

# So You Think You Can Educate Adults? | EdSurge News

So you think that edtech (and school reform in general) are full of buzzwords and hot new trends? Well, that may be true. But edtech's got nothing on adult education, which freely adopts jargon and innovation from the K-12 and postsecondary worlds and then adds its own particular set of terms and approaches.

Indeed, adult education is experiencing a much-needed surge of interest from the innovation and entrepreneurial communities, according to experts, observers, and providers. They hope that this interest will develop new human capital, improve outcomes, and attract additional resources.

Some of the developments – flipped, blended, gamified, mobile learning – are familiar trends generally mirroring those taking place in other sectors. Others trends and concepts – contextualization, “braided” funding, and “bridge” programs – are more specific to the needs of low-skill adults and adult education programs who serve them.

Here's a roundup of some of the most interesting trends and innovations in adult education from our interviews with experts and leaders in the field.

## **Digital Literacy**

While they may have a smartphone, adult learners don't necessarily know how to send or receive email, create or upload or attach documents in Word. And so the need to assess and instruct adult learners in digital literacy has become increasingly clear to program directors, state agencies, and adult education innovators. A new OECD assessment for digital literacy is slated to come out later this year, but in the

meantime Minnesota's [Northstar assessment](#) is a free online measure of skills.

## **“Bridge” Models**

So-called “bridge” programs connect those who are at or near completing their GED or ESOL coursework but need more help to enter and succeed in credit-bearing community college courses. These can be especially useful where adult education isn't offered on college campuses, according to Rachel Pleasants McDonnell at Jobs For the Future. The Chicago-based Instituto Del Progresivo Latino has created [bridge programs in nursing, IT, and manufacturing](#) that help participants move towards careers with viable living wages. A citywide effort to offer bridge programs in nursing, IT, manufacturing, culinary arts, and business services is also currently underway throughout the entire [City College of Chicago system](#).

## **Contextualization**

Making coursework more relevant to specific certifications, degrees, and careers is one of the biggest trends in adult education (which has in the past focused on generic content that has in many cases failed to retain adult learners' interests). So, for example, students interest in becoming a radiology technician would learn reading skills, math, and English with the vocabulary, practices, and other requirements of the field in mind – making coursework more immediately useful and helping engage and retain learners.

## **Integrated Instruction**

A related development takes contextualization even further, combining interest-specific adult education instruction with tailored postsecondary coursework delivered at roughly the same time (rather than forcing students to complete basic skills classes before enrolling in certification or college-credit courses).

Students in Washington State's Integrated Basic Education Skills & Training (I-BEST) programs learn basic skills and credit-bearing career content simultaneously, team-taught by a basic education teacher and a college course instructor). The state's newest variation on the model, [Integrated Digital English Acceleration](#) (I-DEA), includes a blended English language instruction program that includes flipped classes and 1:1 computer deployment.

## Acceleration

Integrating basic skills and college coursework has the added benefit of speeding up the process for adult learners until they become job- or career-ready. "Six hours a week is not going to help a low-level learner become community college ready in a reasonable amount of time," says Sheryl Hart, Educational Technology Manager for the Arizona Department of Education's [adult education division](#), where the state has come up with a blended 1:1 model in which devices are loaned out to students and class time is reduced from twice a week to once.

## Intelligent Tutoring

Speaking of technology, intelligent tutoring -- somewhat common in K-12 education, where Carnegie Learning's Cognitive Tutors and McGraw Hill's ALEKS are fairly well known -- is now coming to adult education. Thanks to a five-year grant from the federal Center for the Study of Adult Literacy (CSAL), the University of Memphis is [developing 50 two-hour modules for adults based on Auto Tutor](#), an intelligent tutoring system that helps people learn by holding a conversation in natural language with an onscreen teacher and "fellow" student (also computer-generated). They'll be testing them in the fall and rolling them out thereafter.

## Mobile

Increasingly common in K-12, mobile games and apps are now coming to adult

education as well. Adult learners are more likely to have a smartphone than a computer or tablet, and often have small breaks in their busy schedules. Two well-known examples include [Skylab Learning's](#) English language games and World Education's [Words2Learn](#) health career vocabulary apps.

## **“Wraparound” Services**

Adult learners often face non-academic obstacles to their success that require additional support services – tutoring, mentoring, counseling, etc. – if they are going to succeed in raising their skill levels and improving their job prospects. Towards that end, programs like New York City's LaGuardia Community College's [Bridge to College and Careers Program](#) include an “integrated advisement and transitions model,” according to Amy Dalsimer, who heads the [College's Pre-College Academic Programming](#). Every student has a dedicated advisor who helps coordinate coursework and address issues that arise out of class (including referrals to social service providers).

## **Distance**

Distance education is a substantial or growing part of adult education services in a handful of states, according to Project IDEAL's Jerome Johnston. Among the 12 states that are currently active in the IDEAL consortium, six have reached or exceeded the 2 percent goal that has been set (out of the 5 percent of eligible adults who are being served). They are Arizona, Arkansas, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, and Rhode Island.

## **Embedded & Blended Professional Development**

Nonprofits like World Education are involved in creating a tighter fit between adult education teachers and the training they're provided. Training “has to be very directly related to their work,” says World Education's Silja Kallenbach, “and it

needs to be sustained over time. ”[World Education](#) has professional development contracts with 29 states and its courses often combine face to face work with online learning. Pennsylvania is one of the states making particularly strong efforts at embedding its PD efforts, according to Kallenbach.

## **Digital Badges**

Some adult education leaders are pushing for digital badges – symbols showing life experience and other qualifications that aren’t part of a formal degree or apparent from a traditional resume. A recent update from Digital Promise describes [how badges could help invigorate adult education](#) and the challenges they face -- demonstrating digital literacy and intermediate certification levels.

## **“Braided” Funding**

A handful of states like California and [Colorado](#) have recently added (or begun restoring) state funding to adult education. Other places, like the District of Columbia, allow the creation of charter schools focused on adults like the [Carlos Rosario Charter School](#) rather than limiting them to younger learners. Several states are attempting to “braid” different sources of funding together to provide more robust services. (Jobs For the Future has develop a [toolkit to help](#) states and colleges figure out how to access additional resources.) There are also a handful of key funders interested in adult education including Gates ([Accelerating Opportunity](#)), Joyce ([Shifting Gears](#)), and most recently Kellogg ([Family-Centered Social Policy Initiative](#)).

Bigger changes are coming, with the adoption of a new [adult education version of the Common Core standards](#) and the development of new high school equivalency exams coming down the pike. But even these trends and innovations suggest all sorts of possibilities -- especially if when mixed and matched.

For example, what if someone lowered the cost of high-quality mentoring and coaching by putting them online? What if innovators took advantage of adult learners' relative comfort with smartphones and created a digital literacy assessment and training program that could be absorbed during a commute to work or during a walk home from school? What if innovators married digital tutoring with contextualized and integrated learning that are now transforming adult education?

The challenges are real, but the possibilities are exciting. Next up: we take an in-depth look at some of the most fascinating innovations in adult education, show you how they look (and work) in practice, and explore the possibilities for scaling up the innovations that work best.

***EdSurge has received a grant from the Joyce Foundation to bring more awareness to young adult learning. This article is the second in a three-part series from Mr. Russo highlighting challenges, opportunities, and trends in the adult learning market. The first in the series, [New Urgency in Adult Education](#), provides an overview of the adult learning marketplace.***