

## ACTION RESEARCH

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**Original Question** – “How can English tutors develop approaches, using technology, to effectively develop the skills of entry level learners?” Then question was altered to: **“How can English tutors develop strategies to engage adult entry level learners, and view information technology as a positive and effective way to develop their skills?”**

**Introduction** – “Digital inclusion is about having the right access, skills, motivation and trust to confidently go online.” as defined by the government’s Digital Inclusion Team (DIT). It is suggested by DIT that 20% of the current population of the UK “citizens lack the digital capability to take advantage of the benefits the internet has to offer.” That implies a lack of basic digital skills, defined as being able to send and receive emails, use a search engine, browse the internet, and fill out an online application form.



The original question, you would assume would have been straightforward enough to answer and also the development of approaches for these learners. However, during conversations with learners from an entry level group, it was apparent there was negativity and reluctance displayed towards Information and Communication Technology (ICT) because for example the mandated job seekers are strongly encouraged to use technology as part of their job seeking and they feel this is another skill that they do not have and makes job seeking more difficult for them. Therefore through reflection on these conversations it became apparent that any approaches that could possibly be developed would probably have been pointless. We needed to understand their unwillingness to engage, and explore this further, before any methods or schemes were devised to help these learners. The group of learners ranged in age from 24 to 59.



Many of the learners questioned attend adult literacy sessions were claiming ‘Job Seekers Allowance’, some were mandated, and these learners were the most negative of all about interaction with ICT. Closer questioning revealed that mandated learners are required to complete a prescribed amount of job searching and application per week, online through ‘Universal Jobs Match’, the Department for Work and Pension’s, (DWP), digital portal. The Job Centre can then monitor if they have completed their online search hours and applications as their

sessions online are recorded. It was this 'Big Brother' aspect they were most uncomfortable about, hence their opposition.

These negative views coloured all their beliefs about ICT. We realised we would have to be creative to develop strategies that enthused and encouraged learners to build on their skills and become digitally competent. This is why we changed the question to "How can English tutors develop strategies to engage adult entry level learners, and view information technology as a positive and effective way to develop their skills?"

Poor literacy and general levels of education was another important factor with this group of learners. People who struggle with aspects of English are also going to struggle with digital language and vocabulary, further removing any incentive to become digitally literate. Fear of ICT was mentioned too, specifically around security.



elements of longevity to engage learners to continue to develop and improve their digital skills.

What was required was a very basic learning/instruction plan to engage those who were most excluded. It had to be enjoyable for those who participated, and able to demonstrate the capabilities of ICT and the internet, and "to discover the ways in which the digital world can enrich their lives." (Francis Maude, Member of Parliament (MP)). It also had to add meaning to their lives. Being competent online is about more than just the technical issues, it requires task-based skills. Even basic learners need to develop their critical cognitive skills in order to navigate the internet in a safe and knowledgeable way. For example, online users need to know how to apply a degree of healthy scepticism to search results. This may be the most difficult and lengthy time-consuming process for some. It may also be important to say that whatever method was devised it would also have to have

## BARRIERS TO USING TECHNOLOGY

	FAMILY HISTORY	UJM ICT	LITERACY	LITERACY BUDDIES	BEGINNERS ICT	EQUALITY & DIVERSITY	
TIME			1			1	2
MONEY	1	1	1	1	1	2	7
THEMSELVES		1	1			1	3
GENERAL LITERACY		1		4			5
FEEL LEFT BEHIND				1			1
DYNAMIC CHANGES IN ICT	1	1			1		3
NO BARRIERS	1		1	2		1	5
	3	4	4	8	2	5	

The table represents the collation of the findings from the questionnaire which was distributed across six courses within Wirral Lifelong and Family Learning Service.

**Research to establish learner's feelings, access and abilities towards ICT** – As a result of reflection and consequence change of direction with our research questions the decision was made to create a questionnaire which would be distributed across a cross section of our classes because we felt we were unable to make a reasonable and valid judgement based just on the conversations. 23 learners were eventually surveyed across 6 classes being run by the Skills for Life department of Wirral Lifelong Learning. Analysis of the collation of the results above has culminated in the following conclusions:

- All learners seem to use technology in some format ie a television or a phone as a minimum.
- Family History learners have gained a high level of skill before joining a class which is useful as many research areas are online databases.
- Equality and Diversity learners take their assessment online so need ICT skills to complete the course successfully.
- Literacy learners, who are Entry level and above, seem to, on the whole, have given ICT a try or are ICT natives, whereas the learners who are pre Entry have

struggled with ICT mainly due to their reading ability.

- The Beginners ICT learners stated that they knew nothing or very little about computers but made a conscious decision to come to a class and learn.
- UJM ICT learners either have given computers a try or know very little. They feel left behind. This is probably not helped by the fact that virtually all job search and application is now computer related.

Learners feel left behind with ICT for a variety of reasons, but money seems to come to the fore. This is stated by the learners but also concluded in the analysis that this is because ICT is dynamic. This constant introduction of new technology is hard to fund.

The data collection through using the questionnaire provided honest information which actually identified a completely different problem to one which had been articulated during conversations with learners.

**Intervention: Screencasting feedback** – A screencast, created by Adele Cook and Lynne Singleton from Congleton Learning Centre, was played to two groups of Universal Jobs Match (UJM) ICT learners to see whether they found the screencast useful. A screencast is basically a video with an audio overlay. The speaker gives out instructions and information as the video moves through the screens. For further information on screen casting use <http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/>

Generally learners did find the screencast useful, but felt it was something they would need outside of the classroom such as at sessions with Reachout (a company providing support whilst job seeking), independent researching at the library or in the Job Centre itself and at home, because it would act as an aide memoire.

They also said that screen casts would be useful for how to use email, but there would have to be at least three versions of this: Google, Yahoo and Live Mail.

**Intervention: Job Centre Plus** – Interviews were carried with Job Centre Plus learners as part of the research and intervention processes. The learners were asked initially to view the screencast and give some feedback. During this feedback they indicated other barriers to achieving employment, other than ICT, which had not been covered in the initial questionnaire. These barriers were different with each learner.



Many are attending ICT sessions within the Job Centre in order to increase their ICT skills for job seeking, although the main hurdle seems always to be applying for a job via an email provider and filling out online application forms. These are difficult for most job seekers due to low literacy and or ICT skills.

Classes are provided for job seekers at the Job Centre to improve their ICT and the majority become more comfortable, confident and digitally more literate after utilising the sessions.

**Intervention. Digital Literacy Session** – (delivered in public library, as part of Literacy Buddies) These sessions were very informal and offered support, information and coaching, but most of all fun.

An assessment of individual learners starting points was established, the first steps included; the parts of a computer, logging in, and keyboard skills. This was supported by websites such as ‘Big Brown Bear’ which encourages accurate typing skills.

Working through the BBC’s ‘First Click’ programme was beneficial for some learners, especially those who were very reticent about ICT. For others, training to use the internet was introduced, including a web search. This activity was supported by “internet surfing” and “internet activities” tasks from [www.skillsworkshop.org](http://www.skillsworkshop.org). These activities were used a variety of questions and involved individual research tasks. Learners had to work through at their own pace, yet remain focussed to achieve the results.

To advance the internet practice, learners were given their own research task involving a subject of their choice. One learner decided to compare the cost of season tickets at Premiership football clubs against the lower divisions clubs’ costs. Their enthusiasm and motivation for the task was noticed. The BBC Skillswise website also has interactive tasks for learners wishing to increase their general literacy skills with drag and drop exercises in small segments.



**Conclusions** – The present government is aware that 20% of adults in Britain are digitally excluded “However, to make progress on the ‘final fifth’ who remain offline and who lack the skills and confidence to make the most of being online, there is a growing need for a highly targeted response going forward.” (Khadejah Al Harbi and Lauren Kahn) and “So-called ‘digital divides’ have narrowed over time, but Internet use in Britain is still strongly stratified by age, (dis)ability, income, education. We also see great variation in people’s capabilities and activities, and the utility people get from the internet.” (Khadejah Al Harbi and Lauren Kahn)

Our sample group concluded; some 30% of these learners stated that lack of money prevented them from fully participating in the digital world. Having Broadband services at home is expensive, together with the digital hardware, be it a; desktop, laptop, tablet, or iPhone device. Because the technology is constantly changing and being updated by manufacturers, this adds to the confusion, and collectively these reasons make it unaffordable to those on low incomes. All these factors add to these learners digital isolation, together with a lack of basic digital skills, and motivation to develop the skills required to participate in the digital world many people take for granted, expect and demand today.

Locally all our council services are now being encouraged to be performed online. It is also acknowledged that “It is important that the core package of digital skills extends beyond a minimum level, to the skills required for almost all jobs. Many entry-level jobs require some degree of



These sessions were only the beginning in some learner's digital journey. Today, to consider yourself digitally literate and included requires many and varied activities to master ICT.



One particularly hard to engage learner had a new Smartphone, he was asked to find a free 'educational app'; he found a wordsearch app, which he is still using today. For some, the use of Smartphones can drive up usage.

Most learners reported a sense of feeling 'more comfortable' using ICT, in whatever format. However, to attend structured beginners ICT courses (Easy Steps Computers) for adults at all providers will incur a course cost, approximately £28.00 for 5 sessions and for some of the unemployed learners the cost is prohibitive.

interaction with digital technologies—whether this is carers, personal services, sales and sales-related jobs, transport and machine operators, delivery drivers, or cashiers. Dr Lisa Payne says: "It is a new requirement that low-skill manual employees such as cleaners need digital skills, for instance to manage their holiday requests and other HR [human resources] activities through websites."

Many recent reports stress the need to up-skill the final 20% of the population, but to do it in an informal way. Hence the rise of 'digital champions', and 'digital eagles'; to work 1-to-1 with someone to help encourage digital usage and increase their skills in a friendly, non-threatening way.

Doing nothing to up-skill the final 20% is not an option, because as a nation in the future we will all be beneficiaries as "Universal digitisation, including universal digital access, could be worth up to £63 billion in additional annual GDP growth." (The House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills 2015)

**Recommendations for Teachers** – Teachers should be aware that some learners struggle with ICT for a variety of reasons, sometimes linked to literacy or hand eye co-ordination skills. It is best not to assume that a learner has the ICT skills to use on a task. Learners do enjoy using ICT, but practice brings confidence and this needs to grow in order for competence to be acquired. Using learner's personal ICT devices eg phones in the classroom would contribute to a rise in confidence as a lack of skill will impact on the Literacy learning and sometimes create an unnecessary barrier. It is essential that the learning experience with ICT is a positive one.

Perhaps offering all adult education courses with elements of ICT as routine may start to reduce barriers to digital literacy.

Effective practice as stated by Maria Kambouri, Harvey Mellor and Kit Logan "tutors were most successful when they managed the followings strategies:

- i. have clear reasons as well as a plan for using technology

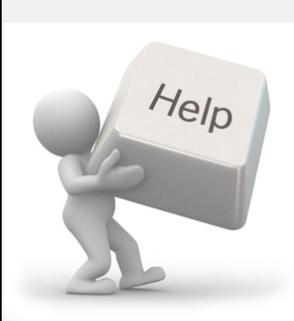
- ii. encourage learner autonomy (through managing activities). This often meant understanding how to encourage self-directed learning through boosting their confidence.
- iii. use of technology to construct (often shared) artefacts.
- iv. use of a wide range of technologies, and in particular mobile technologies to support greater flexibility in learning in any place at any time.
- v. collaborative learning was shown to be effective in terms of gaining confidence and speaking skills, and develop more effective approaches to the use of collaboration with adult learners

This study would not have been possible without the close collaboration and active participation and tutors in adult education, who not only were open to change through constant updating for their ICT skills and reflecting on their pedagogic skills, but also took risks with experimentation.”



### Recommendations for the Service -

Extra support should be given to learners and tutors using ICT as part of Literacy, where necessary. This would include support from another member of staff, up to date ICT facilities in Adult Learning Centre as well as Outreach. Dedicated ICT sessions for Entry level



Literacy learners would also be advantageous as this seems to be a need that has been highlighted by both the Digital Literacy sessions and the survey.

Training for staff is also necessary to ensure that they are confident and capable themselves with ICT developments.

### Recommendations for External Agencies -

Screencasts and links to Learning Services tutors are ways to increase Literacy and ICT skills so learners become more independent and confident as a result.

As a tutor, it has been noted, that DWP could really do with insisting that all those advertising vacancies on the UJM website follow similar methods for applying for jobs as currently the methods vary from telephoning, emailing through the UJM website, hyper linking to online application forms and external websites, using a private email provider and sending an email with an attachment of a Curriculum Vitae (outside of UJM website) and written application form or letter. The methods of applying, if reduced, would provide less frustration for the job applicants as some methods are too involved,

Classrooms in Outreach which are technologically fully equipped would allow for sessions to become more interactive.

complicated or beyond their skill level in ICT and literacy.

Examination boards should look at including ICT within examinations for other subjects for example Functional Skills English Writing Unit: write a complaint letter by hand and then word process the document or Functional Skills Mathematics answer the questions relating to a maths questions involving a table and then recreate the table using a spreadsheet programme and the appropriate formula.

**Where Now?** – A recent report from The House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills 2015 (a report for the new incoming government) states “Everyday activities—such as shopping, using a telephone and banking— increasingly require interaction with technology. Digital skills (the skills needed to interact with digital technologies) are now necessary life skills. It is not acceptable for any group to be excluded from access to digital technologies. We must aspire for the vast majority of the population to achieve the level of digital literacy needed to fully participate in society. All of this will require universal access to the internet to engage with vital public and personal services. That is why we conclude that the Government should define the internet as a utility service, available for all to access and use.”

More interactive learning should be encouraged and developed for the classroom, but it must be remembered that not all learners find ICT easy. Tutors need to be given time and the facilities to develop interactive learning. It should also be considered that educators may also struggle with aspects of ICT, and training should be offered as routine.

**Background reading references** – House of Lord, Select Committee on Digital Skills, Report of Session 2014-15, Make or Break: The UK’s Digital Future 2015, Department for Work and Pensions, Digital Strategy, December 2012, The Education and Training Foundation, Making maths and English work for all, March 2015, Further Education Learning Technology Action Group (FELTAG), 2013, Adult Learners and ICT: an intervention study in the UK by Maria Kambouri, Harvey Mellor and Kit Logan, 2006, Khadejah Al Harbi and Lauren Kahn Government Digital Service blog; Digital Inclusion Dec 2014