Technology Solutions for Adult Basic Skills Challenges

The CrowdED Learning Solution

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The focus of the Technology Solutions for Adult Basic Skills Challenges column is common challenges of adult basic skills practitioners, expressed, for example, in the LINCS Integrating Technology group for which I am the moderator, in other LINCS groups, in my national and state conference or webinar presentations, or privately in face-to-face discussions or by phone or email. Solutions include: hardware such as desktop and laptop computers, smartphones, electronic tablets, VR Goggles, and electronic whiteboards; and digital software applications such as websites, course management systems, learning management systems, databases, and apps for mobile devices. Each article will begin with a challenge and will examine one or more possible technology solutions.

Description of the Challenge

Finding high quality, free or open education resource teaching and learning resources on the Internet is a common challenge for adult basic skills (including ESOL/ESL) teachers. Several years ago, there weren't many instructional resources on the web; now that problem has been solved, but teachers complain that it is difficult to sort out among the many instructional resources the ones that are high quality, that are for the subject they teach (e.g., numeracy/math, reading, writing, science, social studies or ESL/ESOL), for the levels of their students, and that cover the particular content standards they must address, for example the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS). There are many websites that address this challenge for K-12 teachers, including those that align lesson plans and other instructional content with the Common Core State Standards, but, in my role as moderator of the LINCS Integrating Technology group, I am often asked if there is one specifically for Adult Basic Skills teachers. Until now, my answer has been "no."

A Possible Solution

There isn't yet a fully developed, comprehensive, web-based solution to the problem. Most adult basic skills publishers have aligned their online instructional materials to the CCRS. Many of these proprietary sites offer high quality instructional materials, and it is usually easy to determine the subject and level of these materials; however, no publisher has attempted to bring all the adult basic skills online curricula into one easy-to-use comprehensive site. Adult basic skills teachers can find free or Open Education Resources for adult learners, notably in the **OER Commons** "Adult Education" level, and there have been some efforts to create new lesson plans for adult learners by teachers using a Google Documents tool and a HyperDocs template. While all of these are useful efforts, none have a vision that is large enough to address the challenge, to meet the needs as teachers describe them.

One promising solution that will provide a free searchable database of OER, free and proprietary

instructional resources, and that enlists adult basic skills teachers' support in creating and/ or recommending existing free or OER adult basic skills education lesson plans and other instructional resources, is being proposed by **CrowdED Learning**. This article is a review of CrowdED Learning's current website, how it came to be, what the project is intended to accomplish, and what free services it offers adult basic skills teachers now. We also look at the free SkillBlox tool to be developed in 2019 to take on this challenge more comprehensively.

What is CrowdED Learning?

On its website, it is described as "a non-profit organization determined to help adult educators and learners realize the promise of free and open educational resources by better aligning amazing content to the competencies and skills needed by learners and job-seekers." It is the passion of one educator, founder Jeff Goumas, and his small board of adult education advisors. As he puts it, the two problems they are trying to solve are "a surge in the creation of amazing free educational tools" but that for teachers "sifting through countless resources to find things that are effective, aligned to required skills, and easy to implement can be a daunting task." His solution is crowdsourcing, in this case, the "collective expertise (of adult basic skills teachers) to help adult learners and educators more easily connect with the best resources available, aligned specifically to the goals and needs of learners."

He favors Open Education Resources and writes that "OER can democratize learning...Great ideas are everywhere. Great thinkers are eager to share their expertise and knowledge with the world. By establishing protocols for identification, curation, creation, and delivery of resources in a more effective manner, we can make the promise of

OER a reality."

He believes that CrowdED Learning can increase the capacity of the adult basic skills education system to serve more individuals in need. "Roughly 36 million working-age Americans read at 'below basic' levels, and this number nearly doubles with numeracy. Limited education prevents 88 million of 150 million working-age adults from entering into a 21st Century career pathway, yet formal adult education serves just over 4 million learners annually. We believe universal access to free easy-to-use tools and resources that promote lifelong learning is one way increase capacity of the adult education system."

What Does the Name *Crowded Learning* Mean?

It has a dual meaning, representing both the challenge and proposed solution. The first, "crowded", as in the Internet is crowded with instructional resources, a "paradox of choice" problem that makes it hard for a teacher with limited time to sort out what is worthwhile; "crowdED" also means that, through teacher crowdsourcing, in this case ideally with the help of a large number of adult basic skills teachers, there is a solution to the problem, that teachers, curriculum developers, professional developers and others can learn from teachers which instructional resources they find worthwhile.

For Whom Has CrowdED Learning Been Designed?

Adult basic skills teachers and tutors are the primary audience, but curriculum developers, professional developers, researchers, and program managers may also find it useful. At present this does not include as a primary audience adult ESOL/ESL teachers, although the **Communication Skills Directory** does include some resources that may be useful for English

language teaching. According to Jeff Goumas, as new ESL standardized tests are developed to align to the **English Language Proficiency standards for adult education**, ESOL/ESL teachers will find more English language learning content on the CrowdED Learning website.

What Features does CrowdED Learning Offer Now?

1. Skill Directory

https://www.crowdedlearning.org/explore/skill-directory

This is a collection of web-based instruction and learning resources suitable for adult basic skills education. It includes academic, workplace and 21st Century Competencies. It does not at present include English language learning competencies for immigrants. Each of the eleven competency areas has a clickable icon that opens a downloadable PDF with resources for that subject area. Each PDF includes a link to a shared Google document version that enables teachers to add their own resources if they wish.

Academic Competencies

Reading   Writing   Mathematics   Science   Social Studies

Workplace Competencies

Communication   Essential Skills   Career Pathways

21st-Century Competencies

Digital Literacy   Financial Literacy   Health Literacy

2. Content Repositories

https://www.crowdedlearning.org/explore/content-repositories

These currently include links to three major free or OER content repositories that include:

OER Commons is a comprehensive repository of content across many subjects. OER Commons includes authoring tools, content hubs, and the ability to create groups which allows for members to organize content, discussions, and more.

Skills Commons is a free and open library of workforce training materials developed as part of the federally-funded TAACCCT grant program. Resources are searchable by industry, and it includes open courseware and showcases of model curricula and resources.

Curriki is a library of resources, both free and OER, across many subject areas, it includes curated collections of content from content partners, and organizational features that allow teachers to create, organize, and share personal libraries and groups.

3. Links to work-related professional Development Resources

This currently includes three major professional development resources for career pathways and employability skills.

https://www.crowdedlearning.org/explore/professional-development

LINCS | Adult Career Pathway Online Courses

https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/adult-career-pathways/online-courses

Set of courses for establishing career pathways programs in Adult Education. Courses available in Building Strategic Pathways, Developing Effective Bridge Programs, Designing Contextualized Instruction, Integrating Career Counseling and Planning, and Engaging Employers in Adult Career Pathways.

LINCS | Learning Portal

https://courses.lincs.ed.gov/1/

The Adult Career Pathways Training and Support Center, part of the federally funded Designing Instruction for Career Pathways initiative, provided a free professional development network for practitioners and programs interested in designing and implementing high-quality Adult Career Pathways (ACP) systems. The resources developed through this initiative were designed to help state and local adult education providers develop and deliver Adult Career Pathways systems that would successfully transition low-skilled adults to postsecondary education and employment.

AIR & RTI International—Integrating Employability Skills

https://ccrscenter.org/technical-assistance-networks/professional-learning-modules/integrating-employability-skills

From the American Institutes for Research and RTI International, this professional learning module, *Integrating Employability Skills: A Framework for All Educators*, was developed collaboratively by the College and Career

Readiness and Success Center (CCRS Center), the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center), and RTI International. Resources include downloadable PDFs of a **facilitator's guide** and **participant handouts**, as well as a PowerPoint presentation for facilitating the training course.

Additional Features Planned for 2019

Based on the **"SkillBlox" brief**, this is "a learning plan generation tool… being developed to support skill-based, personalized, lifelong learning for adult learners." It is intended to help teachers and tutors generate standards-aligned learning plans for individuals, groups of students or entire classes that can incorporate both commercially-published instructional resources and high-quality free or open education resources. SkillBlox is being designed to help teachers provide adult learners with "multiple options for learning, aligned to core skills and competencies needed for self-reliance and career mobility. SkillBlox is intended to enable teachers or tutors to: 1. Select learning resources they currently use, 2. Enter learners' levels, (defined by standard levels, grade level equivalency, or NRS levels) and/or select topics, and then from this information 3. Generate learning plans with proprietary and/or open education resources that can be downloaded, printed, or shared." In a **CrowdED blog article**, **SkillBlox** is described this way: "This alignment work is the first step in our being able to take the great resources that are out there—from various sources and in various formats—and begin curating them and aligning them to standards and frameworks that are meaningful to adult

learners and instructors. By focusing on skill-based alignment of resources, we hope to increase use and integration of free and open resources and support the continued use of quality existing resources within adult education classrooms."

Reflections

CrowdED Learning is experimenting with ways to provide effective solutions to the challenge, and they are advocating for and promoting high quality free and open education resources. The evolving website is a vehicle by which they are organizing and delivering the existing instructional resources suitable for adult basic skills education, the tools they are developing, and their findings over time. Some parts are developed, such as the Skill Directory, and the Content Repositories, at least to some extent; other needed parts, such as the *SkillBlox* feature, are being developed now, for rollout sometime in 2019. The important differences between this website and others that may appear similar include: a focus on instructional materials suitable for adult basic skills education, not higher education or K-12; the attempt to engage

a large number of adult basic skills teachers in crowdsourcing good commercial, free or OER instructional materials; and the plan to bring these together with a tool that helps teachers to easily produce individually customized or group-customized learning plans that include these instructional resources. With his background in teaching and 15 years in education publishing—more than half of which was spent at McGraw-Hill Education as the Director of Product Management for Adult and Workforce Education—Jeff Goumas has been able to secure the interest of major adult basic skills publishers in participating. His challenges may be achieving sustained funding while holding to the project vision, and getting the numbers of talented and committed volunteer adult basic skills teachers needed to attain the crowdsourcing vision; however, he has already demonstrated significant interest from both potential funders and from teachers, and in a short period he has been able to produce useful results in the Skill Directory and the Content Repositories. I look forward to seeing in 2019 the *SkillBlox* learning plan development tool.