Strategic Conversation

K

learner-centred
establishing trust
relational

Reclaiming the Self: Why Self-Concept Is the Hidden Heart of Adult Learning

SUBMITTED BY **Heidi Grogan**

It is Tuesday at 7:00 p.m., and the last of fourteen adults fits herself into a desk meant for eighth graders. At coffee break, she tells us that her mother said, in front of her little girl, "I'm not sure why you think you'll pass your GED—you're not any smarter now than when you were her (looking at her daughter) age."

We've seen this again and again. Adults arrive at learning programs with goals—but also with stories about who they are and what they are capable of. Silent, limiting beliefs shaped by trauma, poverty, early education or years of internalized discouragement. These beliefs shape self-concept—and in turn, self-concept quietly shapes everything else.

Self-concept is invisible, but pivotal. It influences persistence, engagement, risk-taking and whether learners even believe success is possible. It often exists beneath the surface of test scores or attendance records. But for many adult learners, reclaiming a more compassionate and empowered sense of self is at the core of the learning journey.

More Than Content

Adults return to learning with more than literacy needs or employment goals—they bring stories formed in childhood classrooms or homes where learning wasn't safe. Sometimes those stories sound like: "I'm not good at math." "I'm too old for this." "This isn't for people like me."

Self-concept refers to the beliefs we hold about who we are. It forms early, is shaped by our environment and is deeply emotional. While adult learning theories—from Knowles to Mezirow—speak to the self-directed nature of adult learners, they don't always account for what happens when the very self meant to direct and motivate has been fractured by years of self-doubt. I nerd out on research a bit, because to me, staying curious beyond what I already know is one way of honouring the adults brave enough to return to learning… to squeeze into that grade 8 desk, so to speak.

The full studies are worth checking out, but highlights (see references at the end of this article) have practical application to taking on the challenge of helping learners to shift a self-concept that is often just plain mean. I believe that we can do hard things when people are kind and that kindness includes the words we say to ourselves.

Practitioners as Midwives

While we teach skills, we are also—perhaps more importantly—midwives of identity. The practitioners who have most inspired me know this. These mentor-worthy practitioners show up with care and curiosity. They intuitively understand that shame and self-concept sit beside their learners. They seem to say: "Ahem… might we pause?" to the bullying inner narratives that whisper "you can't" or "you don't belong in this course".

These practitioners create conditions for success that stretch limiting beliefs. They name brilliance out loud. They model vulnerability. They normalize mistakes as part of learning. They embed creativity and self-reflection into the process. And always, they convey a belief that something good is possible.

I've learned from them that the smallest acts—a shared laugh, a question asked with genuine curiosity, a music playlist that resonates at the start of class—can serve as powerful tools for transformation. These moments help adults shift from survival mode to a mindset where growth is possible.

Lyn Tett's work in adult literacy shows how learning environments can support identity reconstruction—but not through content alone. Rather, through connection, affirmation and repeated invitations to see oneself differently. Zacharakis reminds us that when adults re-engage with learning after trauma, it is often the emotional and relational elements—not just the academic ones—that make persistence possible.

What We Might Miss

I once worked with a learner who was on track to complete her life skills program and start the GED preparation classes she'd registered for. This, after a year of consistent effort. And then, the day before her final day in program, she quit.

At the time, I thought it was about relapse and addiction. I now wonder: was it that success didn't align with her view of herself, and therefore made her feel afraid? Was there a silent (to staff) panic at the threshold of rewriting her story? Did I miss the signs? Was I focused on outcomes more than internal shifts?

It makes me wonder how often we, as practitioners, unconsciously reinforce the very narratives our programs are meant to disrupt. In our urgency to meet benchmarks, do we overlook the fragile ground learners are walking as they risk becoming someone new?

I wonder if we should, alongside attendance and curriculum goals, also track our own curiosity?

Practicing Curiosity

I remember a GED learner whose hoodie never came off. He sat along the wall, silent, often late.

In time, that learner did change the view he had of himself. I am grateful he shared what his internal narrative was. It was a major learning moment for me.

Behaviour is a clue, not a conclusion. But so often we interpret it otherwise. My first response isn't always curiosity. Sometimes it's fatigue. Or judgment. Or fear that I don't know how to help. But what if, instead of reacting, we asked: "What might be unfolding here?"

Curiosity is the opposite of judgment. It invites connection. And in that space, transformation becomes possible.

Supporting Shifts in Self-Concept

Self-concept isn't shifted through one motivational pep talk. It's re-formed slowly, in community, under the right conditions.

Here are a few practices I've learned or borrowed from others that support this transformation:

- **Create emotionally safe environments.** Adult learners need predictability and dignity. Small things matter—room setup, welcome rituals, how we start class.
- **Design for success.** Create opportunities to "catch someone being brilliant." Say it aloud. Let them hear it.
- **Model learning edges.** When we admit what we're still learning, we create space for learners to do the same.
- **Reframe failure.** Treat mistakes as data, not proof of inadequacy. Ask reflective questions instead of offering correction.
- **Use music and metaphor.** Songs like "Rise Up" by Andra Day or "Perfect" by Pink can bypass resistance and invite resonance. Invite the learners to make playlists, share songs that relate to their self-narrative and bring themselves into the room through music.
- **Help learners feel seen.** Identity shifts are emotionally disruptive. We can normalize that—in so doing, prepare learners to anticipate and understand that the discomfort is actually a good thing.

In the end, what I've learned is that we are not only practitioners. We are witnesses. Midwives. Mirrors.

Our work is not only about learning—it is about transformation. And transformation begins with the self.

Let us be the kind of educators who do not only see the learners in front of us—but help them see themselves anew. ◇

References

Tett, L. (2006). Learning and identity: The intersection of adult learning and self-concept. Studies in the Education of Adults, 38(2), 146–160. *https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2006.11661533*

Tett, L. (2014). Learning, literacy and identity. In J. Field, J. Gallacher, & R. Ingram (Eds.), Researching transitions in lifelong learning (pp. 427–444). Routledge. *https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772339*

Zacharakis, J., Steichen, M., Diaz de Sabates, G., & Glass, D. (2011). Adult learners in transition: Learning and identity. Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal, 5(2), 84–95.

Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative dimensions of adult learning. Jossey-Bass.

A Call to Reflection

Think of a learner who surprised you—who grew in ways you didn't expect.

What helped that shift happen?

What parts of your own self-concept shape how you teach, support or respond to struggle?

What stories about "good teaching" or "engaged learning" might need revising?

How might naming your own quiet revolutions make you more available to hold space for others?