

Strategic Conversation



strengths-based
planning for learning
hopeful

Now What? Supporting Adult Learning

SUBMITTED BY **Berniece Gowan**

“ Now is the only place anyone ever starts from.
— Jenny Horsman

Among the many roles a foundational learning practitioner has, it is essential to be a co-explorer and a knowledgeable guide on the learning journey.

Learners come to programs hoping and expecting that we will be able to help them solve a problem. That problem may be interfering with their ability to do what they want and need to do in their lives at home, at work and in their community. As problem-solvers with complex lives, they are counting on your adult literacy and foundational learning program to help them figure out a solution.

To find that solution together, both the practitioner and the learner need to know more about the problem, the expectations, the goals and what progress might look like. Practitioners need to be skilled, hopeful, respectful, patient, committed to lifelong learning, have the right tools and a good 'learning first aid kit' for emergent issues. Learners need to be able to trust, and have us demonstrate, that we know what we are doing when it comes to supporting learning to happen. The learner also needs to have a good understanding of what you and your program can offer. This may result in the possibility that you might not be the best place for them to start, but in this case, you may be able to provide information and knowledgeable referrals for a better fit.





We need to respect and communicate that adults-as-learners have a wealth of knowledge and experience that will contribute to their foundation for this new learning. This is work you will do together.

When a practitioner accepts the learner's invitation to co-create a learning pathway with them, the first step is to take time to build a connection. Time is often a scarce resource for you both. Many practitioners report that the more they invest at the beginning, before the first day of class, to establish trust and get to know the learners, the greater the impact on levels of engagement and retention. When you can both acknowledge that there are factors that make it difficult to return to learning as an adult, that there are supports and challenges (systems, people and situations) in a person's life that impact learning, learners will know that they are walking alongside someone who respects what it means to bring one's whole self to learning. These connecting conversations allow the shared learning journey to begin well.

Some thoughts to keep in mind:

- Learners in our programs would not be here if they had been successful the first time through the education system. There are a number of factors (poverty, learning disabilities, systemic inequalities, racism, aversive and chronically disrupted learning settings, bullying, etc.) that contributed to that. Those factors matter.
- Between 'past learning experience' and 'now', there has often been little opportunity to gain more insight into what got in the way of one's learning in the past, what it means to be a strong learner and how to build a learning identity that can support one to meet new learning challenges with confidence.
- Adult learning needs to be relevant, learner-led and problem-centred. This recognizes that adult learning is an active, purposeful, expressive and explicit process.





So where do we begin?

Many adults coming to literacy and foundational learning programs are intimidated by the process of setting learning goals. This is a task they are often asked to do at intake. I have heard adults say “what if I don’t know for sure, I just want to come back to school” or “I am afraid my goals will get held against me if it looks like I am not going to meet them” or “I don’t want to set a goal because it might be another thing I fail at”. Setting learning goals can feel risky, especially when one isn’t confident about re-engaging with learning.

If you are meeting a learner for the first time, you will want to know why they have come to your organization, what they are interested in, how they think and talk about learning and what they know about how they learn best. You are beginning to build a learning relationship. Some of this happens through conversation and some of this is done more explicitly through an assessment process. All of it is programming, even if you have not yet stepped into the classroom. The exchange of information, perceptions and ideas sets the fragile groundwork for the work you will do together.

For learners, assessments can feel like a test that will reinforce, to a stranger, everything one does not know. For practitioners, some formal assessments can sometimes leave them with a ‘now what?’ feeling, or a discomfort with being in a position where it feels like they are ‘judging’ someone’s knowledge.

However, if a practitioner doesn’t know what is going to help someone be successful in their program (reading, writing, skills for learning, digital literacy, AA, etc.), they risk entrenching the learner’s past negative experiences with learning. For each learner, it is personal. It is a practitioner’s role to provide stronger, more tailored learning opportunities, and this cannot



be achieved through ‘guessing’ what the learning needs are.

Assessment can be one of the most helpful, and respectful, tools we use to engage with adults who return to learning. Assessments can help demystify what it means to learn. It is the process of breaking learning down into understandable chunks that represent unique strengths and challenges. Assessments, wisely chosen and wisely used, can build confidence, reveal skills and strengths, set learning priorities, shape a learning plan and inform short and long-term goals.

Assessment tools can be formal or informal, depending on the reason an assessment is being used. Most importantly, assessment is a practice that begins at the first point of contact between a practitioner and an adult learner and continues, for both, over the length of your work together.

Ideally, both the practitioner and the learner will be very interested in the assessment process and what information is uncovered. On a learning journey, like all journeys, it is very

helpful to know where one will begin and what will be helpful along the way. To extend the metaphor, judicious assessment can help both the practitioner and the adult-as-learner map out the journey together.

You can start, even at intake, with a low-risk assessment conversation/activity, remembering the importance of being respectful and clear in our communication about why we want to learn more. In intakes I've done, I used to say something like *'Many people return to learning as an adult because some problem has come up that has to be addressed. Often people have had either negative experiences with learning in the past, difficulty with learning or life disruptions that have gotten in the way. In this program we want to support you to have success achieving your goals for coming and we want to avoid repeating past difficulties. So I am going to ask some questions about your past learning experiences and your hopes and worries about learning.'*

Some of those questions might be:

- What do you think I need to know to support you to be successful in this program?
- What is motivating you to return to learning at this time?
- Are there supports or circumstances in place right now that make it feel like the right time to do this?
- What has gotten in the way of learning in the past? Are these factors that will need to be addressed so that you can focus on learning now?
- What was school/learning like for you growing up?
- Did you have favourite subjects? Was there a particular teacher who influenced you? Why? How?
- Did you have any supports or accommodations for learning when in school?
- Have you ever suspected you have, or have you been diagnosed with, a learning difficulty?

You will have your questions that you like to ask. And, even only having time to ask a few good questions (and demonstrate your good listening) begins to open a space for future conversations.

I also like the following process, adapted from a tool called Creating Learning Partners, which you will find on the CALP portal. The script can go something like this, and the answers can be written/scribed by either of you, just keep it conversational and welcoming:

"Think about a recent time when you learned something new.

- *What were you trying to learn?*
- *What motivated you to choose to learn that?*
- *Did you have previous knowledge or experience that helped you learn that?*
- *What skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking, numeracy, etc.) did you use?*
- *Did you have to practice in order to do it well?*
- *Did you need to ask someone for help? How did that go?*
- *Was this a positive or negative learning experience for you?*
- *If positive, what do you think made it work well?*
- *If negative, what might have worked better for you?*
- *Have you been able to maintain that new learning?*

Thank you for answering these questions. This is what I heard you say about how you learn (paraphrase here using, as much as possible, the learner's own words not your interpretation of them). Have I missed anything here? Is there anything you wish that I had asked? Is there anything you would like to add or correct?

You know a lot about how you learn and the skills you have talked about are the ones we will build on. You and I will also work together to find out what other practical skills you need to help you learn.





We will use some assessment tools to help us figure out where to focus your learning. These tools will help us both understand what your strengths and challenges are and help us build a learning plan that makes sense to you. We will set some learning goals together so we will know what direction we are going and what progress we have made."

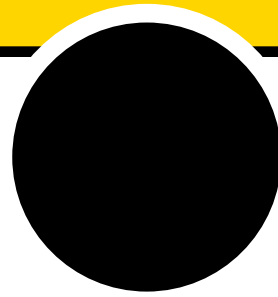
The answers to these kinds of questions become a page in a learning portfolio. They begin to answer, for both of you, the question 'What do I know about how I learn?' That is a hopeful and powerful way to begin.

From there, you can move into appropriate skill-specific assessments (reading, writing, numeracy, etc.). Choosing low-stakes assessments means the learner can explore their own abilities without fearing judgment while at the same time becoming more curious and knowledgeable about the skills they want to learn.

I believe that when a practitioner chooses to use assessments with an adult learner, they are entering into a contract with that learner. The learner agrees to share experiences and knowledge about what they know about a particular skill or subject and about how they problem solve when they are learning. The practitioner agrees to share and explore the results with the learner and to use that information to co-build a learning plan, one that can be adjusted and adapted as the learning relationship strengthens.

As with all things, how you begin influences the outcomes. When the invitation to work together comes, remember you both have so much to bring to the table. ♦

Contents of a Good Learning First Aid Kit



The checklist includes:

- Comfortable with urgent and emergent learning opportunities over fixed curriculum
.....
- Able to adapt authentic materials (whatever walks in the door with the learner) as learning resources
.....
- Problem solver, aware of resources in the community
.....
- Strong listening and communication skills
.....
- Humble—modeling that no one knows all the answers but working together you have a good chance of figuring it out
.....
- Committed—to the principles and practices of adult learning
.....
- Prepared—well-trained, strong tools

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