Program Design: Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

Jill Castek  
*Portland State University, jcastek@pdx.edu*

Gloria Jacobs  
*Portland State University, gljacobs@pdx.edu*

Kimberly D. Pendell  
*Portland State University, kpendell@pdx.edu*

Drew Pizzolato  
*Portland State University*

Stephen Reder  
*Portland State University, reders@pdx.edu*

Elizabeth Withers  
*Portland State University*

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Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief: What Research Tells Us about Program Design

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
This research brief is intended to provide quick insights into the digital literacy acquisition program implemented within the reentry process in one prison. For greater detail about the program and to read what the learners themselves had to say about the program, read the accompanying in-depth case study.

Where did this take place?

- Orleans Parish Prison (OPP), located in New Orleans, Louisiana.
- Louisiana imprisons more people per capita than any other region in the world.
- The state also has a high rate of recidivism, with approximately half of all ex-offenders returning to prison within five years of their release.

How long was the digital literacy program in operation?

- The digital literacy acquisition program was operational for 3 years, from 2011-2014. The OPP reentry process has been in place since 2011.

How do the participants become eligible for the reentry process?

- It is a voluntary program.
- Any inmate within 2 years of release, but with more than 6 months is eligible.
- Preference is given to individuals with a higher risk of recidivism as determined by a risk assessment tool developed by the University of Cincinnati.

How long are the participants in the program?

- The reentry process includes a 10-week curriculum designed to assist individuals in their transition to life outside of prison.
- The digital literacy acquisition program is 1 week long, but some learners stay in the program a little longer, and a few complete it in less time.
- Involvement generally is limited to 1 week to allow the maximum number of participants to have access to the program.
Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

How many participants have there been?

- Between 700-900 individuals are served each year in the reentry program.
- During the time of this study, the OPP reentry process gave 1150 participants the chance to learn digital literacy skills.
- The majority are males ages 25-44 years old.

How did you accommodate laws that prevent Internet access within a prison?

- The computer lab is located in a converted garage across the street from the prison. This addresses the prohibition of having the Internet in a correctional facility. As such, the lab is not funded by the prison, and the Department of Corrections considers the lab to be an extracurricular activity. However, the Sheriff supports the lab. A community organization also supported the lab through the provision of computers.
- When learners access the computer lab, they are brought over from the prison in ankle shackles, chains, and handcuffs and are escorted by two guards. While working in the computer lab, the men are unchained and the guards remain in the room. There are 14 computer stations in the lab as well as a desk for the lab assistant facing the stations. This arrangement allows the lab assistant easy visibility of all computer screens in the lab.

Why are digital literacy skills important?

- Some of the most essential skills for a successful transition to post-release life, such as those needed for finding a job or housing, are increasingly reliant on digital literacy skills. For example, offering digital literacy training as part of the reentry curriculum has meant that the men who go through the program receive hands-on practice with filling out online applications, creating resumes, sending and receiving emails, and conducting effective searches online.
- Evidence suggests that recidivism is directly related to experiencing barriers such as trouble finding high quality employment and stable housing during the process of reintegrating back into one’s community.
- The program director believes that digital literacy skills and self-empowerment help the learners become better citizens.
What is the purpose of the reentry process?

- The reentry curriculum is designed with the intent of providing the participants with the necessary skills to keep themselves out of prison once they have been released. These skills are developed through coursework in anger management, character-building, job interviewing, computer training, money management, resume writing, and digital literacy.

- Along with more concrete and logistical skill development, this reentry process emphasizes the importance of offering curriculum aimed at the personal development of these incarcerated men.

- This process is centered on instilling a strong sense of self worth while also fostering supportive community connections.

What is the learning model for the digital literacy acquisition program?

- The digital literacy acquisition program learning model is self-paced, tutor-facilitated, online support. The program was designed for adult learners and offers goal-directed and learner-driven content with links to other online and offline resources and systems as well as e-portfolios for tracking learning.

- The self-paced instructional model allows learners to spend their time productively engaged in the content they decide is important to them. They also can review what they’ve learned as much as they need to before deciding to move on to new content.

How do you maintain security and make sure the participants use the Internet responsibly?

- The online activities of learners in this lab are highly monitored.
- The learners are actively watched by a lab assistant and two guards.
- Technology support staff examine each computer once a quarter to investigate whether any misconduct has occurred.
- The learners value their participation in the program, and this is the main deterrent to misconduct.

Skills Learned in the Digital Literacy Program

Hard Skills
- Working on a resume
- Learning how to fill out online job Applications
- Writing a cover letter
- Mousing
- Keyboarding
- Internet navigation
- Creating an email account and using email

Soft Skills
- Self-efficacy
- Confidence
- Competence
- Self-regulation
- Autonomous behaviors
Learning Digital Skills in a Corrections Setting

What is the role of the mentors and how many are there?

- Mentors circulate to personally check-in, guide, and encourage learners as they work. They are available to answer their questions in an individualized and flexible way, providing examples as needed.
- There are usually two or three mentors and one lab assistant present while learners use the computer lab.

Who are the mentors?

- The mentor role is filled by fellow incarcerated men who are participating in a mentor program.
- The mentor program was implemented as part of the reentry process and was designed as a means of breaking down the barriers between the men by fostering a sense of community and responsibility. The saying “I am my brother’s keeper” was used frequently to describe the philosophy behind the mentor program where these incarcerated men are encouraged to open themselves up to both offering and receiving services and support from one another.

What is the impact on mentors?

- They experienced dramatic shifts in how they saw themselves.
- They gained hands-on experience in a situation where they were realizing their potential.
- They were able to see themselves as positive contributors with valuable skills, abilities, and attributes. These skills, abilities, and attributes included learning how to work with a variety of people.
- They appreciated having their word trusted, which contributed to their sense of competence and growing sense of self-worth.
- They learned whether they like helping people, a feeling that may contribute to a sense of self-respect and self-worth.
- They were able to see themselves as continually working toward improvement. They came to realize that they are able to push themselves to become more than they were before.
- By seeing themselves as learners able to set and achieve goals and envision a future, they build the resilience needed to succeed outside the correctional setting.
What is the impact of the digital literacy program?

- **Seeing themselves in a new light:** Interviews with learners and mentors indicate that the impact is about more than learning how to create a resume or write a cover letter. It was also about discovering a new way of seeing oneself and seeing a future previously unimagined.

- **Building courage:** Many learners were initially fearful of computers and the Internet. The program director suggests that going online allows these men to do things they otherwise would not be able to do, but the first step involves overcoming their fear.

- **Developing self-efficacy and self-confidence:** Through successes experienced with the support of mentors, the learners were able to see that they are capable of learning and using computers and the internet. They began to see themselves as competent individuals with potential.

- **Becoming empowered:** The mentors not only assisted by answering questions about the content being learned, they also offered encouragement and patience which helped the learners feel motivated and comfortable in their learning environment. The self-paced, online learning platform gave learners autonomy to choose the content they wished to engage with. They were empowered to cover the materials at their own pace within the framework of the one week they were in the computer lab.

- **Building new relationships with family:** Participants began to see how their newly gained knowledge of digital literacy could help them build relationships with members of their family, and especially their children. As part of this, the learning extends to their families who experience pride, hopefulness, and the belief that their loved one is on the right track. The learners could see themselves as full members of their family who were loved, respected, and had something to contribute.

- **Reduced recidivism:** There has been a 47% reduction in recidivism since the reentry process was implemented at OPP. How much of this is a result of the digital literacy acquisition program is unknown.
What are the implications of this type of program?

- Desistance, or living a crime-free life, requires that an individual take on new ways of being in the world. The findings suggest that the changes the learners experienced as a result of participating in the reentry process, of which the digital literacy acquisition program was a part, may contribute to changing behaviors post-release.

- When developing digital literacy acquisition programs for vulnerable learners, such as individuals reentering society after a period of incarceration, attention should be given to wrap-around services that support the learners holistically.

- The learning environment should take the unique needs of the learners and the learning context into consideration.

- If learners are to acquire the soft skills of self-efficacy, confidence, competence, self-regulation, and autonomous behaviors, programs should be designed to allow growth opportunities within a safe and supportive environment.

- While attention should certainly be given to hard skills such as job skills and resume and cover letter writing, program administrators should remain cognizant of the affective needs of learners.

- Curriculum designed to offer adults the skills needed to accomplish even basic life tasks should include support for learning how to operate a computer or smartphone or navigate the internet and access online materials.

- Current policies prohibit access to the Internet within a correctional setting. These policies, while intended to protect society at large, may hinder individuals who are preparing to reenter society.

- Policymakers should give consideration to allowing some access to the world of digital technology to those individuals who have demonstrated readiness to learn so that they can develop the skills and responsibility that accompanies access to the digital world.
What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

I’m glad to see the guys recognized as learners, as part of the human community. They deserved the attention and help and effort we gave them.

Re-entry should be a way of life, it takes you off the street and should return you better than when you came in the door. There’s a part of you that’s human that becomes rejuvenated, so you can get out of here and not come back. Learning digital literacy skills is one of those things can almost put these guys on even footing with those individuals who have had the privilege of continued freedom.

~ Program Director

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/

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