



The Importance of Being Relevant

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What is a relevant space?

'Safe and Welcoming' is a buzz phrase that we hear a lot in the social service field, and rightfully so. As Community Adult Learning Programs, our mandate is to provide learning opportunities which build foundational skills. We know that many folks with foundational skill gaps are also vulnerable people whose very skill gaps create significant and complex barriers to achieving their goals and fully participating in their communities on their own terms. Going back into learning can be intimidating. Our first contact with foundational learners is usually in our learning space, and it's essential that the space feels safe enough to be vulnerable; vulnerable to being assessed and vulnerable to making mistakes (an inevitable and healthy part of any learning). Most people who enter the adult learning field naturally care deeply for vulnerable people and strive for sensitivity. This is great, because having a space that is not a hindrance to learning is the first and most basic step in being relevant. Welcoming and safe is intentional in design. But how do we determine what that looks like for our community? **Relevance.**

What is relevance?

It is the state of being Relevant.

Relevant comes from the Latin *relevare*, which means “to lessen, lighten,” hence “to help, assist”. From this same stem, we get the word relieve.

Relevance acknowledges the very real and immediate needs facing adults with foundational skill gaps and seeks to lessen the load they carry. Through relevant services and resources, we can help an adult learner step up onto the path of lifelong learning.

Why be relevant?

Find and Retain

Relevance is a natural avenue to connect with and retain learners. Often adults need to see the value in our organization and staff before they find value in learning. Relevant programs and resources can relieve some burdens carried by learners while providing opportunities for hesitant adults to get to know their local CALP and become comfortable with the space and the people. For someone with a negative school experience, stepping into a traditional-looking learning setting might be overwhelming. But stepping into a familiar building with familiar faces is not.

In our experience, adult learners who see our learning center as more than a classroom tend to engage in learning with greater duration and intensity.

Relevant support and resources available at, or through, a local learning center demonstrate that foundational skills are life skills. A foundational skill gap might lead an adult to drop in for help understanding an important document. Conscientious program staff can use this opportunity for informal literacy assessment and then provide information on available learning opportunities. The same is true for Community Capacity Building activities and general interest programs.

Relevance creates the bridge from Learner Supports and Community Capacity Building to outcome-specific Literacy and Foundational Learning. It's a springboard to further learning!

Adult Learning Principles

Relevance carries into Literacy and Foundational Learning. Knowles' principles of Adult Learning (loosely) state that adults:

- Need to know why they should learn (pragmatic motivation)
- Learn through experience (task-oriented) and use prior experience
- Want learning to be immediately **relevant** to their lives and work

Relevance is the key to all these principles! Meaningful programs utilize real-life, applicable materials in a relatable context to build skills. Using an evidence-based structured literacy or numeracy program is essential to effective skill instruction. Incorporating relevant material (like a letter from their child's school) into that instruction makes the skill immediately applicable and demonstrates how integral these skills are to everyday life.

Without relevance, learning is on our terms. Relevance demonstrates that we are all peers in learning. Community learning centers offer more than 'just' traditional learning. They offer a sense of belonging and affirm the value of those who step through the doors. It invites adults to take ownership of their learning and the learning space.

Relevance is seeing the learner. It's meeting people where they are and with the life circumstances they bring; not expecting people to meet external expectations before they engage in learning.





Staff retention

Finally, being relevant is good for staff. Facing the complex burdens carried by adult learners is often overwhelming and discouraging. Addressing foundational skill gaps while basic needs go unmet can feel futile. Success in learning takes time and is achieved in small, hard-won victories. Meanwhile, the unrelenting parade of systemic issues, like food and housing insecurity, poverty, unemployment and mental health issues, marches steadily. Many staff experience compassion fatigue and burnout, resulting in high staff turnover. Providing relevant, direct support for learners is practical and rewarding. It's something we can *do*; it's active. Outcomes are usually seen quickly. The tangibility of meeting immediate needs can provide some buffer for staff from compassion fatigue and burnout.

How to be Relevant

A vibrant, effective learning center allows community relevance to drive strategic planning. It shapes partnerships and informs complementary funding options.

Being relevant doesn't just happen. It requires intentionality which costs time and resources. These are in short supply for most community organizations. Fortunately, relevance is not a stand-alone element. Incorporate relevance into the program and strategic planning already going on. Know your learners (or those who you hope will become learners), know your community and know the resources and gaps. Be familiar with the unique local social and physical landscape. Then use that knowledge to create relevance.

A great place to start is to consider who is, and who isn't, coming through your doors.

Who are your current learners?

- Do they think their learning center is relevant? (Ask them!)
- Are there common characteristics, strengths or barriers?
- How did they first engage with the learning center? What drew them in the door?
- When and where *do* they engage in learning?
 - » Daytimes, evenings, weekends?
 - » At the learning center or a partner space? Maybe at work or a residential facility?
- Who remains engaged and who does not?

Who is missing? What about adults with foundational skills gaps whose faces you do not know?

- Who are they?
- Are there some common aspects or barriers you can identify?
- What local services do they access? And what draws them there?

Identify ways to create or increase relevance and invite learners to be actively involved in creating and maintaining relevance.

Relevance in our community

We create and maintain relevance to adult learners in our community.

Here are some of the things we do:

We share the use of our space with other nonprofit organizations to offer direct, in-person services locally. Through us, the community has access to previously unavailable relevant employment services, domestic violence

counselling and services for adults with diverse abilities.

Our collaborative relationship with the local Seniors Outreach is so close that many of our senior adult learners do not realize that we are separate organizations! Referrals regularly go back and forth, and our digital program is mobile so that older adults are not barriered from foundational digital learning because of their health or inability to drive. Relevant learning happens on their own devices in their own home.

Our community has no public laundry facilities and low-income housing has no on-site laundry. Adults who lack clean clothes aren't eager to engage in learning. We obtained a small grant to install a washer/dryer in our learning center and operate it by cost recovery. There is a small fee but some give volunteer hours in exchange (fostering ownership in our learning center). Some learners do their laundry during their tutoring sessions.

Lunch With Friends is a local initiative stemming from common challenges that we and our local mental health nurses were observing in vulnerable adults accessing our respective services, particularly after the pandemic (social isolation, high unemployment, food insecurity and skill gaps). We invited foundational learners to partner with us as volunteers. We provide skill training: Food Safe certification, numeracy through basic budgeting and recipe scaling, digital skills to set up Gmail and Google Drive, social media promotion and literacy skills for meeting notes, posters and written updates. From this seed grew an independent nonprofit, run solely by volunteers. So many people in the community benefit from nutritious food, social connection, opportunity to give back and skills training. Our learning center remains

engaged through nonprofit mentorship and ongoing skills training. It is a unique privilege to equip community members to make a positive impact in their community!

We offer provincially funded newcomer settlement and integration services. This funding increases our relevance to newcomers to Canada and provides opportunities for foundational learning within a directly relevant context. Navigating a new culture, understanding immigration policies and processes and completing forms require basic literacy and often foundational digital skills. We often complete forms with the newcomer, taking the time to embed ELL literacy instruction. Newcomers who receive settlement services often go on to register in LFL programming.

How does your learning center incorporate relevance? ♦

1 <https://www.etymonline.com/word/relevant>

