

How to Motivate Adults with Low Literacy and Numeracy Skills to Engage and Persist in Learning: A Literature Review of Policy Interventions

eTale 2022



This literature review examines current evidence on policy interventions for adults with low literacy and numeracy proficiencies to identify what has so far proven to motivate adults to join and persist in basic literacy and numeracy learning. The author identifies three approaches which seem promising in helping to address individual learners' needs: 1) adapting instruction to learners' needs by means of regular assessment (formative assessments); 2) complementary e-learning (blended learning); and 3) contextualisation of basic skills provision both at work and home (workplace learning and family literacy). The central challenge is to apply this evidence.

Author: Hendrickje Catriona Windisch

Source: Windisch, H.C. (2016). How to motivate adults with low literacy and numeracy skills to engage and persist in learning: A literature review of policy interventions.

This literature review examines current evidence on policy interventions for adults with low literacy and numeracy proficiencies to identify what has so far proven to motivate adults to join and persist in basic literacy and numeracy learning. The author identifies three approaches which seem promising in helping to address individual learners' needs: 1) adapting instruction to learners' needs by means of regular assessment (formative assessments); 2) complementary e-learning (blended learning); and 3) contextualisation of basic skills provision both at work and home (workplace learning and family literacy). The central challenge is to apply this evidence.

- Individuals with weak literacy and numeracy proficiencies are more likely to be in low-paid jobs or unemployed, tend to have poorer health and civic engagement levels, and are less likely to improve their skills through adult education and training.
- Interest in basic skills education for adults has increased in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- A considerable number of adults in participating countries possess only limited literacy and numeracy skills.
- Often those concerned will have performed poorly at school and due to this experience have a negative perception of education; they may lack awareness of their deficiencies or be embarrassed to admit them.
- Even for those interested in tackling their weaknesses, it may be hard to translate that interest into action.
- For basic skills programmes to be effective, they need to motivate adults to take part, convey basic skills, and encourage learner persistence. Moreover, the acquired basic skills need to be sustained through use and applied in good jobs.

Basic skills and employment

- Per-capita income is higher in countries that have large proportions of adults who reach the highest levels of literacy and numeracy proficiency.
- Basic skills play a central role in enabling workers to adapt to technical and economic change and to advance professionally.
- Individuals with lower numeracy and literacy proficiencies are more likely to report poor health, to believe they have little impact on political processes, and participate less in associative or volunteer activities.

The benefits of literacy and numeracy interventions for low-skilled adults

- There is only limited evidence of the capacity of adult literacy and numeracy programmes to produce meaningful socioeconomic returns.
- Basic skills training can be delivered in a variety of ways.
- Literacy and numeracy programmes in isolation may achieve little.
- More plausibly, basic skills training linked to occupational skills and work-based learning has the potential to support adults on a self-sustaining trajectory.

Building awareness and sustaining motivation

- Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills are less likely to engage in adult education and training.
- It is difficult to reach those most in need of basic skills support.

- Motivation needs to be developed partly by building awareness of weak basic skills.
- This can be substantially assisted by developing greater public awareness of the implications of weak basic skills, the scope for skills improvements, and information and guidance about learning opportunities among the adults directly concerned and their immediate contacts.
- Local social networking can help reach those who require basic skills support.
- Using financial incentives to motivate adults to engage in basic skills learning yields mixed results: whilst encouraging participation of adults intrinsically interested in learning, it does not often yield positive outcomes among participants extrinsically motivated by financial incentives or requirement.
- Support, guidance, and follow-up can reduce dropout rates.
- Evidence shows the positive impact of assistance with childcare, transport, access to social services, and measures to avoid wage loss and unemployment during course participation.
- Evidence also underlines the importance of initial skills assessment and induction at the start of a programme when learners are most likely to withdraw, together with continued guidance throughout the programme.
- When adults withdraw from a course, this is sometimes only a temporary response to life pressures. Training providers therefore need to remain in touch with these individuals, seek to support them during the break (perhaps with distance learning), and entice them back to complete the programme.

The teaching profession

- Literacy and numeracy teachers need to be well-prepared.

- Positive attitudes among teachers and a personalised focus on learners can make a positive difference.
- Volunteer staff often play an important role in literacy and numeracy teaching.
- Volunteers are often familiar with course participants and their life circumstances, and their support can be vital. But since they may lack necessary pedagogical skills, their support needs to be supported by at least minimal training.

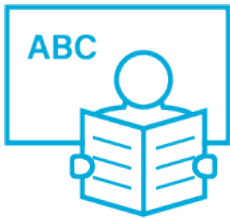
Using the right tools and techniques

- Formative assessment can contribute to the learning progress.
- Formative assessment is a teaching approach that adapts instruction to learners' needs by means of regular assessment.
- It is assessment *for* learning in contrast to assessment *of* learning.
- Basic skills deficiencies among adults often present a 'patchwork' effect, where an individual might be defeated by one simple task while having no problem with another more complex task.
- Accordingly, instruction tailored to individual learners' needs is particularly helpful.
- E-learning outside the classroom can complement tutor input.
- Some research suggests that electronically supported learning (e-learning) is a cost-effective way of overcoming various obstacles to literacy and numeracy learning.
- E-learning can reinforce both skills in information and communication technologies (ICT) and basic skills and can even reach 'hard-to-reach' learners.
- Online approaches need to be twinned with tutor input through face-to-face contact or via telephone or email

to support motivation in a blended learning approach.

- A contextualised approach to basic skills learning has certain advantages.
- A contextualised approach means including basic skills with vocational training or linking them to family life or the workplace.
- This approach is more likely than other approaches to engage adult learners who have negative feelings about classroom learning.
- It can help retain adult learners, positively change their attitudes towards further education and training, improve their self-confidence and their parenting and employability skills, and enable them to achieve literacy and numeracy and/or vocational qualifications.
- Basic skills linked to an occupational skill are more likely to be sustained through use in the workplace.
- Implementing contextualised teaching approaches is demanding: it requires a holistic, organisational approach and necessitates team teaching in the classroom among literacy and numeracy teachers and vocational instructors. This is more costly than running single-teacher classrooms.
- Family literacy programmes promote both child literacy and numeracy and adults' parenting capacity.
- Studies found that both parents and children benefited from participation; however, children gained basic skills to a higher degree than their parents.
- Parents benefited more in terms of parenting skills, employment, and self-confidence.
- Literacy and numeracy provision in the workplace can help employees and employers.
- Employer engagement is as important as government financial support.
- Research shows that learning programmes initiated and supported by employers and supervisors are those that survive in the long term.
- Trade unions can also play a significant role in

enrolling learners in work-based courses.



Conclusions

- The literature suggests that understanding the various learning motivations of adults with literacy and numeracy challenges (as well as their barriers to learning) is crucial for the design of outreach strategies and courses that motivate adults to engage and persist in learning.
- To increase participation and learner persistence, assistance with childcare, transport, measures to avoid wage loss and unemployment during course participation, and guidance services can all make a difference.
- Formative assessment to adjust instruction to the learners' needs has been found to be particularly helpful.
- Contextualised approaches to basic skills learning, such as combined basic and vocational skills training, family literacy programmes, and basic skills provision in the workplace, can help engage those with negative feelings about classroom learning.