keep on pace.
- Participants do not read the book in advance, as most book clubs require.
- The members don't receive the book in advance; they read, tackle difficult words and concepts together, enjoy surprises, make predictions, and enjoy the text together as a community.
- Members may read aloud or simply state 'pass' when it is their turn to read. There is no pressure to take a turn. Readers at the very beginning levels may ask a tutor to assist by echo reading together.
- Students and tutors respect each other's attempts at pronunciation and don't jump in to correct unless support is requested by the reader.
- Tutors and students take breaks from reading aloud to discuss higher level questions involving plot, characters, key details, and making predictions.

Since its inception in 2024, the READ Out Loud book club has met for five eight-week hour-long sessions. Pacing must remain fluid due to the multi-level literacy design. Sometimes, a novel can be read and discussed in a shorter time span and when that occurs, we are prepared and ready with the next book. The club meets from 11am-12pm during READ RVA's 'specialty programming' block on Fridays. This block was chosen for the convenience factor; students that were already participating on Fridays were willing to try out the club.

Initially, the books were selected in collaboration between the student leader and the READ RVA team. Now, the student leader and participants consider several choices and make the book selections. Generally, we choose popular high interest adult books between a 2nd and 4th grade level equivalency from publishers like Gemma Open Door, Orca Soundings, Rapid Reads, and Grass Roots Press.

The Benefits of the Missing Piece

The laughter and conversation that seeps from the room is evidence that multiple levels of readers can and do enjoy immersion into high interest text together. "It's more fun reading with others. I learn new words that I've never seen before. I learn how to pronounce them better," student *VW* explains. *TW* shares that "leaving home to go to book club is like going to another home. I like the energy the other students bring." Book club member *VW* agrees. "When I see some other students catching on, it really makes me happy. I am so proud of them," she explains. From a programmatic perspective, the book club provides extra instructional opportunities and hours. When asked why book club participants elect to join book club in addition to participating in literacy class, the answer isn't solely for fun. *TW* reports that, "Class can be really hard. We have to follow a plan for each class. At book club, we get to practice what we learned in class. We get to take time to think about the stories more." Creating the right environment to read and enjoy text together just may provide the piece missing from traditional programming.

Outcomes and Next Steps

For participants of the READ Out Loud book club, we anticipate a potential increase in family engagement with schools, an increased awareness of our programming as participants share their experiences with family and friends, and a continuation of trust building within our community. Anecdotally, we see these trends emerging. Book club member *TW* reports that he joins group discussions at work easier now, "by walking in with confidence." Student *IC* explains that participating in the book club, "has made me more comfortable in recognizing and pronouncing words."

By changing the narrative of what a book club looks and feels like, all adults can reap the benefits of participating. We are striving to create a literacy-rich space in our little community. Our next step is to expand book club participation into the greater community by sharing this opportunity at alternate locations and with a wider range of adult participants. Since participants won't be known to READ RVA until they join the group, we will be prepared with several book options of varying reading levels to meet the needs of the off-site groups. The success and popularity of the READ Out Loud book club is also informing the way we approach family literacy engagement. We can harness the benefits and strengths emerging from this experience to grow our program in ways we haven't previously considered.

Recently, founding student leader *IC* reflected on her experiences with the READ Out Loud book club. She shared that her confidence has been boosted by leading the group, reading aloud, and discussing text with peers. "I am growing. If I keep growing, I may decide to join a community book club." We can't wait to hear all about it.

References

Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers. (n.d.). Lincs.ed.gov. https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/html/mcshane/chapter2.html

Banas J.R., Valley J.A., Chaudhri A, & Gershon S. The Psychosocial Benefits of Biblioguidance Book Clubs. J Sch Health. 2024. https://neiudc.neiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=hpera-pub

Learning Point Associates. (2004). *A Closer Look at the Five Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction: A Review of Scientifically Based Reading Research for Teachers*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED512569.pdf

Talwar, A. (2024). The Science of Reading and Where It Stands in Adult Education. *Adult Literacy Education: The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*, *6*(3), 43–50. https://doi.org/10.35847/atalwar.6.3.43

http://doi.org/10.35847/VHawes.8.3.61

Technology and Adult Learning

Mentimeter for Engagement and Assessment

Vi Hawes, VH Ed Tech Consulting, LLC.

Abstract

Mentimeter is a browser-based interactive presentation platform that turns passive slides into live polls, word clouds, quizzes, and open-ended prompts, all accessible from any device a learner already owns. This column examines Mentimeter through the lens of adult learning: how anonymous participation lowers affective barriers for learners returning to education after a long absence, how real-time response data supports responsive teaching, and how the platform's brevity fits the fragmented schedules adults bring to class. It offers concrete classroom applications across ESOL, ABE, IET, and professional development contexts and closes with an honest accounting of the platform's infrastructure, training, workload, and cost constraints. Where research on Mentimeter itself exists (Mayhew et al., 2020; Pichardo et al., 2021), this column draws on it directly rather than inferring the platform's value from general principle.

Introduction

Marisol has been in the same workplace English class for six weeks. She has never once raised her hand.

It is not that she has nothing to say. It is that the calculation runs the same way every time: to answer is to risk being the person who answered wrong, in front of eighteen adults she will see next Tuesday again, in a language she is still building. She was a licensed pharmacist in her first country. She is not willing to be the one who does not know. So, she watches the same two classmates volunteer, and she keeps her hand in her lap, and the class moves on without her.

Then, one Tuesday, the instructor asks the class to take out their phones. The question on the screen is one Marisol has an answer to: *How confident do you feel writing an email to your supervisor?* She taps "1–not confident." No name is attachedto it. No one turns to look.

What appears on the screen is not her answer. It is everyone's. Eleven of eighteen have tapped the same thing she did.

For six weeks, Marisol had been carrying something she believed was hers alone. In four seconds, she learned it was not, and so did the ten other people carrying it. For the first time, the instructor put away the lesson she had planned and taught email openings instead.

That is the gap this column is about: the distance between what adult learners know and what a classroom lets them say. Adult education has always been full of learners who are competent, deliberate, and silent, and who are silent precisely because they are competent and deliberate, because the cost of being visibly wrong is one that adults have learned to calculate carefully. What follows is an examination of Mentimeter, a tool that can shorten that distance, and an honest accounting of where it falls short.

What is Mentimeter?

Mentimeter is a web-based interactive presentation platform built on a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) model. Learners join a session from a phone, tablet, or laptop by entering a code at menti.com; no app installation, account creation, or specialized hardware is required. The presenter's screen updates in real time as responses arrive.

Unlike clicker systems or card-based response tools, which are typically limited to multiple-choice input, Mentimeter supports a range of response types (open text, ranking, scales, image selection, word clouds) that

Correspondence: vhedtechconsulting@gmail.com

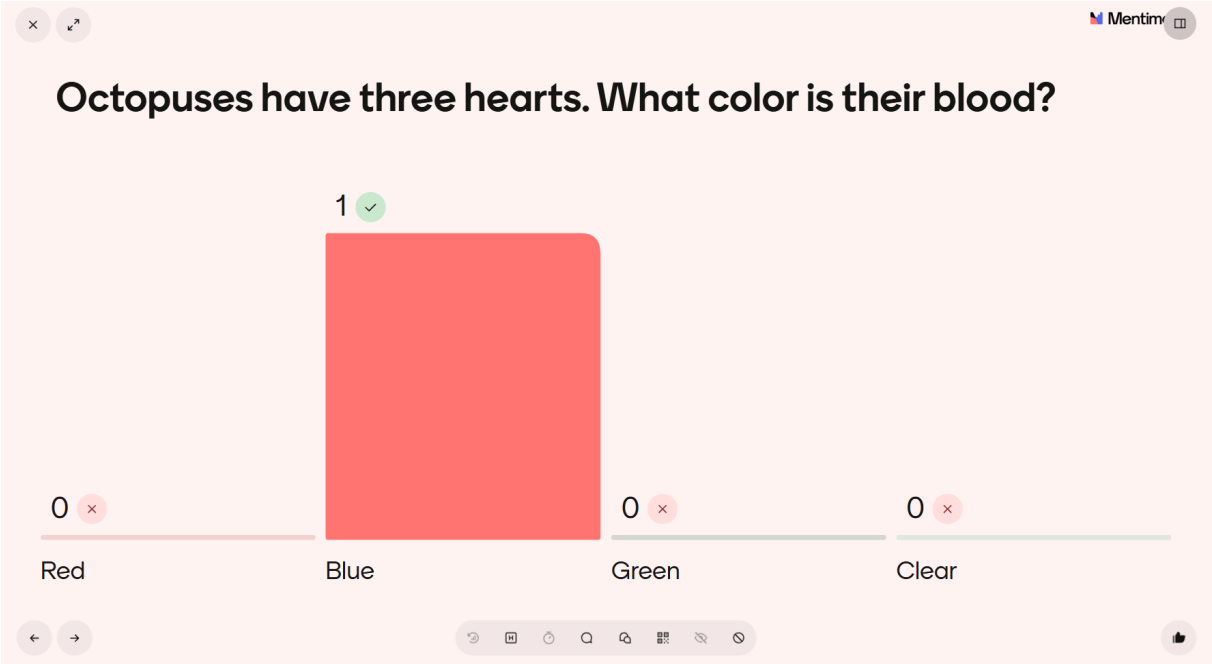
allow learners to generate content rather than simply select from it. The platform has been reviewed in the educational technology literature since its early adoption in higher education, where it was noted for its low barrier to entry and its wider range of question formats relative to earlier student response systems (Rudolph, 2018). For adult educators, the practical value is straightforward: the instructor can see, in seconds, what an entire room is thinking, including the learners who would never volunteer that information out loud.

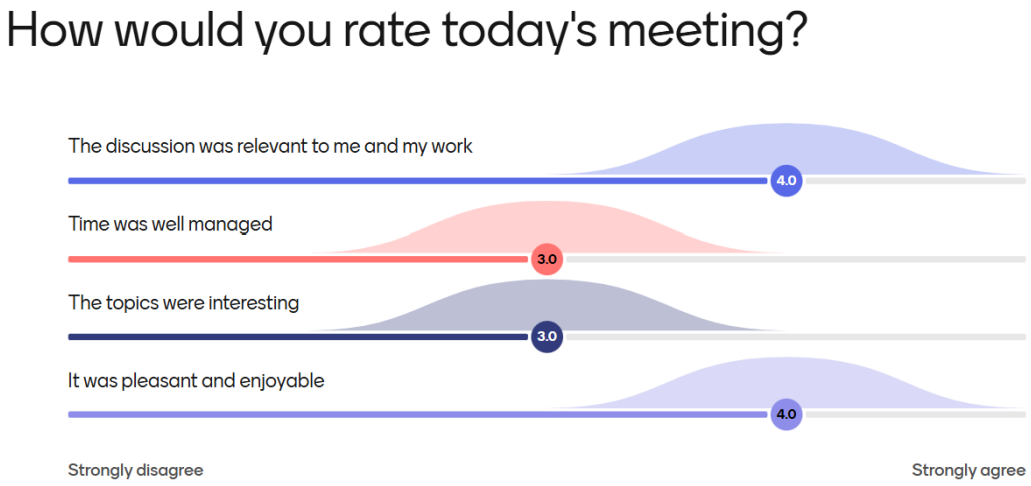
Features

Mentimeter offers a diverse suite of question formats, administrative tools, and presentation features to accommodate various learning objectives. The platform offers the following core features:

- **Live Polls and Interactive Quizzes:** Multiple-choice, scale, and quiz slides display aggregate results instantly (Figure 1), giving instructors immediate evidence of comprehension and a basis for adjusting instruction mid-lesson.

FIGURE 1: Multiple-Choice and Scale Polling





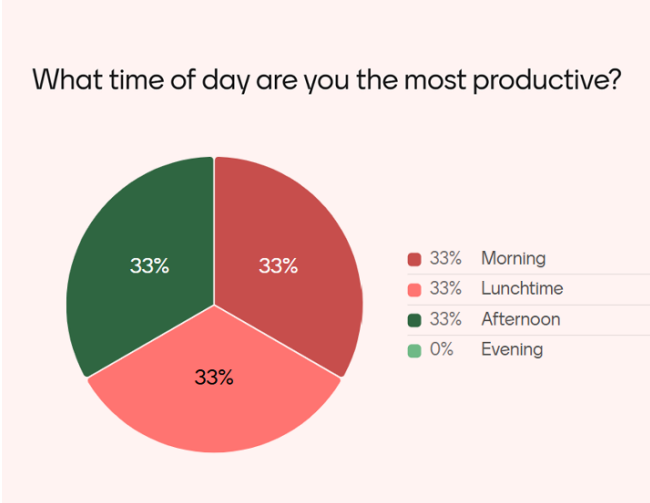
- **Word Clouds and Open-Ended Responses:** Learners submit words or short phrases that populate a shared visual (Figure 2), with frequently submitted terms rendered larger. This surfaces the group's collective thinking rather than a single learner's answer.

FIGURE 2: Word Cloud Example



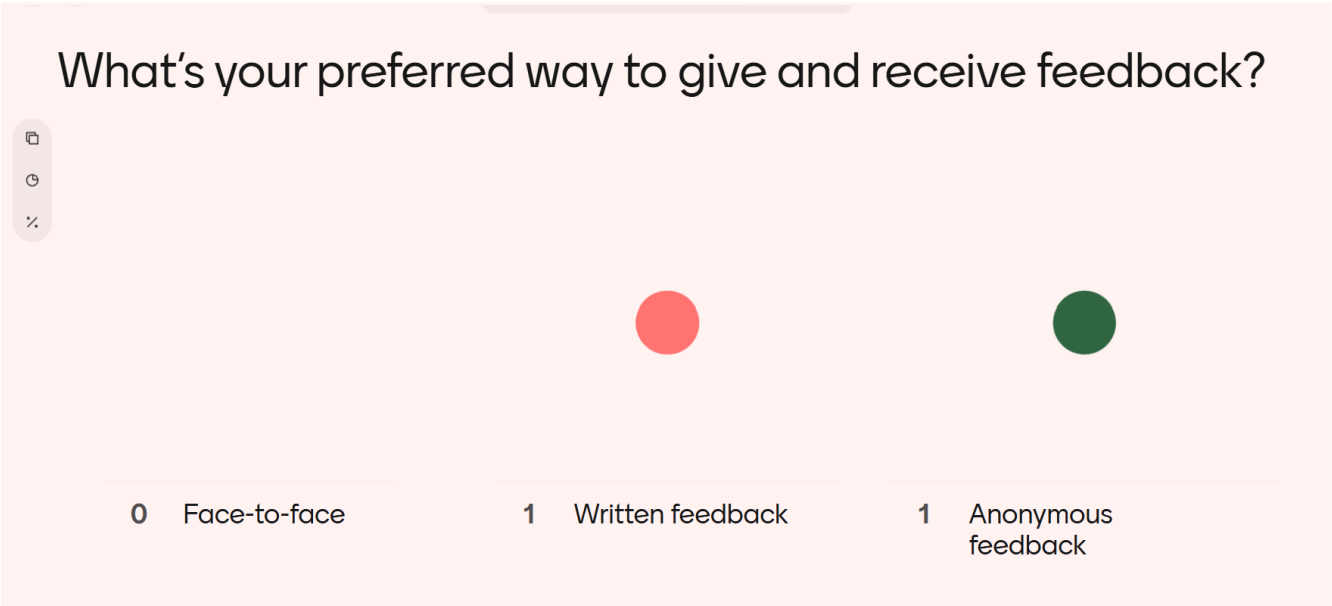
- **Real-Time Feedback and Data Visualization:** Responses aggregate as they arrive (Figure 3), letting learners see how their thinking compares to the group's and letting instructors see where the group diverges from the intended understanding.

FIGURE 3: Data Visualization



- **Anonymous Participation:** Responses are not attributed to individual learners by default (Figure 4). This is Mentimeter's most consequential feature for adult education and the one this column returns to. When students in one large study were asked to rank why Mentimeter mattered, their two highest-ranked reasons were that it allowed shy participants to take part and that it allowed everyone to take part (Pichardo et al., 2021), ahead of engagement, attention, and enjoyment.

FIGURE 4: Anonymous Responses



- **Multi-Modal Delivery Support:** Sessions function across in-person, synchronous online, hybrid, and asynchronous formats, which matters for programs running cohorts across several modalities at once.
- **Exportable Results:** Session data can be downloaded for post-session analysis on paid plans, supporting program-level evaluation and in-the-moment instruction.

Why Mentimeter Fits Adult Learners

Adult educators face constraints that differ from those in K-12 or traditional undergraduate settings. Their learners are balancing work, caregiving, and often precarious schedules. Engagement is not a nice-to-have; it is a condition of persistence.

Engagement is Tied to Persistence, Not Just Enjoyment.

Student engagement increases satisfaction, enhances motivation, reduces feelings of isolation, and improves performance in online courses (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Isolation and infrastructure access are recurring concerns for adult learners in online and distance programs, alongside a strong preference for time efficiency and device flexibility (Mansoor et al., 2024). Mentimeter addresses these by creating interactive moments without requiring specialized hardware, extended setup, or a separate login.

Assessment for Learning, Not Assessment of Learning

Adult educators should draw on a wide range of pre- and post-assessment tools matched to learners' individual differences, with emphasis on "assessment for learning" and learning-oriented assessment that supports lifelong learning rather than assessment that simply ranks (Bin Mubayrik, 2020). Reflection and immediate feedback are central to this approach. Mentimeter operationalizes this: the instructor sees the misconception before the class period ends.

Anonymity Supports Autonomy

Strategies that strengthen engagement and learner autonomy in blended adult learning emphasize self-directed participation and flexible environments that accommodate learners juggling academic, professional, and personal demands (Galani, 2025). Anonymous response is the mechanism.

This is not merely plausible; it is the finding that comes through most consistently in the research on Mentimeter specifically. In a mixed-methods study of 400 students and 12 lecturers across several Spanish institutions, both groups independently ranked the participation of learners who do not normally speak as the single most valuable feature of the platform (Pichardo et al., 2021). Students described the effect in terms that will be familiar to any adult educator: anonymity removed the pressure of being wrong in front of the group and made it possible to raise a question that would otherwise expose a gap in understanding. Instructors reported the corollary. When learners stopped fearing the wrong answer, the instructor could finally see what learners actually knew.

That mechanism is precisely what adult education needs. A learner who is embarrassed to admit they do not understand percentages will tell a poll what they will not tell a room, and that willingness is what makes the data usable.

Real-Time Feedback Changes the Instruction

In the same study, immediate feedback was the feature instructors valued most for their own practice: it allowed them to monitor learners' progress and adjust content and pace within the session rather than after it (Pichardo et al., 2021). One instructor's summary is worth the whole finding: in a minute, you can have the opinion of sixty people. For adult educators working in compressed timeframes with learners who cannot easily attend a make-up session, the ability to reroute a lesson while it is still happening is not a convenience. It is the difference between a wasted hour and a useful one.

Real-Life Applications of Mentimeter

Educators can integrate Mentimeter into diverse instructional contexts. The following practical examples demonstrate how teachers can embed the platform into specific learning activities across adult education settings.

Interactive Knowledge Checks

- **Pre-Class Poll to Activate Prior Knowledge:** An adult educator teaching financial literacy opens with a multiple-choice poll: "Before saving

money, which should you do first?" (a) Open a savings account, (b) Create a budget, (c) Invest in stocks, (d) Pay down debt." The results appear instantly. Sixty percent select "Invest in stocks." The instructor pauses the planned lecture and spends five minutes on why budgeting comes first. Without the poll, that misconception goes undetected until the unit test.

- **Mid-Lesson Comprehension Check:** A workplace compliance trainer delivering harassment prevention training runs a poll every ten to fifteen minutes: "According to the company policy we just reviewed, what should you do if you witness inappropriate conduct?" The word cloud feature is used to have participants type specific examples, ensuring the group can articulate the policy in their own words before moving forward.

Formative Assessment with Immediate Feedback

- **Character Analysis in Literature:** A reading and writing instructor asks learners to type adjectives describing a novel's protagonist. As words arrive ("brave," "thoughtful," "impulsive"), the cloud grows on the screen, with the most common terms largest. The instructor then works backward: "We chose 'brave' and 'determined' most often. Let's find the passage where those showed up." Formative assessment becomes collective and visible rather than individual and evaluative.
- **Ranking for Priority-Setting:** A professional development facilitator teaching microlearning design asks educators to rank four elements from most to least important when building a five-minute module: clear learning objective, engaging visuals, summary and reflection, interactive check-in. The spread in responses becomes the discussion.

Anonymous Participation to Lower Barriers

- **Workplace Literacy Assessment:** An ESOL instructor teaching workplace English uses an anonymous scale poll: "How confident are you in writing a professional email? (1) Not confident, (2) Somewhat confident, (3) Very confident." Results inform whether the group needs more modeling, practice, or can move to independent writing tasks.
- **Sensitive Topics in Wellness Training:** A workplace mental health trainer asks: "Have you ever struggled to balance work and personal responsibilities?" and "Do you know how to access your school's mental health resources?" Anonymity produces honest answers that a show of hands would not. The resulting data ("73% report work-life balance challenges") becomes the basis for normalizing the struggle and introducing resources.

Open-Ended Responses and Brainstorming

- **Learner-Driven Needs Assessment:** A math instructor designing a new unit asks, "What do you want to focus on this session?" Learners type "fractions," "percentages," "overcoming math anxiety." The curriculum follows the learners rather than the instructor's assumptions about them.
- **Vocabulary Building in Language Learning:** An ESOL instructor teaching health vocabulary prompts, "Type one health challenge you've faced this week." Learners submit responses such as "reading prescriptions," "talk to doctor," and "not losing weight." The word cloud becomes the vocabulary focus for that day's lesson, grounding instruction in learners' authentic needs.

Exit Tickets

- **Reflection and Retention:** An ABE reading and writing instructor closes each class with, "What is one thing you are taking away today?" The responses give the instructor a read on what actually landed across the group and surface misconceptions worth revisiting at the next session's opening.
- **Plenary Assessment:** A business IET instructor closes a 2-hour class session by asking: "In three words or fewer, describe the main idea of a growth mindset." The word cloud ("keep learning," "open-minded," "challenge") confirms that the message landed or reveals that it did not.

How to Get Started

1. Create a free account at mentimeter.com
2. Build a presentation and add a question slide. Start with a single multiple-choice or word cloud slide; resist the urge to gamify everything at once.

3. Click "Present." Learners go to menti.com and enter the six-digit code on your screen.
4. Observe the responses as they populate, and then, importantly, take action based on them. A poll that does not influence what happens next is merely decoration.

Accessibility and Privacy Considerations

Mentimeter's voting interface is keyboard-navigable, but presenters carry real responsibility, and the platform has documented gaps. In the Pichardo et al. (2021) study, visually impaired students could not read the questions on their devices or view live results, and instructors had to send questions in advance and narrate the onscreen results aloud. The researchers also noted that the platform did not permit questions to be voiced, fonts to be changed, or text size to be adjusted, limitations they identified as constraining its inclusive potential.

Verify the current state of these features before adopting Mentimeter program-wide; the platform has changed since 2021. Keep text large and high-contrast, read every poll question aloud rather than assuming learners can see the projected screen, and offer a paper or verbal alternative for any learner without a working device or sufficient data. For ESOL learners at NRS levels 1-3, project the question in simplified language alongside the original and allow extra response time for open-ended prompts, which are far more demanding than multiple-choice for emergent writers.

On privacy: Mentimeter is a Swedish company operating under GDPR, and anonymous responses are not tied to learner identity. Even so, programs should avoid prompts that could surface personally identifying or protected information (immigration status, health conditions, disability), since aggregate visibility does not equal confidentiality in a small class where the group can often infer who wrote what. Anonymity is a design feature, not a guarantee.

Challenges of Using Mentimeter

Despite its potential, implementing Mentimeter presents several practical and andragogical obstacles that educators must anticipate and address.

- **Technical and Infrastructure Barriers:** Mentimeter requires a stable internet connection. Network disruption can derail a lesson, and this falls hardest on learners in rural areas, on limited data plans, or in workplaces with restrictive networks. *Solution:* Conduct a technical audit before program-wide adoption to establish bandwidth and device coverage across the learner population. Keep a low-tech fallback ready for every Mentimeter activity (index cards, a show of hands, a whiteboard tally). Designate a technical point person who can troubleshoot in the moment rather than leaving the instructor to debug alone in front of a class.
- **Insufficient Training in Question Design:** The tool is easy, but the pedagogy is not. Writing a poll question that surfaces a genuine misconception, rather than one that simply confirms learners were listening, is a skill. Without support, questions tend to be more superficial. *Solution:* The evidence points to a step most instructors skip. Learners should be told explicitly why Mentimeter is being used, what it is meant to accomplish, and what they stand to gain; the tool does not improve learning on its own, absent that pedagogical framework (Mayhew et al., 2020). Beyond that, professional development must address essential questions, not just button-clicking. Bloom's Taxonomy is a useful scaffold for moving beyond recall, and educators need practice interpreting and acting on response data. A technology-focused professional learning community, where instructors share Mentis that worked and Mentis that flopped, does more than a one-off training session.
- **Time and Workload:** Building interactive slides from scratch is time-consuming. Instructors report that transferring full course content into Mentimeter demands an unsustainable level of effort, and several in one study abandoned the attempt (Pichardo et al., 2021). Staff in a separate evaluation likewise identified preparation time as a principal cost of adoption (Mayhew et al., 2020). *Solution:* Do not try to rebuild your course in Mentimeter. Use it in short bursts, a poll at the opening and a word cloud at the close, alongside your existing slides. Programs should supply ready-to-use templates aligned to common objectives so instructors can adapt rather

than build, and should allocate preparation time within scheduled work hours instead of treating it as an unpaid add-on.

- **Cost:** Cost is the most frequently cited barrier to institutional adoption, and it has been since the earliest reviews of the platform (Rudolph, 2018; Pichardo et al., 2021). The free plan caps you at 50 participants per month, with the counter resetting on your signup anniversary date, not the first of the month. For a single instructor teaching one class of twenty, this is workable. For a program adopting Mentimeter across multiple instructors and sections, it is not. Paid plans (Basic and Pro) remove the participant cap and add slide import, results export, and workspace collaboration. Mentimeter restructured its plans in September 2025, so verify current features and pricing at mentimeter.com/plans before budgeting.

Conclusion

Mentimeter is not a solution to disengagement; it is an instrument for detecting it. The platform's contribution to adult education lies not in the word cloud or the live bar chat, but in the anonymity beneath them, which offers learners a way to disclose what they do not yet understand without incurring a social cost. This is the feature students and instructors alike ranked highest when asked what Mentimeter was actually for (Pichardo et al., 2021).

Two caveats warrant acknowledgement. The research based on Mentimeter is concentrated in higher education rather than adult basic education, and its application to ABE, ESOL, and ASE populations remains an extension of the existing evidence rather than a direct finding of it. Further, the available studies are largely perception studies: they establish that learners report greater engagement and that instructors report better insight into learner understanding, not that measurable outcomes improve. Whether these effects persist once the novelty of the tool subsides is an open question the researchers themselves raise (Pichardo et al., 2021).

Within those limits, the case for adoption is a practical one. Data from a poll is useful only insofar as it changes instruction. A poll that does not alter the next ten minutes of a lesson is a novelty; a poll that reveals eleven of eighteen learners cannot draft a workplace email and redirects the session accordingly is assessment for learning in its most immediate form. The underlying principle is well established (Bin Mubayrik, 2020); Mentimeter shortens the distance between principle and practice. Deployed with that intention, it serves what adult learners bring to the classroom: their autonomy, their accumulated experience, and their claim to be understood before they are taught.

References

Bin Mubayrik, H. F. (2020). New trends in formative-summative evaluations for adult education. *SAGE Open, 10*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020941006

Galani, M.-E. (2025). Fostering engagement and autonomy in blended foreign language learning for adult learners in higher education. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Innovation in Teaching and Education, 2*(1), 38–46. https://doi.org/10.33422/iteconference.v2i1.1360

Mansoor, M., Dahalan, N. A., Abdul Azis, M. A., Abdul Rahim, R., & Temyati, Z. (2024). Understanding adult learners' motivation and preferences in online and distance programs in the post COVID-19 era: A case study of the Institute of Continuing Education & Professional Studies. *International Journal on E-Learning and Higher Education, 19*(2), 357–375. https://doi.org/10.24191/ijelhe.v19n2.19222

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning, 22*(1), 205–222. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092

Mayhew , E., Davies , M., Millmore , A., Thompson , L., & Pena Bizama , A. (2020). The impact of audience response platform Mentimeter on the student and staff learning experience. *Research in Learning Technology*, *28*. https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v28.2397

Pichardo, J. I., López-Medina, E. F., Mancha-Cáceres, O., González-Enríquez, I., Hernández-Melián, A., Blázquez-Rodríguez, M., Jiménez, V., Logares, M., Carabantes-Alarcon, D., Ramos-Toro, M., Isorna, E., Cornejo-Valle, M., & Borrás-Gené, O. (2021). Students and teachers using Mentimeter: Technological innovation to face the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic in higher education. *Education Sciences, 11*(11), Article 667. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11110667

Rudolph, J. (2018). A brief review of Mentimeter: A student response system. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching, 1*(1), 35–37. https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2018.1.1.5