



Adaptive Learning: A Game-Changer in Adult Literacy

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So many times, I reached the end of a program session full of reflections—thinking about what I would change, what I would keep and what I would do differently next time to make the program even better. That used to excite me—until one day it didn't.

I realized that while I was planning for a better “next time,” my past learners had already walked out the door. They were never going to experience the impact of those improvements. That moment changed everything for me. I asked myself: *What if I didn't wait? What if I had the tools and the insight to make those changes while the learning was happening, in real time and for each learner?*

That is when I understood the true meaning—and power—of adaptive learning. It's not about next time, it's about right now. It's about making every moment matter, every learner seen and heard, and every experience meaningful. Because when we adapt in the moment, we don't just change programs, we change lives.

Before I go any further, let me offer a little disclaimer: I am not an expert on the Adaptive

Learning Approach, not even close. What I am is a “passionate practitioner” of it. When I first started to explore adaptive learning, I was terrified of abandoning the program plans I had so carefully prepared. But with practice, patience and a lot of open communication with my learners, I began to see that adaptive learning isn't something to fear—it's an opportunity. A big one. Over time, I've shifted my mindset to see it as not just useful but truly transformative. That's why I am so excited to share with you why the Adaptive Learning Approach is, quite simply, a game changer.

For years, most programming has leaned on structured lesson plans and carefully built curriculums. These are often designed with the best intentions: to provide a roadmap, to give practitioners direction and to ensure progress from one skill to the next. As practitioners, though, we know that adults do not come to our



programs as blank slates. They arrive with rich life experiences, responsibilities and dreams—alongside very specific and urgent needs. A prescriptive, one-size-fits-all approach rarely fits anyone.

That realization can be uncomfortable – for new and even experienced practitioners. When you've been trained to deliver a set program, it can feel risky to let go of the safety of a prepared plan. But adaptive learning doesn't mean throwing out all your plans. In fact, I always come into a session with a framework—a structure that can be stretched, bent and reshaped depending on the learners in the room. It gives me direction, but not rigidity. Think of it as a compass: it provides you with direction while allowing your learners to create their own paths.

It may seem unrealistic to expect practitioners to come to programs prepared to support multiple learning paths. But here's the key: adaptive learning does not mean preparing ten different activities for ten different learners. That's impossible, and it would burn out even the most committed practitioner. Instead, it's about designing one activity that can be done ten different ways.

For example, the same reading passage might be used by one learner to practice sounding out words, by another to build vocabulary, by another to write a response and by the whole group to spark discussion. One task, with slight adaptations, can support many pathways. This not only makes planning sustainable for

practitioners, but it also models for learners the idea that there are multiple ways to approach a challenge. Showing them that their way is valid because it's authentic to them and reflects their learning needs.

Another critical part of adaptive learning is constant, consistent and diverse assessment of each learner. We are always observing, checking for understanding, gauging comfort levels and noticing both engagement or disengagement. We're tuning into everything learners are not saying, not sharing, or perhaps not yet able to express. I call these *Moments to Adapt*.

These are the sticky moments of uncertainty, disengagement, discomfort or that general feeling of "ick." They're the moments we sometimes miss—or, if we notice them, we sometimes push through them to keep the group "on track". Or, like I used to do, we jot down a note to fix it next time.

But here's the aha: next time is not good enough. These moments must be addressed now. When a moment of "ick" shows up, the program pauses. Together, we acknowledge the discomfort, talk it through and adapt before moving forward. Then we try again.

Yes, this can feel messy. It can feel hard. Trust me—I struggled with it too. But then I realized something critical: the struggle lessened when I started telling my learners about it.





When I began explaining what adaptive learning is—why I use this approach and how my goal is to create customized learning just for them—something shifted. I invited learners to help me identify those “ick” moments. Suddenly, they were not just participants; they were partners. They became more reflective about how they learn best and more willing to voice when something wasn’t working. It wasn’t just me scanning the room for signs of discomfort—it became a shared responsibility to co-create the learning experience.

And honestly, one of the most exciting things I’ve noticed about adaptive learning is how it changes the role of the learners themselves. They take the lead in their own learning. They are excited about their goals, choose materials that mean something to them, and point out what’s most meaningful for them and the group. This shift doesn’t just build confidence, motivation and ownership—it helps create a safe, trusting and open environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks, sharing ideas and supporting each other. Over time, these programs become more than just learning spaces—they become communities of peers, friends and collaborators, engaged in learning together in a way that feels personal and meaningful.

Another common misconception is that adaptive learning only works in one-on-one sessions. The truth is, it actually thrives in group programming. You might worry that managing multiple learners at once would be chaotic, but that’s where the magic happens. Groups bring energy, ideas and perspectives that you could never plan for on your own.

One learner’s question about filling out a form can spark a discussion that helps three others. A small struggle with reading a recipe can turn into a teachable moment for the whole group. Someone figuring out a bus schedule might inspire new strategies for everyone. In this way, learners are constantly learning from each other as much as from you. And the result? A vibrant, engaged and supportive learning community where everyone feels seen, heard and capable.

Adaptive learning is more than just a strategy—it’s a mindset. It asks us to embrace uncertainty, to see “ick” moments not as failures but as opportunities, to invite learners into the process, and to trust that when we adapt in real time, the learning deepens.

The benefits extend far beyond our learners. Practitioners experience tremendous growth in both mindset and practice. They become more skilled at reading the room, interpreting learner needs in the moment and adjusting strategies in real time. This supports inclusion and accessibility, reaching learners with diverse backgrounds, abilities and experiences, while also strengthening engagement and retention. Participants feel seen, valued and invested. Practitioners gain back precious time to focus on relationships, reflection and responsiveness—all while achieving strong, often improved, learning outcomes.

The ripple effect extends to the organization and the wider community as well. Adaptive programs generate richer insights about what truly works, what learners need and how offerings can evolve. This creates more agile, learner-centred organizations, better equipped to meet community needs and demonstrate meaningful impact. In short, adopting an adaptive learning mindset doesn’t just transform individual learners—it transforms facilitators, teams, programs and the communities they serve.

That’s what makes this approach so exciting: it’s not just a set of techniques, it’s a way of seeing learning, people and programs differently. It reminds us that every learner matters, every moment counts and every experience is an opportunity to make learning meaningful. For anyone stepping into adult literacy—new practitioners, seasoned facilitators or entire organizations—the invitation is the same: embrace adaptive learning, trust the process and watch how it transforms not just the learners in your room, but your entire learning community. ♦

Adaptive Learning Practitioner Checklist

Before the Session:

- Identify 1-2 core learning objectives for the session and develop your framework or compass.
- Prepare at least one or two alternate pathways (e.g., extra challenge task, remedial resource).
- Plan for your check-in points (quick assessments, discussions, polls, observations).
- Set up choices for learners (different activities, formats or sequences).
- Get familiar with any tech tools you'll be using (keep it simple!).
- Choose activities with varying levels of complexity.

During the Session:

- Explain Adaptive Learning with your learners, include them in this process! Let them ask questions and understand the "why" and "how".
- Observe learner engagement and participation actively.
- Listen for clues about confusion, excitement or boredom.
- Offer choices when possible ("Would you like to do this or this next?")
- Give immediate feedback—quick, specific and encouraging.

- Adapt in small ways—change pacing, groupings or activities if needed.
- Identify Moments of 'Ick' or Moments to Adapt—change pacing, groupings or activities if needed. Chat about these moments with the group.

After the Session:

- Reflect: What went well?
- Reflect: Where did learners respond best?
- Reflect: What could I adjust next time?
- Gather quick feedback from learners if possible (even 2-3 sentence reflections).
- Write down one thing you'll try differently in the next session.

Quick Reminder:

You don't have to adapt everything for everyone all the time.

Focus on small, responsive moves that build learner confidence and progress.

Explain Adaptive Learning to your learners and involve them in the process.

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