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## Improving Workplace English Instruction

by *Helene M. Bumbalo*

**M**easuring outcomes is common in classes for English Language Learners (ELL). We give proficiency tests and evaluate our students, identify weaknesses and strengths, determine abilities and plan new challenges or remediation efforts. At course end, we have final grades or assessment scores.

But how do we measure success in workplace English classes? Do we measure outcomes in grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and/or comprehension skills? Is success measured by what percentage attains certification or whether students obtain employment?

Workplace English instructors are motivated by their desire to help learners become successful employees. Their intentions are strong, yet many workplace English instructors know only the basics of "the real world of work." While their students may be successful in their classroom, they may not be successful in the workplace.

In order to support authentic learning and, thus, authentic workplace success, instructors can increase their effectiveness by shifting their approach. Using the following "formula," instructors can be more effective in preparing students with the language and cultural behaviors needed to obtain and maintain employment: curiosity, a career management process, attitude, workplace knowledge, real-world learning materials, and support.

*Continued on p.2>>>*



# VCU



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ADULT LEARNING  
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# VCU

## Curiosity

Instructors may recognize that teaching workplace English is challenging. Having a teaching background hasn't often exposed them to many of the [12,000 job titles](#) that are listed in the USA. *Curiosity*, that strong desire to learn or know something, is therefore critical for teachers so they can approach this specialty with an open mind and forge new ideas about "the world of work." Without *curiosity*, instructors won't know what they don't know...and need to know!

## Career Management Process

Having a long-lasting and viable career doesn't just happen, not in today's workplace. Gone are the days when one got hired and expected to retire after 35 years with a "gold watch." Due to multiple factors including rapid technological advancements, the demands of corporate shareholders, mergers, acquisitions, individual retirement plans, outsourcing of job functions abroad, the elimination of jobs due to automation and AI, and other factors, individuals need to actively navigate their career pathway as if they are a "free agent." Displaced mid-career professionals trying to re-create a career path in the USA might be sitting alongside other language learners who have never held any jobs at all. Their English levels might be the same; their position on their career continuum might be very different.

The career process must include continuous self-evaluations of interests, values, and talents; goal setting; identification of barriers; planning; and implementation of the plan as well as continued review and modification of that plan. This is a lifelong process. Workplace English instructors who understand this process can help students identify where they are on this continuum, and teach accordingly. Meeting the students where they are allows for authentic and relevant learning that supports successful and continuous employment.

## Attitude

For most of us, the adult knowledge seekers in our classrooms come from very different backgrounds than we do. For many of them, that might include a loss of core family, fleeing from violence with resultant PTSD, different parenting norms, loss of status, education degrees that are not recognized in the USA, religious differences, financial struggles, and/or unstable housing, let alone a lack of English knowledge and fluency. These differences can create and even maintain a marginalized workforce status. As instructors, it is hard to observe these difficult circumstances and maintain empathy but not slide into sympathy, which by its nature sets up a "one up/one

down” scenario. Unless we uncover our unconscious attitudes, the implicit bias that likely exists within us can impede our instruction and may even result in subtle micro-aggressions. Classroom micro-aggressions can range from asking the student in a hijab to explain Ramadan to her classmates to admonishing the Chinese student to speak up more. It is imperative that we explore our attitudes toward our learners to avoid creating an environment that feels unsafe.

### Workplace Knowledge

So much focus is placed on performance at work. You hear phrases like, “I hit it out of the ballpark,” “I put in 110%,” “I made it faster, better, cleaner, more efficient,” et cetera. However, performance is really only one third of what is considered when measuring workplace success. The other two factors are networking and personal brand. Networking can be difficult for non-native speakers who tend to cluster and isolate away from American coworkers, yet accomplishing this can promote career success. Personal brand, that “gut” response others feel when thinking about someone, will also either help or hinder our students. Teaching both the language and concepts of these two additional measures is essential for our students to not just get a job, but keep a job.

### Support

Workplace English instructors need to juggle expectations and requirements from their funding sources and legislation. Making this type of suggested shift in approach may seem overwhelming or impossible; however, integrated education and training (IET) includes workplace readiness activities that dovetail easily with the ideas in this formula. The “Being More Effective in Teaching Workplace English” training has been designed by this author and VALRC, and will be offered in 2019. Come explore real world workplace readiness activities, brainstorm with others, expand your skills, and improve the real world outcomes for your students. Hope to see you in 2019! 📍

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***“...performance is really only one third of what is considered when measuring workplace success. The other two factors are networking and personal brand.”***

### Real World Learning Materials

While textbooks may provide a foundation for learning workplace English, our knowledge seekers need to connect to local newspapers, community happenings, job boards, search engines, company websites, and press releases. These provide ways to expand targeted vocabulary, real world aptitude, and implicit learning necessary for workplace success.



# A Look at the 2017-2018



## Virginia Adult Education Performance Data

*by Virginia Department of Education staff*

**H**ow was 2017-2018 different from the previous year? How closely does your program data reflect the state trends?

First, watch the YouTube [video recording](#) presenting the 2017-2018 adult education demographic and performance data in Virginia. The presentation will give you the high-level story of the state data. Then, read through the article below, which poses questions about the data and offers options to consider for addressing some concerns. Look at your own class, program, and regional data as well as the economic realities in your region as you consider solutions to the questions posed.

### Demographics

Virginia's program year (PY) 2017-2018 total enrollment was down from PY 2016-2017 by 1,112 students, from 19,208 to 18,096. Although there is a national trend for declining enrollments in adult education and community colleges as the economy picks up, is that the full explanation? Was enrollment down in your program and region, and if so, what were contributing factors?

We see that 25-44-year-olds are the largest age group by far, at 54 percent of the total population. These are adults in their prime working and family-raising years, yet they are finding time to add education to their already-busy lives. How does your program help these busy adults succeed in reaching their educational, family, and work goals?

Just over half, 51 percent, of our students reported at intake that they were employed. That percentage is slightly higher than the previous year when it was 49 percent. Meanwhile, a quarter of students identified as being out of the labor force. Do you know why a segment of your students reported being out of the workforce? Do you see students benefiting from the workforce preparation instruction and occupational training offered through your program and reentering the workforce?

Adult education students often adjust their stated participation goals as they begin to learn of new options and gain confidence. Although the state-level data does not allow us to track whether students who initially identified as out of the labor force do gain employment, these are learner trajectories that you might hear of locally that are worth sharing as success stories with your workforce partners and inspirational stories for recruitment efforts.

Do you know where your students are employed? From the student records that were matched with employment records from the Virginia Employment Commission, the industry category with the highest percentage of employed students is the accommodation and food services industry, followed by retail trade, and health care and social assistance (slide 7). Jobs in these industries will very likely require skills in public-facing interaction. Do you have connections with employers in

your community? Do you know what these employers value and reward in their employees so that you can address those skills in your program?

### Performance

Overall, Virginia achieved the 43 percent measurable skill gain (MSG) attainment rate that was our federally negotiated target. This is terrific news and is thanks to all the teachers and tutors who delivered high-quality instruction, to the administrators who provided direction and leadership, and, of course, to the students whose diligence, dedication, and persistence led the charge toward our goal. Great job everyone!

Slides 12 and 13 in the video show the PY 2017-2018 enrollment percentages and measurable skill gain (MSG) rates by educational functioning levels (EFL). The intermediate levels in both Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) accounted for over half of the total state enrollment. ABE levels 3 and 4 totaled 5,416 students and ESL levels 4 and 5 totaled 4,699 students. But as shown on slides 13 and 14, the intermediate levels were not the highest-performing levels. Slide 14 shows that 10,407 students made an EFL gain; that means that 7,689 students did not stay in programs long enough to be post-tested or otherwise make a gain. The state performance overall would be strengthened if we assisted more students in the intermediate EFLs to make gains.

What does the performance data show from your program or classes? Which are your largest enrollment groups and what is the rate of MSG attainment per enrollment

***“The state performance overall would be strengthened if we assisted more students in intermediate EFLs to make gains.”***

group? How are you meeting the instructional and support needs of the students you serve?

The [Critiquing Adult Participation in Education](#) research project set out to learn from adults who were *not* participating in adult education. The project convened focus groups over a number of months in five states, including in the Roanoke area of Virginia. Three resulting studies share the findings and the voices of adult learners. You may have attended a session at the 2018 VAACE conference with one of the researchers, Dr. Margaret Patterson. The findings are worth considering as you address continuous improvement in enrollment, recruitment, retention, and performance in your program. You may want to pose some of the findings or quotes to your own students, graduates, or non-participating adult community members to get their reactions. Do they feel the same barriers and pressures as the study participants? Do they have different barriers arising from the local circumstances? What advice do they have for programming and services?

Sharing program and class-level data with students opens up a new dialogue with our most important stakeholders and can help us understand their perspectives in order to make our programs and services more responsive. 

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*This article was prepared by the staff of the Virginia Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.*

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# Multilevel Instruction and Adult English Language Learners

by *Susan Watson*

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**A**dult educators recognize that classes for adult English language learners (ELLs) are multilevel in many ways: age, education background, world view, first language, other languages spoken, oral language skills, print skills, and more. One aspect of multilevel instruction I have experienced is ELLs with fluent oral skills but limited reading and writing skills in their first language as well as English. It is often the case that these students did not have the opportunity to attend much formal schooling, or perhaps their formal schooling was interrupted. Whatever their background, we know that adult ELLs are global citizens who bring diverse funds of knowledge to the adult education classroom. They are already parents, workers, and citizens who manage busy lives in our communities and turn to adult education for specific purposes and needs. Arguably, language instruction is more effective when all of these circumstances are taken into consideration. However, multilevel instruction is complex. How can teachers and administrators plan for the instructional needs of such a diverse student population? In this article, I provide some practical tips and resources for multilevel instruction with adult ELLs in these four areas: (1) intake and assessment, (2) instructional strategies, (3) instructional materials, and (4) classroom management. I conclude with a list

of resources that might spark creative ideas for multilevel instruction with your students.

## Intake and Assessment

By design, many programs assess and level students' language skills during the intake process. Adult ELLs are then placed in beginning, intermediate, and advanced level classes. Still, other programs purposefully design classes to be multilevel, calling them "intermediate-advanced," or "multilevel beginning." It is also possible that ELLs of all skill levels are placed into one class. Placement protocols vary and need to reflect the demographics of the student population as well as program resources. Whatever the program design, it is important to know how students are placed in your class so that you can better plan for instruction. For example, if students are placed in a class based on their oral English skills, they likely speak and listen at about the same level, but their reading and writing skills could vary widely. With this class, you might consider selecting instructional materials that are not only text-based so that students have different ways to access content. Conversely, if students are placed by their English reading and writing skills, they may need more scaffolding with speaking and listening skills.

## ***“The ASPD contains important information about students’ language and education backgrounds that can be used to inform instruction.”***

Another way to learn about students’ skills is to be aware of what pre-test and post-test your program uses and how to interpret the results. Some tests, such as the BEST Plus oral interview, measure oral skills. A student’s BEST Plus score can inform you about her speaking and listening skills but not reveal much about her reading and writing abilities. The BEST Literacy test, on the other hand, assesses reading and writing but will not be very informative about oral skills. Being aware of what test your program uses and how to interpret the results is another important aspect of the intake and assessment process that can aid in instructional planning.

Finally, all students complete an Adult Student Profile Document, or ASPD, during the intake process. The ASPD contains important information about students’ language and education backgrounds that can be used to inform instruction. Such information includes home country, first language, and years of formal schooling. However, the ASPD also contains personally identifying information that must be kept secured. If you do not have access to ASPD forms, you can always ask students directly. One way to accomplish this is to incorporate what you want to learn into an instructional activity such as an icebreaker, which also benefits students by helping them get acquainted. One popular activity is called *Find Someone Who*. Here, students mingle and find other students who meet some criteria you assign, such as same home country, same birthday, same favorite color, and so on. Usually there is an incentive for students to complete the activity and/or to share the information they have collected about their classmates. You might also assign more advanced students the task of writing about their language and education backgrounds

with a carefully constructed writing prompt or template.

By taking into consideration the many ways adult ELLs’ language skills are multilevel and learning about your program’s design, intake, and assessment process, you can begin to plan for more effective instruction. More information on the [ASPD form](#) and the [Virginia assessment policy](#) can be found on the [Virginia Department of Education Adult Education](#) website.

### **Instructional Strategies**

Broadly put, an instructional strategy is the way a teacher delivers content. An important instructional strategy for multilevel teaching is *differentiated* instruction. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) describe differentiated instruction as creating a balance between content and students’ individual needs, with the goal of creating more equitable access to content and a consideration of differences in how students learn. With differentiated instruction, all students learn the same content, but they access that content in different ways (e.g., simplified language, scaffolding).

My favorite instructional strategy for differentiation is the purposeful grouping of students either by like-ability or mixed-ability English language skills. The pedagogy of group dynamics is social learning: students work together to scaffold and bridge access to content. Grouping strategies are also an effective way to engage adult learners, something we call [andragogy](#). For example, with like-ability grouping, students at the same skill level, whether speaking, listening, reading, or writing, work together on a task that is appropriate for their skills. More advanced groups receive materials with more complex language, and lower level groups

*Continued on p.8>>>*

work with more simplified language, more scaffolds, more teacher support, and so forth. All groups work on the same content but access that content in ways appropriate to their skills.

Mixed-ability groups work a bit differently because they combine students of different skill levels. Using this strategy, everyone is given a role that best fits their skills (e.g., scribe, timekeeper, presenter, and so on). Social learning and the principles of andragogy work to engage and scaffold access to content. Whichever strategy you use, grouping students frees the teacher to mingle and observe. With grouping strategies, be sure to set clear goals and objectives so students know what is expected of them and how they can benefit and learn by participating. For more tips on differentiated instruction, see [this helpful blog post by Karen Ford](#).

***“...the goal of multilevel instruction is to increase opportunities for students to access content.”***

### **Instructional Materials**

Instructional materials include textbooks, worksheets, videos, realia, and so on that teachers use to represent the target content. By differentiating the materials, the teacher begins to create more opportunities for students to access content. For example, you might change the reading level of a text that students read. More advanced readers receive a more complex version of the same text. The [Newsela](#) website is helpful here because it offers different Lexile levels of the same article. For more advanced ELLs, visit the [News in Levels](#) website for world news articles in varying lengths. You might also use the English Language Proficiency

Standards, or ELPS, as a resource for differentiating materials. The [ELPS](#) describe what a student can and should be able to do at each proficiency level. If you look across levels in a standard, you can glean ideas of what students at different levels might do. For example, ELP Standard 1 states that an ELL can “construct meaning from oral presentations and literary and informational text through level appropriate listening, reading, and viewing” (AIR, 2016, p. 21). At proficiency Level 1, a student demonstrates comprehension by identifying a few key words or phrases in the text. But, by Level 4, the student can analyze and summarize information. In practice, you might assign students into like-ability groups by reading level and have the lower level groups working on identifying information while the more advanced groups are analyzing and summarizing.

### **Classroom Management**

Classroom management refers to the many ways a teacher designs her classroom. This includes time management, physical use of space, use of resources, and so on. For example, you might arrange tables and chairs for a grouping strategy, establish classroom rules, use smartphone apps in a strategic way, or incorporate assistants and volunteers. Using volunteers and assistants is a great way to manage a multilevel class. They can pull out students for individual tutoring, and/or provide extra assistance to groups. Peer tutoring programs allow more advanced students to use their skills in creative ways. Adult students can also help you directly. For example, assign students the tasks of passing out materials, keeping track of time, being a spell-checker, and so on. [Dr Robin Lovrien Schwarz](#) advocates for learning stations where students work independently, in pairs, or in small groups to access and master content. Learning stations require an investment of time at the onset but can be used over and over. They can be computer-based or physical spaces and materials.

## Resources for Multilevel Instruction

1. [LINCS: Promoting the Success of Multilevel ESL Classes from CAELA](#)
2. [British Council Teaching English: Adapting Materials for Mixed Ability Classes](#)
3. [Civics It Up! Techniques Bank](#)
4. [Colorín Colorado: Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners](#)
5. [Fluent U English Educator Blog: The Only Tool You Need When Teaching Multilevel ESL Classes](#)
6. [Teaching English Games: ESL Multilevel Activities](#)
7. [English Club: Teaching English to Multi-level Classes](#)
8. [Teaching in the Multilevel Classroom from Pearson](#)
9. [English Language Proficiency Standards](#)
10. [News in Levels](#)

In conclusion, finding ways to address the multilevel language learning needs of adult ELLs leads to more effective instruction. We know that adult ELLs are always multilevel in some way, whether by language skill, experience, first language, or something else. I argue that meeting multilevel needs is an important distinction between adult education and K12 instruction, and it requires adult educators to be flexible and creative instructional planners. While it is not realistic that we can meet every need, the goal of multilevel instruction is to increase opportunities for students to access content. I believe that learning everything we can about students, program design, strategies, and resources can help us develop a multilevel practice. 

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*Susan Watson is ESOL Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.*

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- American Institutes for Research (2016). *English language proficiency standards for adult education*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2010). *Leading and managing a differentiated classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

An illustration of a desk setup for learning. In the center is a laptop with a screen showing a website with icons for a graduation cap, a book, a globe, and a pencil. To the left of the laptop are a pair of white headphones and an orange folder. To the right is a white coffee cup with a spoon. In the foreground, a person's hands are shown typing on the laptop keyboard. In the bottom right corner, a tablet displays a similar website interface.

# App-to-Speed Learning Circles in Adult ESOL Programs

by *David J. Rosen, Ed.D.*

A learning circle is a group led by a teacher, staff member, or volunteer facilitator whose members all share an interest in the same subject or topic. It's a non-formal, organized study circle that includes an online course or other online learning resources. Learning circle topics have included English language learning, high school equivalency preparation, public speaking, storytelling, fiction writing, American Sign Language, basic computer skills, work-related learning and many other topics. In addition to the online learning, they typically meet once a week, face-to-face, for 90 minutes to two hours for a set number of weeks, typically ranging from four to twelve. The main host of learning circles in communities in the U.S. is public libraries; however, an increasing number of adult ESOL programs are also offering them to help adults on their waiting lists for English classes, to supplement or intensify their English language learning in classes, and for other reasons.

This article is about how, through offering learning circles, adult ESOL programs can help immigrant community members to quickly learn and effectively use free or low-cost apps to improve their English language skills. Toward the end of the article is a list of adult ESOL programs from New England that participated in an 18-month pilot project

called English Now! in which the generic learning circle model was customized for adult ESOL programs by World Education in partnership with P2PU. I was the evaluator of that pilot project and continue to serve as an advisor. With funding from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, it is now being scaled up to adult ESOL programs in several states.

In the U.S. we now have a large number of free or inexpensive online learning applications (apps) for smartphones. Some have been explicitly designed for adult basic skills and workforce development students including: adult basic literacy; high school equivalency exam preparation; U.S. citizenship test preparation; and the focus of this article, ESOL. Many of these apps have been part of an international competition known as the Adult Literacy XPRIZE; its goal has been to incentivize developers to build effective learning apps for adult immigrant English language learners and for low-literate native English-speaking adults. There are now five finalist apps, and an upcoming national "communities competition" designed to get the word out about the winning app(s); there are also three more apps that were semi-finalists, and dozens more apps that were completed as part of the competition. Some are available directly to adult learners and others to the programs that serve them.

Most immigrant adults who regularly use smartphones do not know these apps exist, how to use them effectively for their learning, or how to get support for using them. Adult ESOL programs that offer an App-to-Speed learning circle can meet those needs. The goal is to help immigrants who need to learn English feel comfortable and competent in using an adult English language app to improve their English reading and writing skills. They may need more than a particular app has to offer, but the app can help, and the learning circle can help prepare them to use the app well, and, if they wish, to succeed in English language classes.

### **Preparing to Offer an App-to-Speed Learning Circle in Your ESOL Program**

There are two key roles in setting up and offering App-to-Speed learning circles: an administrative role, usually carried out by a program director or a volunteer coordinator, and the learning circle facilitator role. Here's a description of these roles:

#### **The role of the program director or volunteer coordinator:**

- Learn about learning circles. P2PU, a not-for-profit organization, and the major sponsor of learning circles in the U.S. and in other countries, can help with that. Its website, <http://p2pu.org>, has many materials describing what learning circles are and how they are being used, as well as links to short YouTube learning circle videos. Most learning circles are held in public libraries, but some are also held in adult English language programs located in community-based organizations or public schools. They could also be located in community colleges, and in other community organizations.
  - Market the App-to-Speed learning circle and recruit immigrant adults who want to improve their English language skills. Offer adult immigrants on waiting lists for English classes an opportunity to learn how to use their smartphone while they wait to
- enroll in a class or, once enrolled, to supplement their classroom learning. One of the XPRIZE app developers recently found that when learners had access to the app on their smartphone, their usage time was 400% greater than when they only had access by computer. There may be many reasons for this: for example, that learners may have smartphones but not home computers, that smartphones are always with them and can be used when they have time for short bursts of skills learning or practice, and possibly because a criterion for an app reaching at least the semi-final stage of the Adult Literacy XPRIZE competition was that it was engaging; adult learners have found that some of these apps are fun! Most, now sometimes all, adult learners enrolled in English language classes have smartphones but don't know they can use – or know how to use – them for learning. A 4-12-week learning circle can help them download free or low-cost learning apps, learn how to use them well and, equally important, help them build an online or face-to-face support group with others in their program who are also using the same app(s).
  - Choose an app. At the end of this article is an annotated list of the Adult Literacy XPRIZE finalist apps. I am not recommending any particular app, nor have I reviewed all the apps. There are many more English language apps, of course, that can be found on Google Play, or in the Apple app store, or through an Internet search. In considering an app it is important to take into account which operating system(s) your learning circle participants will use. All the XPRIZE adult literacy apps will operate on Android phones, but only a few will operate on iPhones, so it might be best to choose an app that will work on Android phones.
  - Become familiar with how to use the Learning Management System of the app

*Continued on p.12>>>*

so, if you wish, you can look at participant progress. This is also useful for the learning circle facilitator (this role is described below) to know how each person is doing, to offer help, encourage use, or acknowledge learning by awarding certificates.

- Recruit and train a (volunteer) learning circle facilitator. This person is not necessarily an English language teacher but must be comfortable and competent in using smartphones, particularly Android phones. Although a facilitator could be an ESOL program staff member, especially in the first learning circles offered, s/he could be a volunteer from a community computing center, a nearby college or university, or from elsewhere. Training would involve helping the facilitator understand what a learning circle is, what the goals for this particular learning circle are, downloading and going through lessons from the chosen English for immigrants app, and learning how to help learners, who will all be using the same app, to support each other in the weekly face-to-face meeting and possibly online using a free communication tool such as WhatsApp.

Schedule the day and time of the learning circle, the number of weeks, and length of the learning circle meetings. Although learning circles are usually four to twelve weeks in length, there is no prescribed number of weeks. Perhaps your first App-to-Speed learning circle might be six weeks, and subsequent ones could be shorter or longer as needed. Typically, a weekly meeting is 90 minutes to two hours including: group activities, use of the learning app, feedback on how participants' use of their app learning is going, and probably also peers and the facilitator sharing tips for using the app. Goals of the learning circle might be to: help learners feel comfortable and competent in using the app on their mobile phone, feel comfortable with each other as peers who want to improve their English language

skills, and feel comfortable in using a social media app so they can stay in touch between meetings. Once they are comfortable and confident in using the app and the learning circle has formally ended, it is possible that learning circle members may wish to continue to meet on their own, at the program, in a public library, or elsewhere.

#### **The role of learning circle facilitator (possibly also with the program director or volunteer coordinator):**

- Participate in training to learn how to facilitate a learning circle and, in this case, also learn how to download the app, how the app lessons are organized and delivered, and how the app's learning management system, if there is one, works.
- Interview potential learning circle participants. The purposes of the interview are to: 1) make sure potential participants understand what a learning circle is and how it differs from a class; 2) make sure participants have regular daily access to a smartphone and understand that they are expected to come to a weekly, face-to-face meeting with others who will be using the same smartphone English language learning app; 3) be sure participants understand when and where the meetings occur; and 4) collect information about the make and model of each person's smartphone, or at least determine that it is an Android phone since many of the apps will only run on that operating system. Collecting potential participants' smartphone make and model information will enable facilitators to encourage learners who use the same kind of smartphone to help each other with technical issues. This is a good example of the importance of learning circle members building a personal learning community that offers peer support.
- Introduce learning circle participants to the app. There are many ways to do this, but all will need to include downloading the app

and signing in for the first time, ideally in the face-to-face meeting that is held in a place with broadband Internet access, and where there can be facilitator support. It might be helpful, too, to have participants complete a few lessons as a group, perhaps using a smartphone connected to a multi-media projector.

- Offer the learning circle each week and in a log note opportunities, challenges, and questions. In the first meeting, as part of the onboarding, the facilitator may try to determine if all or most participants use a social media app such as WhatsApp or Facebook. If so, the facilitator could help them to set up a private online group where they can easily get in touch, and share challenges and opportunities in using the app. The facilitator might also ask if participants use text messaging and, if so, ask each one for their mobile phone number. Using an app such as Remind, the facilitator could send them a weekly text message reminder of the learning circle meeting. (Gathering this phone number, instead, might be part of the interview.)
- Provide Individual or group support in the face-to-face meeting for adult learners who may need a significant amount of help before they are comfortable and confident in using their learning app.
- Offer learning circle completers a certificate or micro-credential. Adult learners often want recognition for their learning efforts. A learning circle attendance certificate that could be framed and displayed at home is often appreciated. Some apps also offer micro-credentials and/or certificates within the app.

This article offers one picture of what might be involved in creating an App-to-Speed learning circle for adult immigrants interested in improving their English language skills. It is based in part on evaluation findings from the English Now! pilot project.

For further information about learning circles, go to <http://p2pu.org>. To learn about the English Now! Pilot project in New England read this [blog](#) article. If you plan to offer an App-to-Speed learning circle, or if you want to discuss them, please contact David J. Rosen at [djrosen@newsomeassociates.com](mailto:djrosen@newsomeassociates.com) or [priyanka\\_sharma@worlded.org](mailto:priyanka_sharma@worlded.org). 

*English Now! Learning Circles for English Language Learners was an eighteen-month project of World Education's EdTech Center in partnership with Peer 2 Peer University, Newsome Associates, and five New England adult ESOL programs that was funded by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation. The programs all used learning circles to help immigrant learners on waiting lists for ESOL classes and included: Portland Adult Education, Portland Maine; Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative, Providence Public Library; YMCA International Learning Center, Boston, MA; Notre Dame Education Center, South Boston, MA; and Immigrant Learning Center, Malden, MA. The author of this article, Dr. David J. Rosen, was the pilot project evaluator. World Education has been funded by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation to conduct a sixteen-month English Now! scale-up project with additional adult English language programs in several other states, beginning this fall.*

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This article originally appeared on the EdTech Center @ World Education's *Tech Tips* blog: <https://edtech.worlded.org/app-to-speed-learning-circles-in-adult-esol-programs>. It is reprinted by permission of the EdTech Center @ World Education.

**See the list of Adult Literacy XPRIZE Finalist Apps on p.14.**

## Adult Literacy XPRIZE Finalist Apps

- [\*\*AmritaCREATE\*\*](#): “personalized learning app along with engaging, culturally appropriate e-content linked to life skills.” Available from [Google Play](#).
- [\*\*AutoCognita\*\*](#): “applies the constructivist learning approach to engage learners through action. Low-literacy adults effectively acquire basic literacy, numeracy and life skills through a comprehensive curriculum and sound pedagogy.” Available from [Google Play](#).
- [\*\*Cell-Ed\*\*](#): text messaging app that runs on feature phones as well as smartphones. Originally designed for adult English language learners, it is now also for basic literacy learners. Watch a [YouTube Video](#). Available from [Google Play](#).
- [\*\*Learning Upgrade\*\*](#): “With the Learning Upgrade app, adults can make reading breakthroughs on their own phones. The engaging lessons filled with songs, video, and games move adults step-by-step from the fundamentals to advanced comprehension. Learning happens everywhere: on the bus, during breaks at work, or while waiting for a child at school. Adults earn five certificates as they progress through 300 sequenced lessons. The program prepares adults for success at work, earning a diploma, or taking more advanced classes.” Available from [Google Play](#) and in the Apple App Store.
- [\*\*PeopleFOR WORDS Codex: Lost Words of Atlantis\*\*](#): “a mobile adventure game for Android devices, helps low-literate adults improve their English reading skills. Based on an archeological adventure storyline, the initial gameplay revolves around crafting phonemes, onset-rime patterns, and sight words to ‘decode’ a mysterious language from a lost civilization.” Available from [Google Play](#).

# The Teachable Moment

by Vici Garber

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act brought change to our adult education classrooms. The legislation broadened our focus from basic skills and test prep to incorporate workplace skills and job obtainment. For many instructors, this change has been a challenge, requiring a new way of thinking that dared us to step out of our comfort zones. For instructors with a workforce background, these changes made a lot of sense.

With the adoption of the College & Career Readiness Standards and incorporation of programs such as Burlington English, *Stand Out*, and the National External Diploma Program, workforce preparation activities have earned their place in basic skills instruction. However, adding some slight shifts in classroom culture borrowed from job readiness classes can continue to help adult learners compete in the job market and thrive in a career.

Shenandoah Initiative for Adult Education (SHINE) has a long-standing partnership with Shenandoah Valley Social Services. SHINE provides workforce skills instruction to Social Services' Virginia Initiative for Employment not Welfare (VIEW) clients through a two-part program: job readiness, which focuses on job acquisition, and workplace essential skills (WES), which focuses on job retention.

The classroom dynamic in job readiness and WES differs from a typical adult education classroom in that the instructor is not only the "teacher," but also functions in the role of "employer." Every situation—attention to work, tardiness or absence, appropriate dress, interpersonal relationships among learners—is addressed through a workforce lens.

Job readiness and WES classrooms become *de facto* job sites, where learners access tools such as an employment application template,

interviewing questionnaire, and a variety of resources and are plunged into the world of soft skills training. Embedding soft skills in a simulated workplace environment is essential to the success of this program. Employers repeatedly state that they can train new hires to perform job-specific skills, if only the employee would show up to work on time, put down the phone, and focus on the job. Addressing the elusive soft skill gap by turning the classroom into a simulated workplace is a way that adult education can meet this need.

In programs that are specifically designed to teach soft skills, it might feel very natural to take on the role of "employer," but can an instructor do this in an ABE classroom? The answer is certainly yes. As instructors, we are tasked with finding "teachable moments" in our classrooms. Incorporating soft skills in the context of teaching math and writing becomes more natural when instructors begin to see the classroom through a workforce lens.

Some teachable moments are subtle and may not require direct instruction. A simple note written on the board when a learner is late for class or a scheduled appointment with an instructor is a non-confrontational way of addressing a lack of punctuality. "Tardiness leads to termination" is a powerful statement. If the late-comer reports a reason for being tardy, another teachable moment presents itself. The instructor can set up the protocol to

*Employers repeatedly state that they can train new hires to perform job-specific skills, if only the employee would show up to work on time, put down the phone, and focus on the job.*

receive a text message in the future, followed by a discussion on employer expectations regarding tardiness. This situation could also lead to another workplace conversation: having a “Plan B.” The importance of a “Plan B” is also a great discussion or writing topic after an unexpected absence from class.

There may be times that a learner makes an inappropriate personal comment towards the instructor or another learner. Take the teachable moment to address appropriate communication and sexual harassment in the workplace. Some adults do not yet understand that a seemingly innocent comment could end in job termination. There are many possibilities in the everyday classroom to address workplace skills.

Our classrooms have transformed from lecture-based instruction to interactive communities. In PluggedInVA classrooms, the “4 Cs”—collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking—are emphasized during any group activity. When learners can identify how these soft skills are a part of classroom activities, they can better visualize how it will benefit them in the workplace.

The Virginia Department of Education’s [Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth](#) lists twenty-one needs identified by Virginia employers. Every day, good instructors naturally address many of these needs, but with a little specific intention, the classroom could be more workforce-focused:

- A positive work ethic is addressed daily when we praise a motivated learner.
- Teamwork is a part of our everyday classroom with peer instruction and paired or group activities.
- Diversity awareness is impossible to overlook in our melting-pot classrooms.
- The need for conflict resolution instruction could pop up unexpectedly, but a savvy instructor can transform a tense situation into a workplace lesson.

The “teachable moment” is discussing how those traits translate to the workplace and how our learners can showcase these moments in a standout job performance.

The struggles we as instructors face now, that insecure feeling of getting out of our comfort zones to turn our programs into workforce-focused classrooms, will give our learners opportunities for self-sufficiency and increased self-worth, while we instructors earn the satisfaction of changing people’s lives. 📍



*Vici Garber has served as the Regional Specialist & PluggedInVA Coordinator for Region 6 since 2015. She started her career in adult education in 200, with a focus on employment services. She has served as an instructor for GED®, ESOL, job readiness, and PluggedInVA and as co-teacher for the Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities grant cohort at Blue Ridge Community College. She can be reached at [vgarber@waynesboro.k12.va.us](mailto:vgarber@waynesboro.k12.va.us).*

# 2019

# PROGRESS CALENDAR

## JANUARY



**5** Questioning Strategies:  
Strategies to Help Teachers  
Ask Better Questions &  
Strategies to Help Students  
Ask Better Questions  
Madison Heights, VA  
[www.valrc.org](http://www.valrc.org)

**28** VALRC Winter Term Begins  
Facilitated Online Courses  
[valrc.org/trainings/index.html](http://valrc.org/trainings/index.html)

## MARCH



**9-10** Virginia Council of  
Teachers of Mathematics (VCTM)  
Annual Conference  
Farmville, VA  
[www.vctm.org/VCTM19](http://www.vctm.org/VCTM19)

**12-15** TESOL International  
Convention  
Atlanta, GA  
[www.tesol.org/convention-2019](http://www.tesol.org/convention-2019)

**31- Apr 3** Coalition on  
Adult Basic Education (COABE)  
Conference  
New Orleans, LA  
[www.coabe.org/conference-2019](http://www.coabe.org/conference-2019)

## APRIL



**1** VALRC Spring Term Begins  
Facilitated Online Courses  
[valrc.org/trainings/index.html](http://valrc.org/trainings/index.html)

## JULY



**10-12** Adult Education and  
Literacy (AE&L) Conference  
Roanoke, VA



# VCU



THE VIRGINIA  
ADULT LEARNING  
RESOURCE CENTER

Virginia Commonwealth University