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Tutor-Facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition in
Hard-to-Serve Populations: A Research Project

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Job Seeking Learners: Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Study

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Program 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 for learners to work at their own pace and identify their own goals*

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. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms for participant protection in accordance with research protocols.

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/

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Introduction and Significance

The field of adult education, from the perspectives of practice, policy, and research, recognizes that digital literacy skills are fundamental to participation in society. There remains, however, significant challenges in understanding the needs of job seekers. More information is needed about which organizations are situated to provide the needed services.

The **Workforce Investment and Opportunities Act (WIOA)** identifies the need for digital literacy training in both vocational and adult basic education settings. As a result, policy makers and program administrators are now tasked with the job of providing digital literacy training to a wide range of individuals.

In this case study we investigate how digital literacy is acquired in a context that is focused on preparing individuals for employment. Because of the complexity of program funding and design, adult learners seeking employment may have attended workforce centers or adult basic education programs to prepare them for getting a job. Our examination of the data led us to fine tune our analysis on the job seeking learners themselves rather than on where their digital literacy learning took place. We suggest that viewing the issue through the lens of learners' experiences provides more meaningful insights into what digital literacy acquisition means for these adult learners.

We have found that the needs of job seeking learners may differ from those of adult learners whose primary motivation is to learn digital literacy skills. Individuals who are unemployed, especially after having worked for many years, are in the midst of a turbulent period in their lives and are driven by the need to find employment. Unemployment strikes at the heart of an individual's sense of security, self-worth, and even identity (Belle & Bullock, n.d.). Our research indicates that job seeking learners who are required to participate in a digital literacy acquisition program in order to receive economic assistance, may be hesitant, resentful, or even hostile to the imposed requirement of digital literacy training. Thus, it is important to understand the experiences of these learners as they move through the digital literacy acquisition process.



Historically, digital literacy has been considered a vocational skill because of its association with tasks such as word processing, data entry, spreadsheet development and use, and so on. However, the ubiquity of digital technology and the emergence of the Internet as a powerful information gathering, communication and problem solving environment has increased the importance of these skills for individuals and employers. As job seekers quickly come to understand, digital skills are required to look and apply for jobs, even if those jobs do not require digital skills on a daily basis. Additionally, the global economy has demanded a different way of doing business in order to remain both productive and competitive. Most striking is the shift away from vertical, top-down organizational structures where most decisions were made at the highest levels and then communicated to lower levels, to those that are organized more horizontally (Reich, 1992). Instead of decisions emanating from the top of an organization, teams within lower levels are empowered to identify and solve important problems that generate new knowledge and lead to better ways of producing goods or providing services. Today's workplaces seek to use the intellectual capital of all employees at all levels to increase effective decision making and increase productivity. As a result, the ability to skillfully navigate the digital world becomes even more significant.

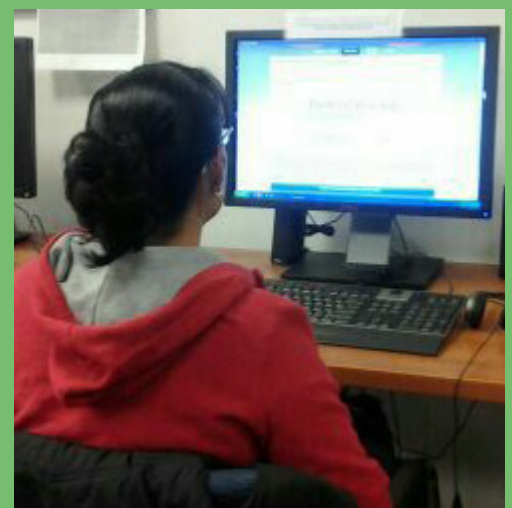


As scholars in the field of economics and education have pointed out, today's information-based economy requires nimble workers who can work in teams, move across different cultural contexts, and learn and make decisions quickly without depending on a hierarchy. In a white paper written for the MacArthur Foundation, Henry Jenkins and colleagues argued that these skills are often learned through engagement with the digital world. Thus, those individuals who have not developed the most basic skills for using digital technology are most at risk for being vulnerable to economic and social exclusion.

Based on our analyses, we argue that the process of digital literacy acquisition, while linking directly to job skills, goes beyond the basic ability to operate a computer and navigate a website. Instead, we have found that many programs designed to assist job seekers are uniquely situated to introduce individuals, who might not otherwise have an interest in digital technology, to the opportunities made possible through digital literacy. These include the ability to engage in participatory democracy, seek further education, engage in health care, find and use online information, find and keep a job, and engage with family, friends and the community.

Although many job seeking learners may have been hesitant or resistant to participating in a digital literacy acquisition program because of their real and immediate need to obtain employment and secure income, we found that their work with tutors and the structured digital materials offered on Learner Web, served to remove some of the barriers to digital literacy.

As they moved through the program, successful learners became aware of the relevance of digital literacy in their lives, were able to overcome the fear of technology they may have had, and experienced a growing sense of self-confidence in technology use that often spilled over into their everyday lives.



Lab Descriptions



As previously mentioned, the focus of this case study is the experience of digital literacy acquisition among adult job seekers. As such, this case is bounded by the life circumstances of learners - namely the need to learn digital literacy skills in order to obtain employment - as opposed to the setting within which their acquisition process occurred. In fact, within this research adult learners seeking employment attended labs in a number of different settings such as workforce centers or adult basic education programs.

While some of these settings were government operated centers for the unemployed, others were schools and nonprofit organizations. In this section we provide an overview, as well as descriptions of some examples of labs where job seeking learners went to acquire digital literacy skills.

Several of these programs came into existence due to the result of a novel partnership between the state workforce agency and a literacy organization. The literacy organization placed volunteer tutors and a coordinator in the workforce location, and the workforce center provided a space for the basic digital literacy-training program and directed learners to it. This was the first time that these organizations had partnered in this way and also the first time that volunteer tutors worked in the workforce center.

One lab was part of an adult education program run by a school district cooperative. Adult learners were there for 3-week long job readiness training and job search support alongside learners who were studying to pass high school equivalency tests. Learner Web, a web-based learning software designed for adults with digital literacy acquisition curriculum, was incorporated into the job readiness training.

Another lab was embedded within an urban branch of a large national employer/workforce training organization. This lab was opened to the public and recruited widely in the community. In addition, all people who enrolled in the job-training program were required to first do at least one session of digital literacy training.

One lab had restricted Internet access, making it difficult for learners to do anything on the web that was not job related. The learners in this lab were focused more on job acquisition than on a general building of digital literacy skills. This lab also had a large number of Spanish speaking learners and bilingual tutors were available.



The range of settings for the labs attended by job seekers include dedicated workforce centers and adult education program facilities. The majority of the labs were in urban settings, though at least one was located in a rural area. These labs were not always designed solely to meet the needs of job seekers but rather adults interested in acquiring digital literacy skills for a variety of reasons. All of the labs included in this study offered this digital literacy training for more than two years and had a lab coordinator who had been part of the program for nearly the entire period of operation. The number of learners participating at each lab ranged from about 150 to nearly 1,000 over the project period. Most labs served around 300-500 learners during that period, which lasted from 24-30 months.

Each of these labs was unique in terms of the dynamic that developed between learners and tutors. In some labs with a higher number of tutors and lower number of learners there was greater opportunity for learners to work one-on-one with a tutor. This does not mean, however, that labs with fewer tutors did not provide adequate tutoring. Instead, these labs would be more apt to use what we have come to call the “busy bee” model where one or more tutors circulate around the lab to respond quickly to a variety learner needs. We stress that each lab was unique and should not be treated in a uniform way.



A variety of tutoring models were employed across these labs. For examples, there was a “many to one,” or “busy bee” model where many learners in a lab were supported by only one or two tutors. There was also a “one-to-one” approach, where tutors worked individually with learners. In most cases, a learner often worked with the same tutor.

In one case, the lab used a triad model in which one tutor would work consistently with two learners, who often sat on either side of the the tutor. Some of the labs were set up to maintain a sense of privacy in which everyone engaged in their own individual work, while others were more collaborative in nature.

The Learning Model

The digital literacy acquisition learning model used by these adult learners offered self-paced, tutor-facilitated instruction, built around an online learning support program.

The online program, Learner Web, was designed for adult learners and offered goal-directed and learner-driven content with links to other online and offline resources and systems as well as e-portfolios. The content is customizable and shareable across different programs. Materials and reports can be accessed using different roles such as for tutors and program administrators.



Some programs offered the digital literacy training as part of classes organized around other topics. Other programs used one-to-one tutoring in drop-in, open access labs. In all cases, learners were able to move at their own pace within the structure of the program. We found the flexibility of the self-paced learning model allowed learners to spend the time they had productively engaged in the content they decided was important to them. The Learner Web was also designed to accommodate the complexity of learners' lives by keeping track of their learning for them. This allowed learners to re-enter the system at the point where they left off without needing to repeat previously learned content. They could also review what they had learned as much as they needed before deciding to move on to new content.

The Learner Web offered learners the option of content in English or Spanish. Labs often had bilingual (English/Spanish) tutors available. In terms of the tutors' capability to meet individual learner needs as they arose, tutors were able to check-in, guide, and encourage learners as they worked. They were available to answer learner questions in an individualized and flexible way, providing examples as needed. In this model learners got support when they needed it and would work independently otherwise.



Within the online platform, digital literacy content is organized into modules called learning plans. Learning plans are grouped into three main content areas. These are (a) Computer and Internet skills, which teaches basics such as mousing and keyboarding, as well as finding information online, using email, Internet security and safety, and using popular social network platforms; (b) Broadband Consumer Education, which helps learners become savvy consumers of computer hardware and broadband subscription services; and (c) Introduction to Career Paths, which orients learners to basic career path concepts and connects them with local career path programs. These learning materials were included in part to help learners see what new job possibilities might exist for them once gaining computer and digital literacy skills.

Learner Experience: How Job Seekers Move Through the Learner Path

This case study examines the digital literacy acquisition process as it was experienced by job seekers. In many respects, as these adult learners moved through their acquisition process, their experiences were similar to those acquiring digital literacy skills for purposes other than to obtain employment. For instance, analyses from the larger study of which this case study is one part, revealed a learner path common to adult learners across settings.

This learner path involves experiencing three key moments:

- (a) how digital literacy is relevant to one's life
- (b) confronting and overcoming a fear of the technology, and
- (c) acquiring a stronger sense of self-confidence



Job seeking learners were found to experience these three key moments, however, the context of having to learn these skills in order to look for and obtain employment in many ways shaped their experiences as they moved through the learner path. In particular, some job seekers experienced a lot of challenges when it came to finding ways digital literacy was relevant to their lives which led to a variety of personal reactions to the acquisition process.

Additionally, we found that tutors who worked with job seeking learners, while employing many of the tools common with all learners, were also able to respond to the unique needs of job seeking learners with strategies specifically aimed at supporting them as they moved through the acquisition process.

DISCONNECT: I Need a Job, not Digital Literacy

In perhaps no other context is the relevance and importance of digital literacy so prominent.

First, the process of searching for and applying for work has moved almost entirely online. As such, there are a variety of digital skills, everything from typing and mousing, to using a search engine, filling out an online form, or sending an email with an attachment, that are essential to the process of obtaining employment. Second, digital literacy skills are becoming increasingly important in the labor market in terms of both what kinds of jobs one is eligible for as well as wages within a given position. Mossberger et al. (2006) found that

...use of computers and the Internet at work is significant in predicting income for both less-educated workers (with high school education or less) and for all workers - controlling for other factors. While information technology use is indeed more common in occupations demanding higher education, it is still prevalent in many "low skill" jobs and is associated with higher pay.

As one tutor put it:

"They need computers and the skills and the knowledge in order to be successful in work readiness so the two kind of go hand-in-hand." ~ Tutor

However, many learners were hesitant or resistant to participating in a digital literacy acquisition program because they were focused on obtaining employment and viewed the program as not related to that goal. A major source for this disconnect came from a sense of urgency to find work which made the long term goal of acquiring digital literacy feel completely irrelevant. In these cases, acquiring digital literacy seemed to them like an unaffordable luxury or a bureaucratic hoop they had to jump through before actually getting down to the business of looking for work.

Several tutors and program organizers described the situations in their labs:

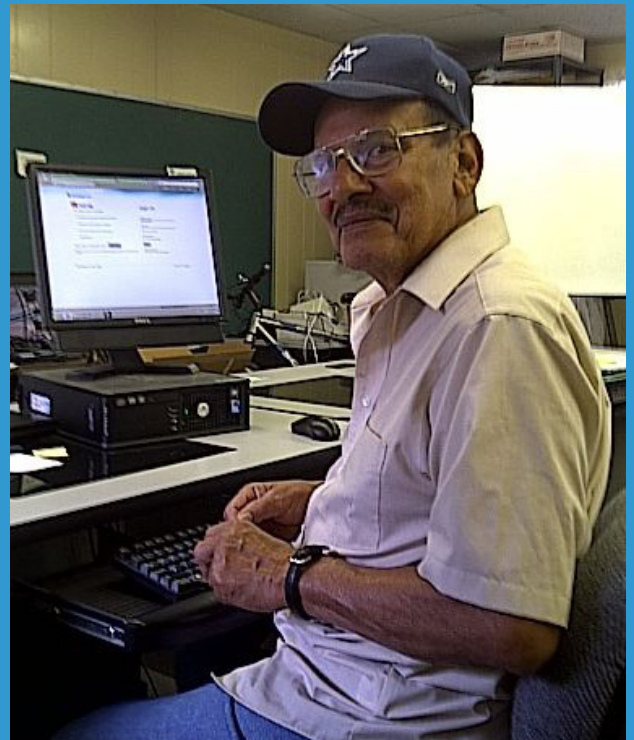
"...many times people who are low income and have limited skills have such immediate needs that they want to meet, and they need to meet these needs now, and they don't have the luxury often of being planful in a longer term type way." ~ Program Organizer

"...a lot of the learners come in with a very narrow focus, 'I want you to help me write my resume' 'Well I can help you learn how to type so you can do your resume on your own'" ~ Tutor

"The population is homeless and unemployed so if they're coming here from...[the] homeless shelter, they don't necessarily understand the importance of being computer literate, they realize the importance of finding a job today, they want to get on that immediately." ~ Tutor

In other cases, job seeking learners were displaced workers who had had long careers in which they never needed digital literacy skills. Having not searched for work in such a long time, they were at times unaware of how drastically the process and the labor market has changed over the past decade or two.

For many job seeking learners, this first key moment (where an individual views digital literacy as relevant to their life), was by far the biggest hurdle experienced during the learning path. Taking the time to acquire digital literacy skills when there are such pressing issues as finding work and securing an income to support oneself and one's family does not immediately present itself as desirable or even doable. And in fact, for some learners it was not. However, for other learners, digital literacy acquisition was seen as a possibility and was eventually viewed as vital in their efforts to becoming employed.



The Role of the Tutor/Learner Relationship

For many job seeking learners, the support they received from tutors was integral to their success. Tutors offered support to learners in three primary ways. First, tutors acknowledged the real and urgent needs of the learners and showed awareness of the disconnect between their present situations and the long term goal of acquiring digital literacy. Second, tutors responded to the varying levels of engagement that learners exhibited often corresponding with whether they were participating in the program voluntarily or mandatorily. Finally, tutors employed unique strategies for supporting job seeking learners that were designed to offer job readiness training as part of their digital literacy acquisition process.

Responding to Felt Needs



Tutors often worked hard to address the learners' needs by acknowledging the ways they were experiencing a disconnect between their need to find work and the digital literacy acquisition process. Several tutors described their approach:

"95% of the people coming here need a job. And so I had to figure out how to help them get those computer skills at the same time meeting that need of job searching." ~ Tutor

"A lot of times I have someone come in panicky because they went to a job interview and they were asked about Excel... So they need computer skills for the job now... Then there's... someone who wants advanced skills but needs basic skills, and it's a question of how much time are they going to be able to give me and how dedicated are they going to be. I... try to guide them in what they're asking for. I try to acknowledge their need and suggest other things that I think would be good for them." ~ Tutor

Responding to Resistance

While there were some job seeking learners who sought out the digital literacy training programs on their own accord, the majority of these learners were participating in the program as a requirement either to receive resources and support at their local workforce center or to continue receiving public assistance and/or unemployment benefits. Because learner participation was often not entirely voluntary, we found a range in the level of engagement with the technology and in the learner process.

Job seeking learners' reactions to the program ranged from eager to skeptical to outright hostile. In fact, a number of tutors cited learner push-back as one of their greatest challenges. One tutor described her experiences:

"The biggest headache is the reluctant participant because they're forced to be there and... If they don't want to be there then they will put this wall up. That's the hardest part of my job is trying to take that wall down." ~ Tutor

With this range in reactions from job seeking learners, success had as much to do with strong tutor/learner relationships and as it did with building skill. Most people were going through a difficult time and needed to feel cared about and heard. Tutors worked to ensure morale was high by fostering personal connections with their learners, acknowledging the challenges they were experiencing, and offering encouragement. These tutor/learner connections often led to more investment in the learning process on the part of the learners.



Incorporating Job Readiness Training

Tutors who worked with job seeking learners often employed strategies meant to engage learners with the materials not simply as a means of learning digital literacy skills but also as a means to ready them for the workplace and gain skills valuable in the labor market.



For example, in some settings, learners who had higher levels of digital literacy were encouraged to work as peer mentors and gain skills that might assist them in teaching jobs. This experience was also seen as a valuable resume builder. Some tutors used the digital literacy acquisition program as a tool for encouraging independence among job seeking learners. Here the self-paced aspect of the learning model was understood as a valuable form of job training that could be used to help learners gain experiences and skills in terms of how to troubleshoot on their own as well as coping mechanisms for getting stuck while working on something.

One tutor saw this kind of learner independence as being tied to a process of encouraging learners to take responsibility for themselves:

"You know it's really about taking responsibility for their learning,... so they can move quickly or they can move slowly. It's up to them. It's about what they're comfortable with and that's part of becoming a better person in a workplace." ~ Tutor

Overcoming Barriers

While job seeking learners were often faced with unique challenges throughout their digital literacy acquisition process, our research findings indicate that through their work with tutors and the Learner Web these barriers to digital literacy were often overcome.

As adults gained facility with digital literacy skills, the accomplishment of acquiring new skills gave them a sense of self-confidence, which resulted in more incorporation of digital literacy skills into their everyday lives.



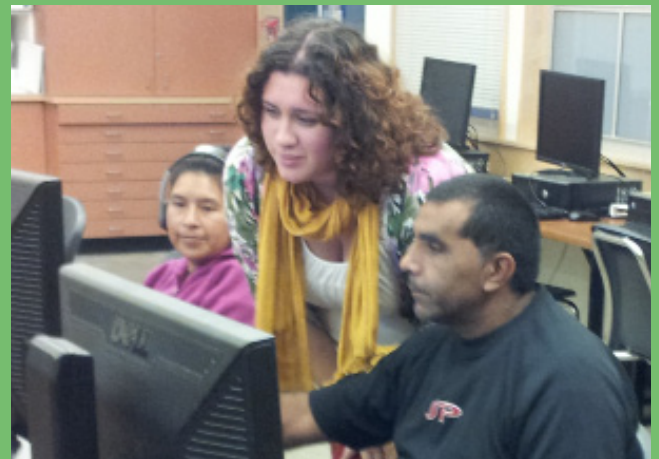
Implications

In the early years of computers, learning digital skills was employment focused; these included skills such as the use of word processing software, spreadsheets, and databases. With the advent of the internet and the ubiquity of digital technology in all aspects of life including job seeking and applications, information seeking, mapping, social media, and entertainment, the lines between skills for occupational, educational, and personal goals have blurred. As such, labs that serve job seeking learners are well situated to introduce individuals to the opportunities made available through computer and internet use that go beyond employment to deeper civic and social engagement. However, before these goals can be met, lab coordinators and tutors must find ways to address the disconnect between what the learners feel they need and what the digital literacy acquisition program offers as well as learner resistance by building a strong tutor-learner relationship.

Addressing the Disconnect

Our findings indicate that job seeking learners have a unique set of challenges when working to acquire digital literacy skills. The findings suggest that lab coordinators and tutors working with these individuals need to acknowledge the reality of the learners' lives while supporting them through digital literacy acquisition learning path.

As such, tutor training should include awareness of the unique needs of job seeking learners as well as the inclusion of strategies for building relevance while meeting the immediate needs of the learners.



Addressing Resistance by Building the Tutor/Learner Relationship



The tutor/learner relationship is essential for helping learners move past reluctance and resistance. Tutors who had once been learners themselves, were especially effective at making connections with the learners because they understood what the learner was feeling. Tutors recruited from the ranks of learners can serve to provide the lab with needed personnel while also building the resumes of job-seeking individuals.

Additionally, training programs for tutors working with job seeking learners should address the affective needs of the learners.

Addressing Barriers to Success

Learners across all settings and in all circumstances experienced barriers to success but many were able to overcome those barriers with support of the tutor and the resources offered by the online learning system. These findings suggest that the self-paced online learning system alone is insufficient for supporting learners, especially those who may be feeling frustrated and unsuccessful because of their current life circumstances. Thus the support of the tutor is needed.

However, the self-paced online learning system provides the tutor with a standardized set of resources, thus allowing them to focus on the affective needs of the learner.



The findings indicate that tutors recruited from the ranks of learners and who receive the training and support needed to be responsive to the affective needs of job seeking learners are able to build successful learner/tutor relationships, which help learners move through barriers to learning.

Digital Literacy Acquisition Case Studies

- Corrections and Reentry
- Volunteers in an Adult Literacy Library Program
- Job Seeking Learners

Digital Literacy Acquisition Policy Brief

- Community Connections

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