

Adult Education: Finally Hip to the Game | EdSurge News

Not too long ago, Santa Ana College instructor [Susan Gaer](#) found herself in class describing the steps required to obtain a passport. Her students – mostly English Language Learners of varying ages – began typing notes into their cell phones. This alarmed Gaer, given the somewhat complicated process and the limited functionality of the phones her students were using (a mix of smartphones and feature phones).

“I was almost screaming at them that they had to use pen and paper,” she recalls. But the students weren’t convinced. “Calm down, teacher,” she recalls one of them telling her. “We can use our phones just fine.” And they did.

One of the most exciting innovations/trends in adult education is the emergence of a small but growing set of mobile and/or game-oriented products and programs that allow adult learners to gain skills on their own away from class or as part of a program, without any need for a laptop, desktop, or computer lab.

Mobile learning for adults can deliver instruction in small, bite-sized snacks rather than comprehensive, multi-course meals. Adult education students often don’t have time to sit down and do traditional homework, notes Gaer.

With mobile technology, “everything the teacher can do in the classroom the student can do at home,” says adult education expert Nell Eckersley, who directs the [NYC Regional Adult Education Network](#) and is also a national expert for the [LINCS Community Technology & Learning Group](#).

“Calm down, teacher,” she recalls one of them telling her. “We can use our phones just fine.” And they did.

Estimates of the level of use of mobile technology in adult education range from 20 percent – which could include little more than students texting teachers about being late for class – to 10 percent where mobile technology is a regular part of adult education instruction and student learning. (WorldEd’s Steve Quann estimates it at even lower – 5 percent.)

estimates it at even lower, 3 percent.)

Advocates like Skylab Learning’s Alex Chisholm predict that adult education will soon experience the same shift in mentality that’s happened in K-12 education, where handheld devices were once banned but are now considered a valuable part of the learning process.

“I wouldn’t say it’s taking over adult ed,” says David Rosen, a [nationally-rekowned expert on adult education](#). “[But] there are small pockets of activity. It’s definitely coming along.”

Mobile For Adult Learners

In addition to commercial/consumer products being used in some places (like Lumosity, Duolingo, and Rosetta Stone), there are a small but growing number of mobile sites and apps focused on adult learning programs:

One example of a mobile game that already exists is Words2Learn, a vocabulary app for adult learners that allows them to download word lists and exercises onto a phone or tablet and use them offline during breaks or on the way to work. Quiz results are uploaded when students – some of them are health care students – log on, allowing teachers to monitor progress.

The [Johnson Center for Simulation](#) at Pine Technical College in Minnesota has developed a handful of games like [this one](#) for nurse’s aide students who need help with soft skills like teamwork and conflict resolution. A game focused on helping students learn how to read and use blueprints is in beta, and a game focused on the manufacturing process is under development. The older games are still in flash, but the newer ones are in HTML5, suitable for mobile use.

Even its most ardent supporters don’t think that mobile and/or gaming are the single best or most important thing to happen in adult education. For a look at other major trends and innovations, see [our previous article](#). But looking at mobile technology in adult education reminds us that there is tremendous potential for innovation that could leapfrog what’s currently going on in K-12 and postsecondary, and potentially even lead the way.

The best known example in this area is Skylab Learning. As of August, Skylab is wrapping up first full implementation of a mobile learning pilot partnership with

... ..

Boston-based Flower Bakery, which has four locations and roughly 40 adult learners in need of improving their English skills.

SkyLab is developing courses with SEIU [Service Employees International Union] in Seattle that are slated to roll out in early 2015. It has also proposed an expanded version of the Cape Cod restaurant worker pilot that could provide mobile learning for as many as 600 ELL workers over the next two years.

There are also a growing number of programs that use mobile technology as a key part of a broader effort to help adults acquire new skills and information:

OneAmerica's [English Innovations](#) effort, funded in part by the Gates Foundation, was piloted in 2011-2012. Students in the 12-week program received free laptops and internet access while enrolled. LiveMocha provided the course, called ActiveEnglish. The new version of the program would feature a full mobile platform.

Another effort, dubbed, [Cell-ED](#), is an interactive voice and text platform for teaching basic skills. Participants are asked to respond to texts, or listen and respond to voice messages. All it takes to get started is to call (or text?) in – from anywhere, anytime. No smartphone is required. Cell-ED is currently embarked on a mobile ESL [English as a Second Language] campaign with the Office of New Americans and Governor Cuomo's office in New York.

Big Opportunities for Adult Mobile/Gaming

There are a number of trends and dynamics taking place that help encourage the development of mobile/gaming in adult education:

Installed Base

One of mobile's biggest advantages is the installed cell phone base among adult learners. A large and increasing number of adult ed students have access to smartphones. In the immigrant ELL community the installed base is 80-90 percent have access to smartphones at this point, according to Rosen. In adult basic education, 40-60 percent have access to smartphones. African-Americans and immigrants are among the fastest growing adopters of smartphones.

Fewer Barriers to Innovation

There's a lot more money in K-12 education, and a lot more activity in terms of raw numbers, but there's also a lot more obstacles, say some of those involved in the space. "All the systems are so mature, everything is so locked down, that money is all tied up," says SkyLab's Chisholm, a K-12 edtech veteran. "I see how quickly we're able to move in adult ed space."

Digital Literacy Not Just for Digital Natives

One of the biggest motivations moving adult education towards technology including mobile is the arrival of two additional high school completion exams to go along with the GED, all of which have computer-based versions. Even if they lack the keyboard and mouse that most laptops and desktops provide, mobile devices can help students increase their digital literacy and get comfortable reading on a screen and accessing new pages of information.

Common Core Standards for Adults

Another fundamental motivator is the arrival of new, more rigorous standards in 13 different areas – a grownup version of the Common Core that has been endorsed by most state adult education directors nationally. These new expectations, still being implemented, will require substantial improvements in adult education outcomes – which could well include more mobile and/or game-based approaches.

Still Room For Improvement

There are an equal number of obstacles to the increased use of mobile and/or gaming in adult education:

Limited Classroom Connectivity

Unlike in K-12 or postsecondary education, Internet access in classrooms is not yet widely available in adult education sites, according to Rosen. Many programs operate in nonprofit facilities that don't have that kind of broadband access. So while materials may be available online they can't be accessed, or require students to have their own data plans.

Insufficient Teacher Preparation

While teachers like Gaer can be found here and there, there "there are many teachers in adult ed who don't use any technology at all," says Rosen. At best, they might use an overhead projector, he says. Only about 20-40 percent of teachers have smartphones, according to Eckersley.

Preference for Basic Tools

Eckersley has also found that veteran teachers prefer to convert existing materials into mobile-ready lessons or activities, using more generic tools like QR code apps and Weebly websites to create quick links to websites or videos or audio files, rather than relying on outside sources or games. Gaer reports much the same, generally limiting her use of specialized apps and tools to Quizlet.

Building for Browsers, Not Apps

Mobile is still an afterthought for most adult education programs and providers, say many of those interviewed for this series. In many cases, products are still distributed via textbooks or other physical materials, or CD-ROMs or DVDs. Materials are being moved online in some cases, but if so it's usually for some sort of desktop or laptop-based model that relies on a browser rather than an app. There are precious few apps, and even the browser experiences haven't been optimized for mobile.

Ad Hoc Development

In K-12, publishers like Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and BrainPop have offerings online already and are migrating them to mobile as quickly as they can. However, there's fairly little

developer- or publisher-level activity going on specifically tailored to the adult education market.

"Gamification" Hype

For mobile approaches that employ game-based learning, the challenge is to find products that get past superficial bells and whistles that make an activity more appealing but don't necessarily impart information or skills. A game-based app has to map closely to learning goals and specific skills, which may mean stepping away from quizlets, multiple choice items, or penalties for incorrect responses. Rewards have to be based on competencies demonstrated rather than simple completion.