

# The Priority of Being Welcoming

## Strategic Conversation



learner-centred  
building relationship  
humane

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**Think about how you feel when you walk into a new job interview. Maybe you feel a little anxious, nervous, excited or jittery.**

Or what about a visit to the doctor's office where you are asked to fill in a bunch of forms with information you have already given them? Or how might you feel when different doctors continually ask you to repeat sensitive information, possibly traumatic, even though it's recorded in your file? These potential feelings of frustration, embarrassment, nervousness, anxiety or fear of being judged are what many foundational learners walk into our organizations with. They often have had negative experiences with education in the past. Our job is to create a safe and welcoming space so that we can help the learner get what they need to get started on the goal that brought them through our door.

### How do we do this?

The first step is to have a conversation with the person. To get to know them. To listen emphatically and carefully to what is being said (or not said) and read body language. The balance is to gather information from the learner to help understand needs and meet our reporting requirements without grilling the learner as if it is an interview. We want the learner to feel no judgment from us, only to be supported and heard. There are no right or wrong answers or necessities. Whatever information is shared (or not), we are going to do our best to help.

This initial conversation may only gather the learner's name and phone number while also sharing some programming options available to the learner. Let the learner absorb the information and come back later if they need time to think. Not feeling pressured will also help to establish a safe space for these learners.

### What do we say?

This first conversation doesn't follow a pre-determined script and will change learner to learner, need to need, as it is not always black and white. Often, as part of a CALP, we need to work in the "grey" area and be flexible.



First conversations include:

- listening to what is being said
- reading body language
- sensing hesitations
- asking questions without interrogating

If we put ourselves in the learner's place, how would we respond to an "interrogation" with a stranger when we may feel shy, nervous or embarrassed about the information being given? It has taken courage for the learner to walk through the door and ask for help, so we want to respect, support and not intimidate the learner with our questions or by recording information vigorously.

### **How do we keep track of all these learners and sensitive information?**

If we do need to write down an essential detail, let the learner know what is happening and why. Ask for permission if necessary, so that the

learner is an active participant in the process and doesn't wonder, "what are they writing about me"? and stir up feelings of uncertainty.

If the learner is more open to sharing, we could record more information with the learner or on behalf of the learner. The initial conversation would be more thorough and collect specific demographic information needed for reporting purposes.

### **What if the learner is uncomfortable answering our questions?**

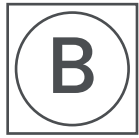
Remember, leaving blanks and/or selecting "unknown" will be ok. We can gather these unknown pieces of information later when the learner is more comfortable and settled, through instructor/tutor-led activities or other general conversations. Often, saying hello and engaging in polite, daily conversation can go a long way in helping to establish a connection and gathering missing information.

### **Where are we going to store this information, even if it's just a name and phone number? How do we remember details about all the learners we may speak with in a day, a week or a month?**

One option is to use a form. Any form to record information needs to be chosen carefully and written in learner-friendly, simple, clear English with an easy-to-follow layout. Using legal-sized paper allows the layout to have adequate spacing and a larger font, as these conditions also facilitate development of reading and writing abilities for foundational learners (ESL for ALL, 35).

The front of the form can contain student information, while anything administrative is on the reverse side. Marking essential information required for reporting purposes with an asterisk helps to identify key information and any unknowns to complete later.





The form can also include “nice to have’s” separated from the reportable data by a dashed line. The “nice to have’ information can help:

- plan programming
- identify referrals
- provide personal preferences
- determine learning times
- indicate potential barriers to learning

### Who fills out the form?

A learner could record the information on a form, which would also give a quick evaluation of literacy skills. Or we can record the information on behalf of the learner by asking, “Is it ok if I write this down to help remember and find the best option for you?”. We can also record the information after the learner has left.

Bringing out a form is usually best left for later in the conversation, not as an opening.

### What are the challenges of a form?

Even though a written record can be beneficial for understanding ability and storing details for future use, it can make a learner feel inadequate if the learner is unsure how to answer the questions or where to write.

This can potentially create a barrier or intimidate a learner, such as a learner who has asked for help to read and write English or has English as an additional language.

There can be situations where fear of stigmatization can lead to false information being shared as this is self-reported information with no verification. Even in reporting, there is the option to record “unknown” for some demographic data, so it will be ok if you don’t have all the information.

Remember, the first step is to be safe and welcoming, to listen, to focus emphatically and to demonstrate understanding of the learner to create a connection. This connection is what helps a learner to feel comfortable starting a learning journey with you and is one reason a relaxed conversation about programming can be effective.

### What are the benefits of a form?

The conversation can also be guided by your chosen form. The form helps direct the conversation into areas needed to get the learner started. This conversation also highlights strengths the learner has, as many literacy learners have developed strong oral and other survival skills. Using a form as a guide helps to avoid repeating questions, now or in the future. It can also help an organization collect information that is relevant and appropriate to complete the CALP Final Report. For example, there only needs to be one question on a form about the level of education. Matching it to the reporting criteria (no schooling, 1-6, 7-9, etc.) ensures that this information is only asked once and then stored for future reference. Knowing past schooling can identify potential learning gaps and programming opportunities. Should the learner return for future learning, the file can be opened and only details such as name and contact information need to be verified, avoiding the duplication of the previous conversation.

A form with space for multiple future registrations allows for collected information to be used again and provides a tangible, lasting record to help:

- plan programming
- collect and maintain reportable data
- provide a history of relevant learning opportunities completed by the learner

The priority is getting the learner started on the journey, remembering the conversation is not an interview, but a step towards reaching a learner's goal and to identify potential barriers and/or skills that may assist in accomplishing those goals.

Forms can be significantly beneficial when designed with foundational learners in mind and used together with a relaxed conversation that views the process from the learner's perspective to support the learner's journey. ♦

## Pros of a Form

- Information is easy to find and use again
- Provides a history of the learner
- Collects reportable data in one place
- Helps to plan programming
- Identifies potential barriers to learning
- Can be an informal evaluation of literacy skills

## Cons of a Form

- Awareness of Access to Information Act (AB) and sharing/storing of sensitive information is needed
- No standardization of forms—it is up to each organization
- Could feel like a contract or learners are unsure why they need to complete and/or sign
- Misinterpretation of the form if it is not clear, simple language
- Can create potential barriers for some learners who may feel a form is too institutional
- Self-reported data with no verification due to feelings of fear/shame can lead to inconsistent or confusing data

## Quick Tips

♦  
**Sensing hesitation?  
Just talk—no form needed!**

♦  
**Engage the learner in  
conversation, not conduct  
an interview.**

♦  
**On a registration form,  
mark essential information  
with an asterisk, the rest  
can be collected at a later  
date.**

♦  
**Avoid collecting  
nonessential information.**