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

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Learners: Self-Paced Learning

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Self-paced Learning

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

Digital literacy learning was implemented as a self-paced process, rather than moving learners through activities at the same pace-- a common practice in classroom or cohort models. Even within labs designed as classes or cohorts, learners self-selected their goals and they moved through the learning materials on their own with the support of a tutor. The self-paced approach supported learners' success in a number of ways:

- For some adults with lower digital literacy skills, a traditional cohort learning model could be daunting as they may suffer embarrassment from learning at a slower pace than others. A self-paced learning model provided a useful alternative learning environment where reduced levels of embarrassment or anxiety allowed learners to be comfortable enough to learn new content.

- Providing the individual learner flexibility in how they engaged with material was critical. Learners capitalized on the flexibility to spend time with the content as they needed. For low skilled and ESL learners, self-paced learning allowed for more time processing the content and allowed as much review as desired. Variations in learners' typing and mousing skills also impacted their self-pacing.

- Goal-oriented learning offered individuals the ability to engage with the materials that interested them, which can lead to greater motivation and success.

- Self-paced learning accommodated the learner's life context. The self-paced model provided those who might need more flexibility due to structural barriers, such as transportation and child care, to step in and out of learning activities as they needed.

Voices from the Field

"[You are] just gonna move on when you think you are ready. Well that's how I move on, I don't know how the other people decide. I don't move on until I understand what I'm doin'. And that's what I think was the best part about it."
~ Learner

"It's not a rush and they're not saying, 'You need to be out the class in a week or two, 'cause that's all the time we're givin' ya.' And they're not saying 'You have from Monday to Friday, you gotta be here over these days to hurry and finish with the program.' ... You can miss a day if you gotta go to work or you got something to do, and when you come back nobody sayin' 'Where you been? You missed this, you need to be moving forward.' And that's good to me."
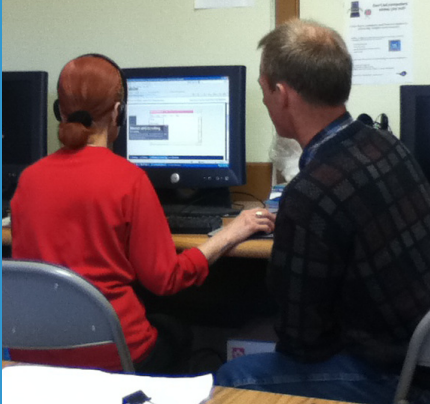~ Learner

Self-paced Learning

On the Ground

Tutors and lab coordinators developed ways of organizing the lab to support the self-paced model. For example, in some labs, the learners were encouraged to keep notebooks of basic information such as URLs and usernames so they could easily get started on their own. This combination of a self-paced system and lab supports helped move the learners toward being independent learners.

Some learners, particularly older learners who are more familiar with a classroom model, might be more comfortable with directives from the tutor to keep them on track when first starting out.

Key Discoveries

- Self-paced learning reduced fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety were very real barriers that learners faced when learning to use a computer. Trying to keep pace with others, or to work at the teacher's set pace in a classroom model, can add to, rather than lessen, their already existing anxiety and feelings of falling behind. Some learners needed a longer amount of time to build skills and accumulate more positive experiences using a computer before they gained the confidence to proceed through the learning plans. Learners repeatedly reported that the self-paced aspect of the learning model reduced the pressure on them and increased their comfort.

- Self-paced learning built engagement through enjoyment. Learners frequently spent time reviewing content and practicing their skills with online applications and games, and many stated that these features helped them enjoy the learning process. Participants found the multimedia content engaging and supportive of their learning path, especially those with lower literacy skills.

Self-paced Learning

What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

We can learn a lot here about why our computer "classes" are never as popular as our open labs or one-on-one sessions. A self-paced learning model clearly works better because it adapts better to individual needs. For many libraries, this information is going to suggest a completely different approach to digital literacy work.

~ Library Administrator
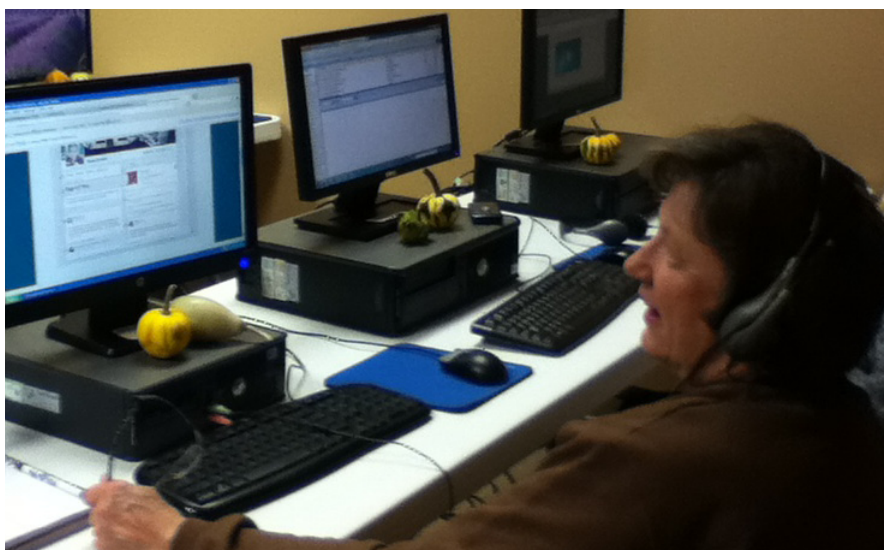
Acknowledgements & Further Information

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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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