Research Briefs and Case Studies · Tutor-Facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition in Hard-to-Serve Populations: A Research Project

2015

Learners: Impact

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Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief:
What Research Tells Us about Learners

Overview

These findings are from an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project that interviewed more than 100 participants within a multi-state Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) project. The BTOP project included six lead partners who developed local networks of community organizations to provide adults with an opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet.

While these networks created a variety of implementation strategies and ways to serve learners' needs, they shared these key features:
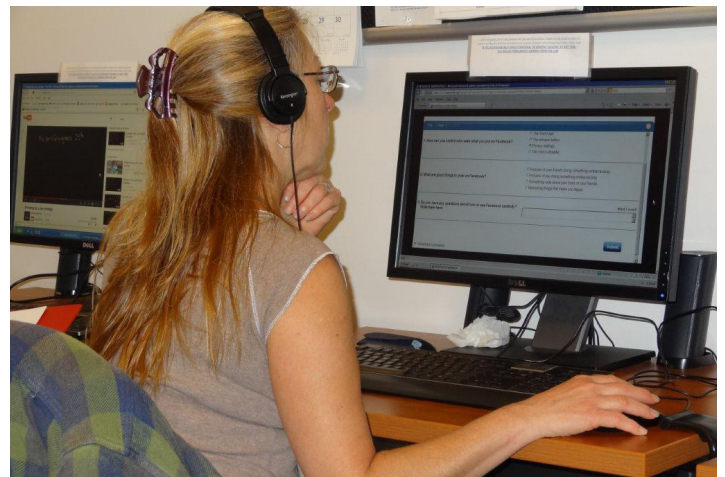
- *curriculum on the Learner Web, an online platform designed specifically for adult learners, which included digital literacy material in English and Spanish*
- *in-person tutor support*
- *the opportunity to work at their own pace and identify their own goals*

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Key Discoveries

One of the most compelling features of a digital literacy program for adults is the major impact it can have on learners' lives. Building digital literacy helps sustain critical social connections and opens learners up to an entire new universe of information, interaction, and entertainment. Learners were able to learn how to digitally interact to sustain relationships. In addition, some were able to create new economic opportunities for themselves by broadening their awareness of the digital world. Digital literacy training has the potential to transform and enrich learners' lives.

- Learners described learning to use computers as being like discovering a new universe. Having digital skills expanded their sense of the world.

- Gaining digital literacy skills helped learners maintain contact with friends and family when life circumstances made face-to-face contact difficult.

- The ability to use digital tools made it possible for some learners to explore the world of online entrepreneurship.

- Older individuals, who otherwise might have been "aged out" of the workforce, were able to sustain businesses and remain vital members of the business community.

- Parents were able to demonstrate to their children that they were still able to learn and succeed. Knowledge of the digital world served as a bridge between generations.

- For some learners, success in learning digital literacy skills was their first positive learning experience. Some began thinking about pursuing additional educational opportunities.

- Learners who were job seekers were able to see themselves as viable members of a workforce that was different from the one they had entered years earlier.

On the Ground

"Learning empowers individuals with knowledge and skills to help them fulfill goals for a better quality of life. I've always felt that digital literacy and broadband education are definitely skills that will help them lead better lives and have a better quality of life. The biggest reward is when the students complete at least fifteen hours of training and they say 'I learned it and I want more.'" ~ Program Administrator

Voices from the Field

"It's like opening a door. Imagine living in an apartment with no windows, and then somebody comes and puts windows in. It's about that different. You know? This has become much more important since my husband's health. Even if I'm at home, I can look out. I don't like to be enclosed, I like to look out. I enjoy sociability, and it gives me sociability."
~ Learner

"We had a learner who was absolutely determined that her boy should go to A&M. And she came to me and we did a bunch of the Learner Web Internet research kinds of things. And that boy did end up going to A&M, but she looked at a ton of other college sites. It just was like—it just opened the world for her and then it became a choice as to where that boy applied to school."
~ Tutor

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What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

It's our mission to empower individuals with knowledge and skills to help them fulfill goals for a better quality of life. I've always felt that digital literacy and broadband education is definitely one of those skills that will help them lead better lives and to have a better quality of life. So (doing this work) is serving the community. They want to learn skills that they don't have, and it's amazing in looking back to what, a little over a year and a half, the 1,750 participants that came through the doors knowing that none of them had any of those skills (before participating in this program). They don't have those skills and they want to better themselves.

To me, any gain in knowledge is monumental. It's not just going through the motions and acquiring the knowledge that they didn't have before, but it's actually getting that certificate of completion that attests to their skills. ~ Program Director

Acknowledgements & Further Information

These research efforts were informed and supported by a National Advisory Committee and a Research Applications Committee made up of professionals who support adult learners.

More information about the project, research findings, publications, and project data can be found in PDX Scholar at:
http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/digital_literacy_acquisition/

Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief: What Research Tells Us about...

Language Learners
- Tutors' Perspectives
- The Role of Online Materials
- The Learner/Tutor Relationship
- Learners' Perspectives

Program Design
- Tutor-facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition
- The Learner Path
- Volunteering in a Digital Literacy Program
- Learning Digital Skills in a Time-limited Program
- Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

Tutors
- Personal Qualities of Tutors
- Tutoring Strategies and Organizing Learning
- The Tutor/Learner Relationship

Learners
- Development of Self-confidence
- Measuring Success
- Impact
- Learners Who Become Tutors
- Self-paced Learning

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