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Adult learners use the Xenos app for game-based learning.

Ira Sockowitz Builds Learning Games for Adults

by Tony Ryals

As a kid, I always enjoyed games. I remember receiving my first gaming console and the countless hours of excitement it brought. Now, I rarely think about games the way I did as a kid. It wasn't until I spoke with Ira Sockowitz, the CEO and co-founder of Learning Games Studios, that I realized games are more than just entertainment; they have the power to change our world.

Ira, an attorney by training, spent 20 years of his life in public service. He has served at the local, state, and federal levels of government and his work has primarily focused on economic and workforce development. In 2005, two years before the first iPhone was released, Ira moved into the educational field. In the last several years, Ira has focused on adult education. Ira states, "In many ways, I see working in education as a natural extension of public service." Ira began working with fellow forward thinkers from MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and they began studying game-based and interactive learning. It was from this group of extraordinary thinkers that Learning Games Studios was born.

Learning Games Studios was developed as a company grounded in academia. "We're a learning company that uses games as pedagogy, not a gaming company trying to make something educational," Ira states. Ira views

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Workforce Preparation: Why You Should Learn More

by *Heidi Silver-Pacuilla*

The Commonwealth of Virginia Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [Combined State Plan Modifications](#) requires that “programs receiving Adult Education and Family Literacy (AEFLA) funds deliver workforce preparation activities concurrently with adult education, correctional education, and English language acquisition activities. This emphasis on integrated workforce preparation activities will increase the college and career readiness and employability of participants by engaging them in activities of deeper learning and application of practical skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and understanding systems. Training for instructors on how to integrate workforce preparation activities with standards-based instruction and for administrators and instructional leaders on how to support and recognize this enhanced instruction will be ongoing” (page 239).

This article provides background and resources to help you meet this requirement.

What is workforce preparation?

The definition of workforce preparation as an adult education activity was finalized in the WIOA regulations, Sec. 463.34:

Workforce preparation activities include activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in:

- a) Utilizing resources;
- b) Using information;
- c) Working with others;
- d) Understanding systems;
- e) Skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of postsecondary education or training, or employment; and
- f) Other employability skills that increase an individual’s preparation for the workforce.

These competencies should be familiar to those teaching with the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education. They may remind you of previous initiatives to prepare students for success in their careers such as [21st Century Skills](#), the [Employability Skills Framework](#), or the [SCAN Skills](#) from the late 1990s.

The requirement in the Combined State Plan indicates that these skills and competencies are to be integrated into instruc-

tion and taught concurrently with academic skills, thereby deepening and contextualizing the learning experience.

Why is workforce preparation important?

You may have heard business and economic reports calling for better preparation of the workforce for the jobs of today, even as they caution that the jobs of tomorrow will be different. Voices from higher education research also raise concerns that students starting community or four-year colleges are underprepared for the coursework. However, nearly half of our adult education students are already in the jobs of today, and they are preparing for their jobs of tomorrow.

In program year 2016-2017, 49 percent of our students reported that they were employed when they enrolled. An additional 25 percent reported that they were looking for work or looking to advance in their jobs. Last year, 534 adult education students achieved an industry-recognized credential to help them advance in their careers, and 2017-2018 is on track to see more students achieve these credentials through the many Integrated Education and Training programs that are in place across the state. These working learners attend our programs to develop their academic, workforce preparation, and occupational skills.

What skills do employers want to see in job applicants?

In Virginia, we know what skills employers are seeking. The Virginia Department of Education, in collaboration with the Demographics Research Group of the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, recently published [Virginia's Workplace Readiness Skills: Framework for the Future](#). The purpose of this research was to evaluate Virginia's current

21 Workplace Readiness Skills, which provide the framework for the Commonwealth's Workplace Readiness Skills assessment, and to make certain they are up to date and aligned with the needs of employers. For more than 30 years, in each decade since the 1980s, hundreds of employers throughout the Commonwealth have been interviewed or surveyed to determine the most essential workplace skills for entry-level workers. Major findings from the report indicate that employers continue to value the existing Workplace Readiness Skills, available as an [infographic](#), with some refinement.

In addition, the Combined State Plan Modifications includes tables of updated economic analyses, some of which are presented by Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA). These regional snapshots give a clear picture of the current high-demand and emerging occupational trends in each of the LWDAs across the state. Helping students explore careers and skills for in-demand or emerging occupations can present new opportunities to reach higher and pursue additional credentials or degrees.

How can you learn to integrate workforce preparation activities?

Below are two online, self-paced courses offered by [LINCS](#) that local Professional Learning Communities could engage in as individuals or as a cohort:

- [Introduction to Workforce Preparation and Employability Skills \(1.5 hours\)](#): This course is designed for adult educators, administrators, teachers, and advisors who seek an introduction to the general concept of workforce preparation and the specific skills outlined in the U.S. Department of Education's Employability Skills Framework.

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Take note: There will be a one day, hands-on "Train-the-Trainer" professional development opportunity in mid/late August at the VALRC on the new statewide "Citizen Seminar," a 6-hour curriculum designed to empower low socioeconomic and low educational attainment students with basic knowledge and skills in economics, personal finance, and entrepreneurship. Flexible, by design, the curriculum can be delivered as a stand-alone introductory workshop, perhaps serving as a recruitment tool, or integrated into existing courses and programs for real-world instructional context. Stay tuned for more details.

- **[Workforce Preparation Activities in the Classroom: Contextualizing Employability Skills for Deeper Learning \(1.5 hours\)](#)**: This course is designed for adult educators, administrators, teachers, and advisors who would like more familiarity with how workforce preparation and employability skills can be incorporated into instructional activities.

Through VALRC, there are several ways to learn more about incorporating these skills and competencies into your instruction.

- **Contextualization in Action (6 hours, on-site)**: This training is designed to address the importance of integrating contextualized instruction in adult education; participants review key definitions and integration models, analyze classroom-relevant examples, and practice planning contextualized lessons and activities. Contact VALRC’s Jeffrey Elmore or Kate Daly Rolander for more information or to schedule a training.

- **Building College and Career Readiness and Workforce Preparation Skills (3 hours, on-site)**: This workshop introduces Virginia’s [Workplace Readiness Skills](#) and is designed to assist instructors in integrating workforce preparation into academically rigorous, standards-based instruction. Participants will engage in hands-on instructional and lesson planning activities with a focus on writing, reading, and discussion skills. Contact VALRC’s Hillary Major for more information or to schedule a training.

For more resources, see the chart below. 

Heidi Silver-Pacuilla is Adult Education Coordinator at the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education in the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

Workplace Preparation Resources

Resource	Summary
IET Blueprint	Find workplace resources listed at the bottom of the page.
Workplace Literacy Guide	This guide presents practices and procedures that can be adapted to a variety of workplace literacy programs.
Skills to Pay the Bills	This curriculum for young adults in transition (ages 14-21) focuses on mastering soft skills in the workplace.
Bridges to Careers for Low Skilled Adults	This is a program development guide for implementing bridge programs, which help improve adult basic skills.
Life Skills, College, and Career Readiness Guide	According to LINC, “This guide provides suggested classroom tasks that combine academic knowledge and skills described by the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education with behaviors and composite skills needed to succeed in college, workplace, and civic life (essential competencies).”
Bridging Cultural Gaps in the Workplace	This curriculum is designed for immigrants and refugees who are entering or currently part of the workforce.
Employability and Soft Skills Manual	Drawn from youth workforce development efforts, this manual provides guidance to work readiness training; it includes checklists and rubrics.

Virtual Reality: The Future of Adult Learning

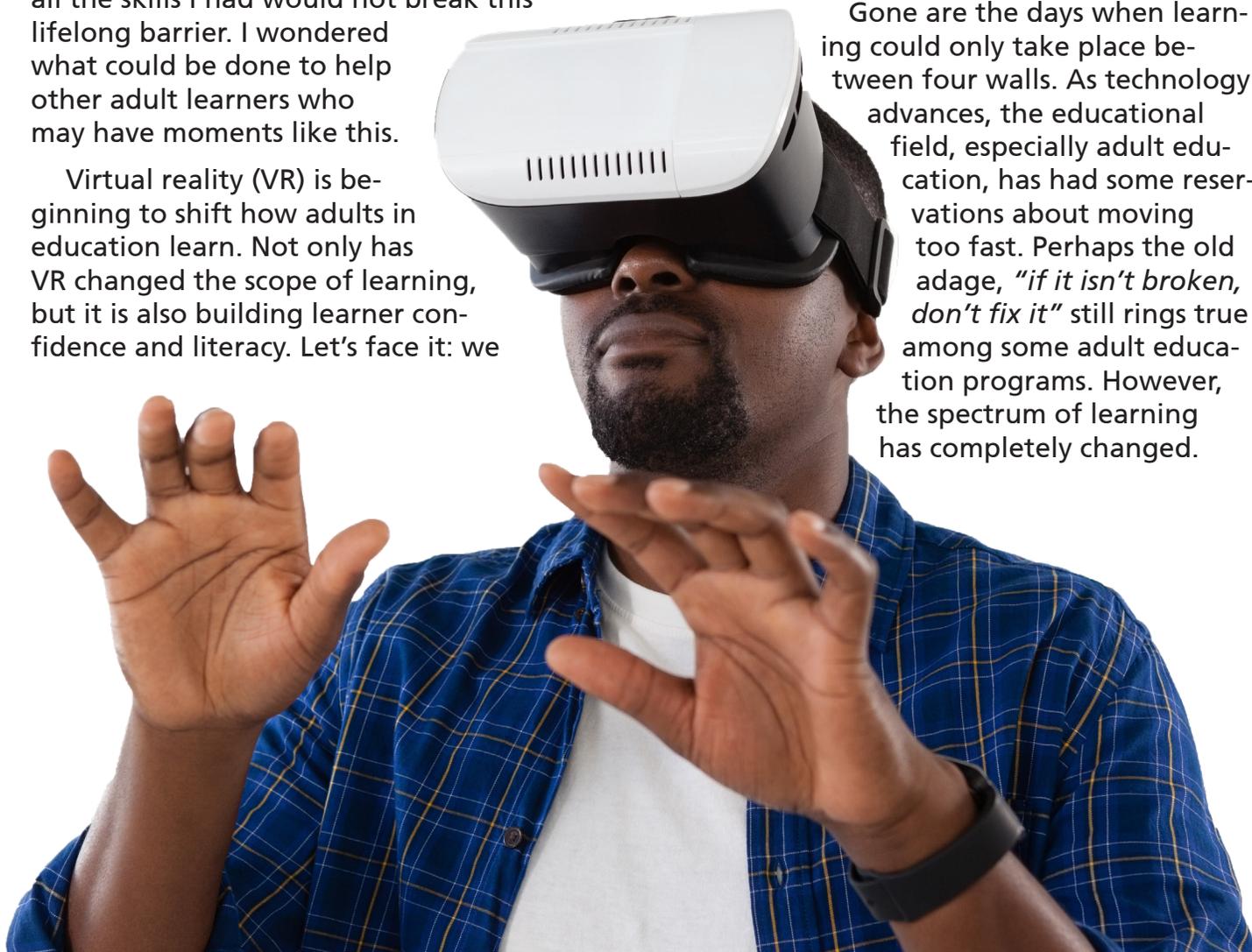
by Tony Ryals

I turn around as a student of mine, April, storms out of the classroom. This is the fourth night our GED® class has worked on fractions. We have tried every type of method, worksheet, and activity to reach the students. She finally returns. Her eyes are a bit glossy and she apologizes, “Mr. Tony, I am sorry. I just don’t understand fractions. I never have. Do you know how embarrassing it is to have a son in fourth grade and you can’t help him with fractions?” In her moment of vulnerability, she shared that she dropped out of high school at 15 and it was her dream to attend college to become an anthropologist. At that moment, I knew that all the skills I had would not break this lifelong barrier. I wondered what could be done to help other adult learners who may have moments like this.

Virtual reality (VR) is beginning to shift how adults in education learn. Not only has VR changed the scope of learning, but it is also building learner confidence and literacy. Let’s face it: we

cannot escape technology. No matter our age, socioeconomic status, or location, we can see technology in our everyday lives. Just think of our mobile devices: according to the Pew Research Center’s [Mobile Fact Sheet](#) (2018), 95% of Americans own a cell phone of some kind. 94% of adults ages 18-29, 89% of adults ages 30-49, and 73% of adults ages 50-64 own a smart phone. These statistics remain in the upper 90th percentile in urban, suburban, and rural demographics. Technology is part of our everyday lives. Our smartphones are more than just Facebook and selfie depositories; they can be used to advance adult learners.

Gone are the days when learning could only take place between four walls. As technology advances, the educational field, especially adult education, has had some reservations about moving too fast. Perhaps the old adage, “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” still rings true among some adult education programs. However, the spectrum of learning has completely changed.



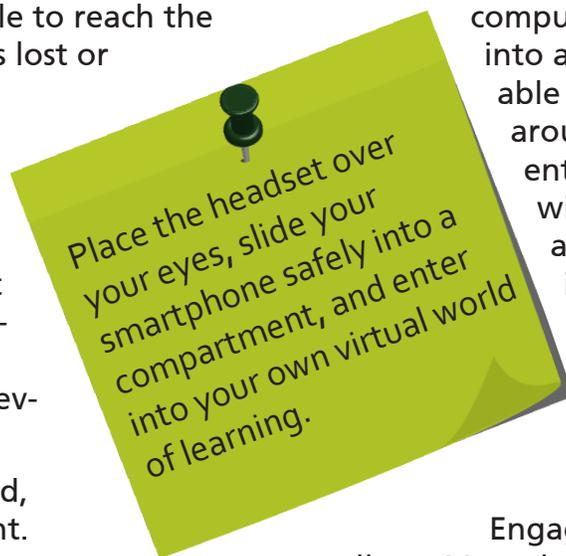
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Learning today is more than just notetaking, lectures, and textbooks. Learning has become engaging, creative, and forward-thinking. VR is a resource that may be able to reach the students who feel all hope is lost or fear traditional learning environments. It may help build confidence as a student works and learns on their own. Technology resources are more than just a fun way to learn; they provide pathways that can lead students to success and achieving their goals.

As an educator in this field, buy-in is extremely important. As a GED® instructor, I see how students come and go; they are passionate about completing their education and, then, life happens. VR may be the answer to these issues. Learning can take place outside of school buildings. Enrollment may increase as VR learning platforms are created to allow students to learn on the go. Blended learning opportunities can allow adult learners to continue their education, even when “life happens.” [An Education Week research round-up](#) cites Julia Freeland, a research fellow at the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, on the need to think beyond the “average” student in evaluating technology integration. “The whole power of blended learning ... lies in its ability to personalize education to meet individual students’ needs” (Davis, 2015). VR has the ability to meet adult learners where they are and lead students on a personal path of success.

Virtual Speech and Engage are just a few platforms that are leading the VR cavalry in adult education. Virtual Speech is an immersive learning platform that not only educates, but builds confidence. Virtual Speech allows the user, through their smartphone, to enter into a unique VR experience through a headset. Headsets range from \$14.99 to \$99.99; place the headset over your eyes, slide your

smartphone safely into a compartment, and enter into your own virtual world of learning. This virtual world is not like a regular computer game; you are immersed into a virtual learning simulation, able to grab things and move around in a world that is different from your own. Specifically, with Virtual Speech, learners are trained in leadership, job interviewing skills, and even public speaking. Virtual Speech allows these immersive learning simulations to be accessible through a smartphone, anywhere.



Engage is a VR platform that allows 30 students to virtually interact and learn with one another. A teacher can record a lesson and provide virtual and immersive elements to a class. For instance, if you are teaching about the solar system, learners can virtually pick up different planets, explore the surface of Mars, or see the rings of Saturn. The great part of this software is that these lessons are created for you, or you can request lessons that fit the needs of your students. Assign a science project where students mix chemicals, or take the students on a virtual field trip through an erupting volcano, all while you moderate what is happening every step of the way. As a teacher, you have the opportunity to think creatively about how to design a lesson that will have the best impact on your learners. Engage makes the set-up process very easy for teachers:

1. Choose a design for your classroom.
2. Add interactive elements that go along with your lesson (i.e., a blackboard where a student can work on math problems).
3. Record your lesson.
4. Observe students in real-time or watch the recorded version at a later time.

These immersive learning classes engage adult learners, allowing them to explore elements of a lesson that may not be accessible

in a traditional adult learning setting.

While VR platforms are fun and engaging, they are also a solution to a problem. The life of an adult learner is busy, and getting an education should not feel like a burden. VR is an investment in providing more opportunities to learn. As a teacher, you want to feel a sense of ownership over your lessons and curriculum. Virtual Speech and Engage are useful platforms that allow teachers to still have this ownership and to check in on student progress. VR is not a way to take over the field of adult education: it adds to the options available to meet an adult learner's needs. After a week of spending time learning virtually, students might write a report on what they learned and present it during a face-to-face class. Students could also complete VR lessons while on vacation or throughout the summer; VR learning can potentially fill the gaps where funding and resources fall short.

As an educator, you also want to reach every student, to see them achieve their goals and provide for their families. However, not all students learn at the same pace or in the same way. VR provides an option for students to work outside the classroom, at their own pace, at their own time. How amazing would it be if April was able to use VR technology as a hands-on way to learn fractions? She could manipulate pieces and parts of a whole or complete hands-on fraction drills that build her confidence. This resource could be the thing that helps break a barrier for her. She would then be able to sit at the kitchen table with her son and help him learn fractions.

Overall, VR offers unique possibilities for technology-integrated instruction. Most VR platforms offer support to educators on how to properly use the technology and provide the best learning experience

for each student. The future of education will be driven by efforts to find more ways to provide access, engagement, buy-in, and convenience for all learners from all walks of life. Through technology, learning can take place at home, on a lunch break, or on the bus. While VR is still new in the field of education, the future looks very bright. The same smartphones that the majority of Americans hold in their hands are shaping how, when, and where learning can occur. Technology in education is not only creating unique ways of learning, but it is breaking down barriers for adult learners everywhere. 

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Teaching with Technology at REEP

by Beatrice Lele and Hilary Major



Micayla Burrows with students from REEP's first Northstar Digital Literacy class; by the end of the class, students had earned 70 certifications in different Northstar modules.

English language learners work in pairs, leaning toward each other [to show pictures they have snapped on their smart phones](#). As a warm up conversation activity, students are enthusiastically discussing their photos. The teacher shares that she assigns photo topics that relate to classroom units, from food to careers; students often bring in photos from their own homes and workplaces.

Beginner level students collect vocabulary words that are used frequently at their workplace or describe a job they are interested in pursuing. Their teacher records the words on their mobile phones; [students listen to the recording several times, practicing correct pronunciation](#). With the teacher, they review opening the saved sound file so they can retrieve it when they need it.

[A volunteer instructor walks students through the process of using Skype](#), from connecting to WiFi and creating their own [Skype](#)

accounts on their phones to talking in English with other students who are sitting in the center's reception area or another classroom. Excited students are eager for more conversations.

These are just a few of the ways Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) educators have infused technology into their English language instruction. REEP's mission is to prepare adults to achieve their personal, professional, and academic goals by providing the highest quality instruction for English, workplace skills, community participation, and digital literacy. REEP has a long history of investing in technology integration, thinking deeply about technology integration and incorporating computer labs in the 1990s; developing the [REEPworld.org website](#) in the early 2000s; and including a designated Instructional Technology Coordinator (ITC) position on staff for the past two decades. Current ITC Michele Cona emphasizes that



A beginning level student uses REEPworld.org.



2017 Northstar teacher certificates



Teacher Darlene Fahrenkrug works with a basic computer class for ESL students (July 2017).

the REEP curriculum, which is “student-centered and needs-based” leads the way. Technology can transform learning, but its role is to support instructional best practices and language and life-skill development. Over time, the focus has shifted from technology access to the digital literacy skills that will help students, even at the most basic levels, be self-sufficient. Today, students often come to REEP “with powerful communication devices in hand,” but face an environment in which a wide range of daily transactions are digital: a student-centered curriculum must work to ensure technology is not a barrier to adults’ ability to communicate. REEP teachers make the classroom decisions that support this goal, and program-wide professional development assists their efforts. Every in-service incorporates technology; instructors collaborate and share across sites using online

workspaces such as wikis and [Google Groups](#). “We have to model,” Michele says; to be effective instructors, teachers themselves need to use technology in “personally and professionally relevant ways.”

PROGRESS had the chance to interview two REEP teachers, Darlene Fahrenkrug and Micayla Burrows, about their use of technology. Darlene has taught most ESL levels at REEP, currently teaching intermediate and advanced conversation and pronunciation. Micayla is the digital literacy teacher, the IET coordinator for digital literacy, and an ESL teacher. Both have taught preparation courses for [Northstar digital literacy certification](#). When asked what types of technology she uses in the classroom, Darlene provided a varied list, from hardware (a computer and projector,

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laptops, smartphones, smart pens) to social media and other interactive or collaborative platforms ([Google Classroom](#), [Gmail](#), [Quizlet](#), [Kahoot!](#), [SlideShare](#)) to websites selected primarily for their learning content ([Breaking News English](#), [Voice of America](#), [YouTube](#), [dictionary.com](#), [collinsdictionary.com](#), [gcflearnfree.org](#), [sense-lang.org](#)). Micayla shared a similarly diverse list of tech-based resources and instructional aids: “In the intensive English class every week, we use laptop computers during a computer lab. Computer lab activities range from using English language learning software to Internet navigation activities ... We also use mobile devices for a range of activities including” messaging, email, polls, quizzes, and vocabulary practice. Her digital literacy class also utilizes Google Classroom for assignments and activities.

In discussing her technology choices, Darlene explained, “I look for meaningful ways to support what we are doing in class with extra practice and to provide additional resources for out-of-class extension or reference.” In her experience, it is best to start small and model each step in the process when first introducing technology, so that students don’t get overwhelmed. Later lessons can add additional steps or features, with students learning bit by bit as they progress. It can be helpful to give students “a checklist of steps so that they feel like they can do it on their own and be successful.” Micayla chooses technology based on how it complements REEP’s life-skills curriculum, how popular it is outside the classroom and with students, and userfriendliness. “For example,” she stated, “the majority of students in most of my technology assessments state that they currently use WhatsApp, so I choose to use WhatsApp as a class communication tool. WhatsApp messenger is extremely easy and accessible to use for the students.”

“Students love being able to practice on their own and access resources independently.”

“I begin by giving my class a technology needs assessment,” Micayla continued. “This self-assessment guides my technology use in the classroom. In a beginning level English class, I get my students connected to WiFi and using a communication tool like WhatsApp during the first week of class to have as a standard communication tool throughout the cycle. Every week, I build on the types of activities using WhatsApp. By the third or fourth week of the cycle, I introduce collaborative in-class activities using mobile devices, such as Kahoot! quizzes or Quizlet Live to practice the vocabulary and grammatical structures students have been learning. In the first two or three computer labs, I have students work on English language learning software, after I have the students use different practice sites on [REEPworld.org](#), REEP’s online site for English practice. By the seventh week, I have the students compose an email about the topic they have been studying. In this past cycle, the

students were studying housing and wrote an email describing their home. I have then grouped stu-

dents in cross-ability pairs for a collaborative assignment using Google Docs. For example, after working to complete a simplified resumé in class, I have given each student in a group particular personal identification information for a fictional person. In a document I share with the group, the students complete an information gap activity to write a resumé. [In the next] computer lab, I have students write their own resúmes using the same template on Google Docs.”

“Students love being able to practice on their own and access resources independently,” Darlene states. According to Micayla, “[w]ith technology, many more students are practicing English outside of class. ... Communication tools such as WhatsApp allow for students to write or record short messages to the class in their free time as well as [communicate with teachers

about] assignments, scheduling changes such as room changes, and other notifications.” The teachers monitor the success of their technology-integrated instruction through student feedback, including student surveys; formative assessment; and paying attention to increased class participation – and smiles. For Micayla, signs of success include students following up by email after class to clarify information and seeing students studying on their phones as they wait for class to start.

The teachers identified numerous benefits of teaching with technology. “[D]igital literacy skills and technology skills” are “becoming more and more necessary to succeed in the U.S.,” Micayla asserted. “Technology also allows students to be supported in more tailored, differentiated ways. Often it can help to make lessons personally relevant and multi-level.” Darlene also discussed technology’s ability to allow students to work at their own pace, adding that it “is especially useful for listening practice, because [students] can listen to something over and over again (sometimes at slower speeds) until they feel comfortable.”

There are challenges to introducing different technologies for classroom and student use. Both Darlene and Micayla noted that keeping up-to-date with a tech scene that is constantly changing can be difficult. Darlene shared that it’s not always easy to “figure out which [tech tools] are going to be a good fit for your students. For ELLs, sometimes a great website will have instructions that are just too wordy. ... I look for resources that are free and don’t require an account.” For Micayla, the “biggest challenge is knowing how to teach and model technology skills in a way that doesn’t end up taking too much of the practice time.”

Finally, the REEP teachers provided a few recommendations for other instructors who want to increase their technology use:

- Remember to teach students information security and the skills to evaluate online content. “Digital literacy is critical for our students,”

states Darlene. “It is important to practice in class so that students feel comfortable. They may use Facebook, but do they understand the privacy choices they are making or safe information to share online?”

- Micayla recommends “using at least three different types of technology in every class. It’s always good to test it out and become familiar with it, but the best advice I can give is to go for it! The best way to see what works, what doesn’t, and how to improve is trial and error.”
- “Even if [you or your students] don’t like computers, set a goal to take one small step this cycle,” Darlene encourages. “Try one new website or program that supports an activity in class. Allow time for things to go wrong and have a sense of humor about it.” 

Learn More:

- Explore tech tips and other spotlight techniques on [REEP’s YouTube Channel](#).
- Read Darlene Fahrenkrug’s [blog post on using Quizlet for collaborative activities](#).

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Learning Games for Adults

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technology-enriched learning as an impactful education tool in today's society. His game-based products aim to improve learning among adults. He mentions access as a huge component of technology-enriched learning. This type of 24/7, 365-days-a-year learning is essential to the field of adult education. Ira says, "Adult learners have a desire to acquire skills, but they have an absolute responsibility to their jobs and families." This responsibility builds a barrier between the adult learner and educational and workplace readiness programs, a barrier that contributes to low completion and retention rates in adult education. Ira notes that one third of adult learners drop out of educational programs, while another third make measurable progress. Learning Games Studios has found a worthwhile way to address completion barriers and low skill gain through their game-based learning app, Xenos. This app uses a playful and interactive game-based format. The virtual world game sends learners on missions that help build English language, literacy, and technology skills.

"Technology-enriched learning can be done inside the lifestyle of the busy adult learner," explains Ira. Technology-enriched learning provides adults access to academic content at any time from their mobile devices; the learning is, quite literally, in their own hands. Not only does technology-enriched learning provide access, "it deepens learning, causes reflection, and teaches 21st century skills." Technology-enriched learning also provides equity, Ira explains: "80% of people have smartphones at all levels of income." Imagine if each smartphone were equipped with technology-enriched learning software for the on-the-go adult learner. These devices are extremely powerful when used in the right way.

Ira and his company work to provide access and equity through their game-based learning technologies, which have won a Gates Foundation grant and earned an X Prize semi-finalist position. Research has shown that technology-enriched teaching is changing the trajectory of learning in adult education. After conducting efficacy research with Xenos, Ira and his team saw incredible results. Not only were retention rates and program completions doubled, but in a 12-week, large-scale field study, 44% of participants improved in listening at NRS level 1-3 and 62% of participants improved in reading at NRS level 1-3.



X-prize semi-finalist Ira Sockowitz will be a keynote speaker at the Adult Education and Literacy Conference, July 2018.

Ira continues to stay mission driven, with a desire to reach and impact unserved adult learners around the world with his product. From his game-based learning product, he plans to release a direct-to-consumer product to impact the unserved. He is also partnering with the U.S. Conference of Mayors to develop game-based learning pilots in numerous cities throughout the U.S. Ira is not stopping there and continues to be an advocate for technology-enriched learning among unserved populations. His continued forward thinking will surely change the way adult education views technology-enriched learning. 

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2018 PROGRESS CALENDAR

APRIL

25-28 NCTM Annual Meeting (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) Washington, D.C.
<http://www.nctm.org>

30 Universal Design for Learning TEAL Online Course Begins
tinyurl.com/teal2018



MAY

4 Strategic Grant Writing Workshop Lynchburg, VA
tinyurl.com/valrcMay4grants

21 Student-centered Learning TEAL Online Course Begins
tinyurl.com/teal2018



JUNE

11 Deeper Learning Through Questioning TEAL Online Course Begins
tinyurl.com/teal2018



JULY

17-20 Adult Education and Literacy Conference Williamsburg, VA

