

Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

**Arresting the digital tundra- a study in
adult digital skills evolution**

Northampton College – June 2022

Northampton College (2022) *Final Report on the OTLA Action Research Project – Arresting the digital tundra- a study in adult digital skills evolution*. London: ETF.

© The Education and Training Foundation (2022)

This resource was produced as part of the Education and Training Foundation's OTLA programme, which was funded by the Department for Education. To learn more about the OTLA programme please visit: <https://et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/professional-development/practitioner-led-development-and-research/otla/>.

For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

The programme was delivered on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation by:



NATECLA



CONTENTS

SUMMARY	2
RATIONALE	2
Other Contextual Information	2
APPROACH	3
OUTCOMES AND IMPACT	4
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	4
Professional Development	5
Organisational Development	5
LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT	6
REFERENCES	6
APPENDICES	7
Appendix 1: The Project Team	7
Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies	8
Appendix 3: Transcript of learner conversation	9
Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders	12
Appendix 5: Research/ Evaluation Approach	12

Arresting the digital tundra- a study in adult digital skills evolution

Northampton College

SUMMARY

This project focuses on adults returning to study a digital curriculum; a new learning 'space', the Essential Digital Skills qualification (EDQS) where achievement depends on success in a digital examination. Our job is to navigate through the wasteland of adults' negative experiences of education past (but not forgotten) and to inspire digital courage, confidence to experiment, and competence to master new skills. We found that spending time discussing learning at the outset led to learners increasing their confidence in learning and taking risks, and improving retention.

RATIONALE

For the purposes of this study, we focused on Entry 3 of the EDS qualifications, as for most of our learners, this represents their starting point. Typically, learners demonstrate learning behaviours that are intensely inhibited, hindered by anxieties about being unable to learn to use a computer, of decoding the digital language or simply about 'breaking the internet'. We set out to better understand the anxieties of our learners and to use this insight to develop learners' skills so they can use them to solve real life problems whilst at the same time support them to pass the exam.

We also aimed to get learners to reflect about returning to learn, support them to consider further study or acquire meaningful employment. We wanted to empower our learners to use newly acquired digital skills to open up new and uncharted territories in their personal and working lives.

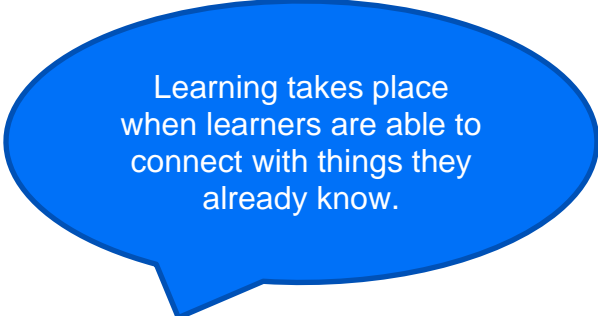
Other Contextual Information

Our provision is a roll-on/roll-off Skills Centre where adult learners have bespoke programmes of study; for some this is an intense 6-week course, for others it may be studies that span several academic years. Learners are supported by highly skilled trainers to acquire knowledge and skills in preparation for exams at Entry 3 and level 1, as well as other digital qualifications.

Learners enrol on the course throughout the year and attend at times/days that are convenient to them. Learning resources are provided in a variety of mediums; narrated power point, video, workbooks are just some examples which enable learners to select their medium of choice.

APPROACH

In light of the anxieties of many adults as they return to study after several years, we decided to produce an initial assessment framework conversation for EDS courses which would help teachers to assess their learners' needs, preferences and aspirations. We started by reviewing the research on learning preferences to see if there were any recent studies that would not just debunk the myth of learning styles but provide some useful insights to explore our understanding of how adults learn and how teachers can respond to their needs in adapting their teaching approaches. In this respect we were influenced by two pieces of literature; firstly, Brookfield's ideas on the significance of critical thinking in teaching (Brookfield, (2017) and also Chaves' work on 'mathetics' - the study of how adult learners learn to learn (Chaves, 2019). Fundamental to Chaves' work was the significance of connection in adult learning and that crucially, 'learning takes place best when learners are able to connect what they are trying to learn with things they already know' (Chaves, 2019).



Learning takes place when learners are able to connect with things they already know.

Using these ideas as a basis, our teaching team discussed how we could improve our induction. We developed and began to trial a questionnaire to frame initial and ongoing conversations with learners that provided us with valuable insights into their approach to learning (see Appendix 4 for a transcript of one conversation). From the results of our trials of the questionnaire we began to put together some 'Preparation for Learning' sessions incorporating the ideas from Chaves' work. We noted that learners who had not been in an education setting for a number of years only used the techniques for learning that they had learned at school and did not know how to introduce new ones. Learners typically queried why they should try new strategies often citing 'but I haven't done that before' as a reason to stay with traditional methods for notetaking. We therefore discussed how we could gently introduce learners to using other learning methods such as mind maps, revision strategies, flash cards and self-testing without alienating and over-challenging. The pre-learning sessions became routinely used and we began to collate feedback and examples of learner voice.

We visited New City College campus in Tower Hamlets to discuss their provision. We explored how adults were engaging with the course and focussed our time looking at the classroom experience and particularly the challenge of supporting ESOL learners with the course. The visit helped to galvanise our efforts to inspire our learners to experiment with new learning strategies. We were able to recognise the benefits of a cohort-based approach (rather than roll on/roll off) to delivery, in particular how readily learners were to try new approaches when studying alongside others. We are now planning to adopt this approach for integrating our EDSQ with our adult ESOL learners and we plan to incorporate the most successful techniques recognised by our participating learners.



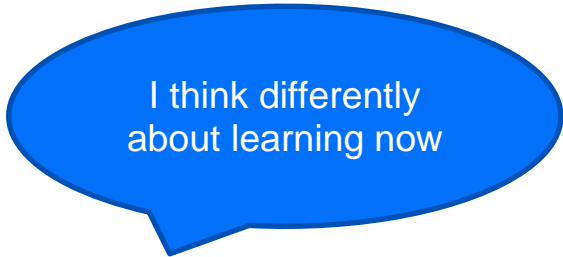
I now enjoy learning in a way that I definitely didn't at school!

Throughout this project, we captured the learner experience and found a positive impact. As one learner stated, *'I didn't particularly think that I would enjoy learning to use the computer but now I can say that I don't want to stop - it is making me think about what else I want to do after this. I realise that I now enjoy learning in a way that I definitely didn't at school and it just makes me want to go on'*.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT


This action research project has confirmed our belief that it is important to build closer, trusting relationships with students at the outset of their EDS programmes, focusing on delivering sessions that are in line with their needs. It is important to alleviate the many anxieties they felt in enrolling on a course that would challenge them to explore a new area of skills and knowledge. One learner in particular shows this in her statement, *'but now I have come and the weeks going down, I am calming down I am not thinking of other people, I am not rushing I write down, instead of trying to scribble, I now put a headline of what I am learning, and this is what I am doing'*. We were influenced in our thinking and practice by Chaves and Brookfield in their work on 'mathetics' and the nature of adult learning respectively. In refining the sessions of our Preparation for Learning sessions we aimed to:

- build relationships between trainer and the learner to form a nurturing bond
- explore different learning approaches
- explore different knowledge retention strategies
- establish notetaking and organisational skills
- improve learner's confidence to talk about themselves
- set a tone of 'friendly challenge' so that learners will be encouraged to step outside their tried and tested learning/retention strategies



I think differently about learning now

One student in her feedback reported that the sessions *'helped her to think differently about learning'* and that increased her confidence to *'learn new things'*. Other learners were less explicit but made clear indications that they enjoyed their learning and that this was contrary to their expectations. Another learner indicated that, *'this is the best thing I have done'* – a statement indeed! Other feedback includes, *'by learning this skill it made me want to know more about this digital world we live in [...] I shied away from using computers which I now realise was the wrong thing to do'; 'I've learnt so much since I started [...] now feel confident to fiddle and click on parts of the screen'*.



This is the best thing I have done!

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

We began to realise just how important it is to have appropriate and supportive induction sessions, even for relatively short courses. We recognised that the pre-learning session helped learners to re-visualise their capacity to learn; it created a real synergy between learner and practitioner. We now think of the pre learning sessions as springboards which require the investment of time but ultimately pay dividends. This is captured well by one of our learners, *'I have gained confidence in myself using computers, with the help of my teachers who are very understanding' and 'I actually enjoy learning again [...] I am the only person stopping me from learning [...] I felt at ease coming in and knowing that if I ask you, that's fine [...] I feel with a lot of things I am moving forward, being a bit braver'*. This sort of self-awareness in learning and an increase in self-confidence are transformative, particularly for adults and we have found that the pre learning session makes this a much more likely outcome.

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
4. Be creative and innovative in selecting and adapting strategies to help learners to learn.	The learner-focussed approach of our project enabled us to focus on individual strategies to support learners. This meant that we experimented with quiz creation, summary cards, matching exercises, and mind maps- all of which we have not previously used for Entry IT. The project also helped us to recognise the role of the trainer to prompt learners to adopt new learning strategies and that once prompted, learners reacted well.
9. Apply theoretical understanding of effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment drawing on research and other evidence	We have enjoyed the opportunity and encouragement to draw on the ideas of other practitioners. We took a fresh look at a number of different learning theories and thought about how each in turn could enhance the impact of learning. The change in assessment, to digital examination, prompted us to review our approach to how knowledge is acquired and retained by learners.
13. Motivate and inspire learners to promote achievement and develop their skills to enable progression	Our project helped us to better understand our strengths as a provision and how these can be harnessed to address the growing market for adult education – particularly for IT. It has inspired us to experiment with new approaches to learning in this roll on/roll off learning environment. This project has led to conversations with the aim to inspire learners to consider learning other disciplines.

Organisational Development

Our practice has evolved through the project to become increasingly learner focussed and attuned to their experience of learning. Our team at Northampton College now better understands the psychology of adults returning to study and just how entrenched adults often become in learning-related anxieties. Our project has also helped us to recognise the transformative capacity of digital teaching. Many adults have never studied a digital curriculum so, unlike maths and English tuition, where most adults feel that they return to a subject with which they have some existing schema;



they fear the unknown. Our research has helped us to recognise the value of personalised consultation and tuition, particularly at the very start of the learning journey and that through gentle ‘friendly challenge’ learners can transcend their own expectations for themselves rapidly. Our delivery team now approach learning in a different way and are more empathetic. One trainer reflected, *‘although we always looked to spend quality time with individual learners, we never structured this in a formal way. The research has enabled us to focus on the learning skills students arrive with and has given us the opportunity to explore learning strategies and*

methods with them. Throughout our project it has become clear that the greater the focus on the individual (particularly at the start of the learner journey) the quicker the learner is ready to experiment with new learning strategies and the greater their aptitude to take control and shape their learning.

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

We have also been enthused to continue to build a reflective practitioner culture within our adult provision. Our work has focussed on the point of re-engagement in learning but has also been impactful with regards to collaboration. We are encouraged by the communities of practice that we now engage within, and our reflective work enables us to develop a more outward-looking mindset. As a team we have become more adept at experimenting with new ideas in delivery and being unafraid to abandon them and/or adapt to suit circumstance- without doubt we have become more resilient as practitioners and as learners ourselves.

REFERENCES

Brookfield, S, (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* [2nd ed.], Jossey-Bass; San Francisco, US.

Brookfield, S (1986) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*, Jossey-Bass; San Francisco, US.

Chaves, P.E.M.C (2019), *Mathetics: The Art of Learning, Re-inventing Education!* July 12-13, 2019 Conference Proceedings, Pan-PBL Association, Virtual international Conference.

Comenius, J. A. (1680). *Spicilegium Didacticum*. Amsterdam: Typis Christophori Cunradi. Cousinet, R. (1976). *Educação Nova* (3rd ed.). (M. E. F. Moura, Trans.). Lisboa: Moraes

Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, (2018) *Decisions of adult learners*, Department for Education.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Jolene Swift	Assistant Principal	Jolene.swift@northamptoncollege.ac.uk
Project Deputy	Jacqui Painter	Coordinator	Jacqui.painter@northamptoncollege.ac.uk
Project Team	Caroline Rugg	Trainer	Caroline.rugg@northamptoncollege.ac.uk
Mentor	Sue Southwood	Mentor	suesouthwood@mail.com
Research Group Lead	Bob Read	RGL	Bobread94@gmail.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

Learner A

Learner A was keen to learn IT skills for new job opportunities. They had not been a student for 24 years and they were lacking in confidence and anxious regarding attending college and their ability to learn new skills. The Preparation for Learning session gave us the opportunity to begin building the student/ practitioner relationship which we believe is so important with students returning to a learning environment and to help engage the spark of belief in the student that they 'can do this'.

During their time in the college, we have seen a dramatic change in their overall confidence in the learning environment and most pleasingly, an enjoyment in their learning which they want to share with family and friends. This student took on the challenge of creating an IT quiz and happily tested her family on their IT knowledge resulting in everyone learning something new!

Learner B

Learner B had to use a computer at work to complete training. They recognised a need and interest for learning more digital skills but had not studied for 13 years so were '*feeling nervous and excited at the same time*'. They felt completing the course would enable them to apply for different jobs in the future and would give them more options in their day-to-day life.

By embracing the opportunity to try new learning methods they thrived in the learning environment, gaining confidence in using IT but also in their ability to learn new skills. This student was thrilled when they were able to solve an IT problem for their husband!

Learner C

Learner C is a mother to 5 children. They wanted to study the course to be more involved in their children's lives by understanding the benefits and drawbacks of online access and how to use Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. In the future they are interested in taking online courses and is aware that learning these skills will be the key to enable them to fulfil their aspirations.

Learner C had previously studied English at Northampton College but IT was outside her comfort zone, and she was naturally apprehensive. The Preparation to Learning session gave us the opportunity to quell these anxieties, and offer a variety of learning mediums to suit their individual needs and preferences to help them in this course and any further online courses they may undertake in the future

By studying the course in the Skills Centre, they feel confident in their ability to progress with future learning and feel they have the learning strategies in place to help them thrive and succeed.

Appendix 3: Transcript of learner conversation

0:06	CR	Homework for you was a new way of learning and a new way for you to retain information- you produced a quiz that could be given to another learner. How did you find putting the quiz together?
		At first it, I was a bit er... because you have so much to go back on, it actually made me read back on and take in more- to look for questions. I had written down so many questions that I didn't use- but you remember what you have written down because you have gone over it and you have looked it up to get the answer- and then you have filtered it down to the questions plus I wanted to do different questions different ways – like when it says try to use a picture for somebody else to use to learn from.
	CR	So it was a good learning strategy for you to use?
		Yes because I think it is quite good to do a quiz because it made me look for all the questions and the answers and then it goes it ... it is repetition. And then working out the questions – not going into too much detail- because I know how I would feel if I read it ..
1:40	CR	Do you think it is a way of learning and retaining learning that you would use again?
		Yes, definitely, I would. I think that I will do a little test on it because then you remember it. If you try to do things in more of a fun way, you think 'ooh I remember that'
2:10	CR	You make it sound like it is a fun thing for your family
2:16		Yes, because we were all doing and looking for things and then I was learning from them and they were learnt from me. Not knowing how to do a screen shot on her new laptop,
	CR	so you taught her that?
		yeah
	CR	And so that is another way for you to learn is by teaching someone else
2:35		Mmm, but you think that everybody knows everything
	CR	Yes, you just assume, don't you?
2:40		And as I have gone on and talking to other people, that is what I have found. That everybody doesn't know everything. They might know the computer but they don't know the social- Facebook and all things like that- so I always thought and made, myself feel that I couldn't learn. But now I have come and the weeks going down, I am calming down I am not thinking of other people, I am not rushing I write down, instead of trying to scribble, I now put a headline of what I am learning, and this is what I do
3:20	CR	So you are sort of forming a bit more structure to your learning
		Yeah, instead of just panicking
	CR	And randomly writing
		Yeah, and going back on it where I would understand it and I think – I wonder if that is from the quiz as well – it has made me read through it, send the answer
	CR	And the writing down, was that new for you or would you have written down before but, like you say perhaps you just condense it
		I didn't think I could, because I felt that I had to keep everything stored. I think you go back a bit to your school days of writing stuff down, and for me I still do try to write a lot of stuff down if I want to try to remember. So I think that reading through booklets is good but it is not...

	CR	Yes, you need to be going over it again to retain that information
		Yeah, yeah
	CR	Do you think these are skills that you would use outside of the classroom now as well? Apply them perhaps?
4:35		Yes, there are lots of things that you have to try to remember
		Is it now a natural life skill as well?
		Yeah, yeah. Because everything that you do has got to be sort of retained in your head or on a computer or something- but people still have to write things down and that is not a bad thing.
	CR	No definitely not
		And whatever works for you – the way of learning- we are all very different. What works and what makes it easy for you
	CR	That's right and you don't have to have one set way either, it can be like a combination of
		Yes, that's it
5:02		We are all very different and people might say, no that's not how I learn
5:20	CR	No, but it has been good that you have been accepting of looking at different methods and seeing that they can be of benefit to you. I like the use of this picture and it is a good demonstration for students learning about how to do a screenshot
		Yes, and I thought that this was the way and that in the paper that you gave me it says use pictures and for a lot of things I can't use a picture
	CR	So you have had to think what best to use
		So what question and it is, and I know it sounds silly, but I was so excited when I had done a screen shot because for me that is a big thing and
	CR	Yeah, but that is a really good one and that this is something that I might pinch from you to use in the classroom myself
6:04		Yeah, it's just how I just thought. I could have wrote down the letters as you said it is the letters that we are using but it thought because it said a picture, I tend to, as I said to you, not read properly sometimes so I even kept reading through what you had asked me to do, because I read very quickly and sometimes I don't get it all and when it said questions and a picture I thought right so what questions in my booklet can I use a picture? And that is the one thing I remember for this week. I was so chuffed with my screen shot.
6:37	CR	And so you had to really think didn't you? And that is, a lot of time students struggle to remember that one and that is, to have a visual explanation of what to do and like I say also to get them to tick on the keys to use as well is a really good idea
		I thought like that there is not much to use, but like with other keys , because on my nieces' laptop it is not, it wasn't that
7:08	CR	No, no
		Her's was different as I am still looking for that- different from a computer to a laptop
	CR	Yes, so a desktop is that, but now you have also learnt on a laptop. Yeah, so lots of learning there
		Yeah, and like you say, on certain keys if there is something that I have got to find or even when people say, you say enter', well it doesn't say enter on the there
		No, not on all of them, no
		It is that, when you read your booklets and it says like a key or something and I think... ooooh I don't know where
	CR	Yeah,yeah, yeah
7:43		Yeah and I think that's they are terms that if you use a computer you

		know, but when you haven't used them, it is foreign
	CR	Yes, it is like another language, isn't it?
		yes
		I thought it was really, really good and I had to think, oh yes what is the answer to that one.
		My partner says, because I was quizzing him, and he was saying the same, he was going, ooh I don't know that one, what is that one? And that one, he needs to know it so we were laughing and I was, don't you know that one? And like the taskbar I didn't know, reading through- go to the taskbar. I don't know where the taskbar is because I don't know what a taskbar is. A friend of mine says that there are certain areas of the computer that you will just start to know where things are, over there, down the bottom there
	CR	Yes, and it just becomes second nature that that is that and that is that
		Which is what I am getting more at ease for and instead of looking at the screen and thinking [panting sound] just calm down. I think I have calmed down.
9:03	CR	You have, definitely. You are very good, you really are.
		I just, I just feel like I just can't, and as you said it, I actually enjoy learning again. Yet when I first come, I kept eating myself up thinking I don't know this and it is making the first step to come out, to come into new. I think I got so mad with myself, I am the only person who is stopping me from learning and even then I thought- I am going to come in here, say it as it is and that is it. You are nice person, you are a nice teacher and that does really help, so me coming in and if you would have went, oh ok. And just body language and stuff, I felt that at ease coming in and knowing that if I ask you, that's fine. And I even after about like 5 weeks I thought, I don't think I can do this. I don't know why I think it was just how I felt and then I thought no, the only person, if I step out and don't come back is me, you know and that is it. And I feel that with lots of things I am moving forward, being a bit braver
	CR	Yeah I know and I want you to come in – so always think that, I want to see you
10:25		And I want to come in because I want to learn and I know and that is what I thought and then the week after I come in and it was just totally different. I think it was just how you are feeling and it weren't going in and I was thinking noooo.
	CR	And you are doing really well considering that you said, that I can't do anything else. YO are doing so well
		Oh, good. The thing is with the laptop, I do find at home that I can't really practice. Can you get a mouse for it?
	CR	Oh yes, you can get a mouse,
		A wifi mouse....

Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	8	No of staff?	6
No of organisations?	2	No of employers/ stakeholders?	2

Appendix 5: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)		Interview/survey (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	X
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)	X	Document analysis (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	X
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'	X	High-stakes learner assessment (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs)	X
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)	X	Comparative trial (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group)	
Other (specify):	Action Research		

Thankyou

<https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep/>

Our Partners



Funded by



Department
for Education