



Adult Learner Focus Group Insights

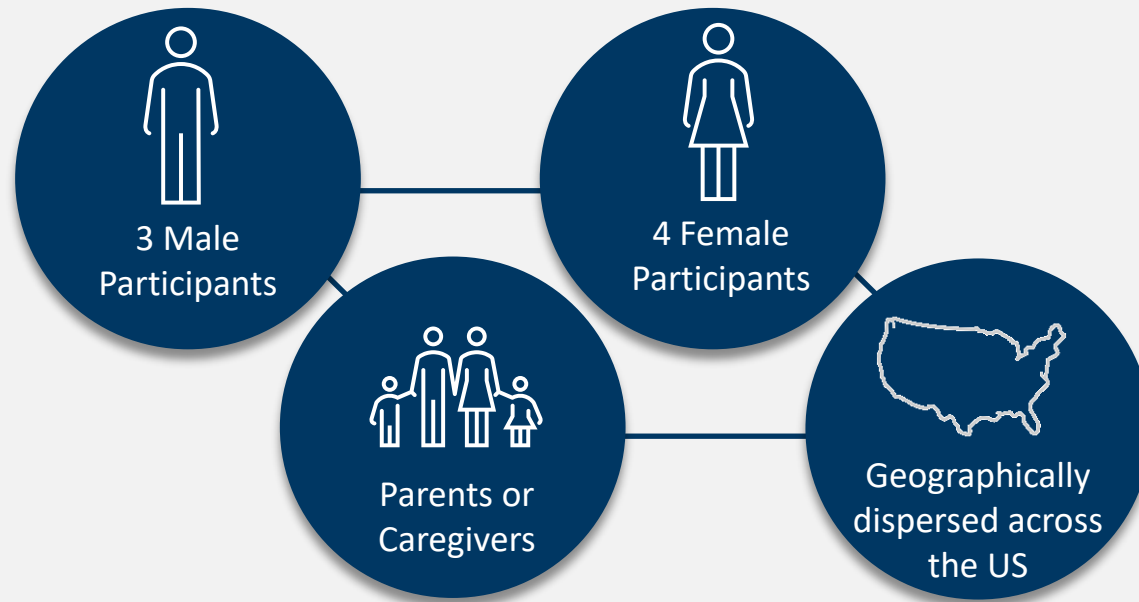
Commissioned by ALL IN – The Adult Literacy & Learning Impact Network

Focus Group Methodology

FTI Consulting conducted a 90-minute focus group online via Zoom on November 20th, 2023, with 7 adult learners who have completed or are currently enrolled in an adult education program. The discussion followed a semi-structured guide and was moderated by an FTI expert facilitator.

Focus Group Composition

Respondents included 2 native and 5 non-native English speakers.



Efforts for Confidentiality

Invites

BBF collected interest in participation on FTI's survey platform via an email sent to adult learner networks.

Selection

Selected based on having interest plus recent experience in an adult education program. No participant was informed of the selection process.

Group Intro

At the beginning of the focus group, the FTI moderator explained the goal of the discussion and reassured participants about confidentiality.

Turning Focus Group Feedback into Actionable Insights

A note on the way focus groups are conducted, feedback is collected, and responses are interpreted to inform actionable insights.

Report on Attitudes & Sentiment

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique in which we capture and report on prominent attitudes and sentiments. It is not a quantitative measurement tool in the way a survey is designed. It tells us “why” people feel the way they do.

Guided Questions, Volunteered Answers

FTI used a semi-structured discussion guide of pre-approved questions (provided in the Appendix) on the perceptions and experiences that adult learners have of and in adult education programs. Participants volunteered additional feedback as part of the conversation flow.

Suggest Opportunities for Action

In this report, FTI provides suggestions on potential opportunities or action items for adult education programs, based on recommendations from participants.

Executive Summary

With the findings from the focus group being qualitative in nature, the key insights are a summary of the thematic topics raised throughout the conversation.



Confidence and connection motivates adult learners most

Adult learners are driven to improve their reading and writing skills to improve their quality of life, increase their self confidence and open up new opportunities to achieve career goals.

Beyond personal or professional advancement, improved reading and writing skills are essential for adult learners to raise their children and nurture their families in the United States.

Outside of self and home, improved reading and writing was cited as necessary for adult learners to feel connected to their communities and society more broadly.



Learning itself can be the key struggle for adult learners

Struggling with materials used in adult education programs and the inherent emotional challenge of learning as an adult are key obstacles for adult learners.

Outside of personal struggles with learning, logistical challenges also arise as adult learners have several competing priorities (e.g., work, children, pursuit of diplomas/degrees, etc.), as well as mental health and learning conditions (e.g., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Dyslexia) that require personalized support beyond the adult education program curriculum.



Support helps learners persevere despite challenges

Adult educators play a critical role in ensuring adult learners push through the challenges they face and complete their programs, even if on an extended timeline. They are the stabilizing force for adult learners when the emotional challenge of learning as an adult begins to overwhelm.

They also serve a key purpose in adjusting program schedules and logistical details to accommodate adult learners in various stages of their lives or as they take on responsibilities at home and at work.

Support from friends, family members, and people with strong literacy skills are equally helpful motivating factors.



Extending classes and hybrid options would help learners

Though adult learners are already juggling many responsibilities with little time to spare, some participants mention that extending class times within adult education programs would be helpful, given the scope of material covered and time needed to grasp the concepts.

In-person instruction is deemed highly valuable, but so are remote options for those who struggle to make in-person classes consistently, or who want to take several classes per week.

Adult educators who also speak the languages and dialects of non-native English or immigrant adult learners are also viewed as incredibly helpful.



Insights



Adult Learner Motivations



“When you can’t read something or you don’t understand, you feel you’re in an environment that’s strange. When you learn, you understand what you’re doing, you’re confident. In the past, people would ask questions and I would be totally confused, I would say yes or no and not understand what they’re saying. Then their reactions would show me that I said something wrong, so confidence is important.”

- What motivated you to continue improving your reading and writing skills as an adult (e.g., taking classes, joining a program)?
- Did someone encourage you/help you sign up for a class or program? If so, who? (e.g., family/friend, teacher, employer, etc.)

Adult Learner Motivations



Personal & Professional Development

Adult learners mention being driven to improve their reading and writing skills to advance themselves personally (by way of increasing their self confidence) or professionally (to be able to take on more and/or better opportunities).



Caregiving & Supporting Family

Beyond personal or professional advancement, improved reading and writing skills are essential for adult learners to raise their children and nurture their families in the United States.



Connecting with Community

Outside of the self and the home, improved reading and writing was necessary for adult learners to feel connected to their communities and society more broadly.



Challenges Adult Learners Face



“Sometimes all they have to offer is online classes. I don’t understand the concept of teaching yourself something you don’t know. I need somebody to work with me. I think it’s a lot easier to have an in-person class, I need things broken down to a large degree and I can’t do it myself with material provided online.”

- What challenges did you face while participating in the program?
- Have you ever felt like you wanted to give up? Why did you feel that way?

Challenges Adult Learners Face



Difficulty Understanding Materials

Struggling with materials used in adult education programs, particularly in virtual formats that require independent study, can be a big challenge for adult learners. Likewise, not being able to fully grasp materials covered in classes given their short duration also emerged as a challenge for some learners.



Emotional Burden of Learning as an Adult

Adult learners mention that native English speakers and those with strong literacy skills sometimes lack empathy and understanding of the difficulty of learning to read and write in English as an adult. Separately, mental health and learning conditions require personalized support beyond adult education program curricula.



Logistics & Time Management

Beyond personal struggles with learning, logistical challenges also arise as adult learners have several competing priorities (e.g., work, children, pursuit of diplomas/degrees, etc.) and limited time and wherewithal to successfully manage them all.



How Adult Learners Persevere

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*“Sometimes when I felt I wasn’t learning, and people asked me for directions, being able to answer those questions... some people said I speak good English, and I say, ‘I’m learning,’ and they say, ‘Keep it up, don’t give up!’ **When people say those compliments to me, I feel awesome and like I should keep it up and keep learning. My children tell me I’m learning. Nothing in life is easy, so you should keep trying.**”*

- Could you please talk a little bit more about how your experience improving your reading and writing helped you build confidence?
- Who motivated you to continue learning despite the challenges you faced in the program? What did they say or do to make you feel encouraged?

How Adult Learners Persevere



Supportive and Flexible Adult Educators

Adult educators play a critical role in ensuring adult learners push through the challenges they face and complete their programs. They also serve a key purpose in adjusting program schedules and logistical details to accommodate adult learners in various stages of their lives or as they take on new responsibilities at home and at work.



Acknowledgment of Improvement in Literacy Skills

Compliments from peers or strangers provide validation that adult learners' efforts are paying off, motivating them to continue learning and improving their skills.



Encouragement from Friends & Family

Support from loved ones is a key driving factor for adult learners, especially those who serve as caregivers or who are responsible for nurturing younger children (who are sometimes developing strong English reading and writing skills on their own through school).



Considerations for Adult Education Programs



*“Having more time to learn is really helpful, because if we have more hours, we can improve more. **Give more time for the classes. Being online doesn’t work for me** – I have kids, so I don’t focus on my classes. It’s better to be in-person with more time, or more specific classes like reading class, or writing class.”*

- What, if anything, do you wish had been done differently in your program?
- What advice would you share with other adult learners?
- What’s the one thing you would want other people to know about your experience improving your reading and writing skills?

Considerations for Adult Education Programs



Extend Class Times

Though adult learners are already juggling many responsibilities with little time to spare, some participants mention that extending class times within adult education programs would be helpful, given the scope of material covered and time needed to grasp the concepts.



Prioritize Hybrid Offerings

In-person instruction is deemed highly valuable, but so is remote options for those who struggle to make in-person classes consistently, or who want to do several classes per week.



Pair Educators with Learners Based on Native Languages

Adult educators who also speak the languages and dialects of non-native English or immigrant adult learners would also be incredibly helpful. Some learners mention that increased focus on pronunciation is needed as well.



Appendix: Discussion Guide

Drivers of Adult Education Program Enrollment – 20 minutes

1. What has been your experience with reading as an adult?
 - a. How has your experience with reading changed from when you were a child/teenager to now?
2. What motivated you to continue improving your reading and writing skills as an adult (e.g., taking classes, joining a program)?
 - a. **PROBE IF NOT SPECIFIED:** Were there specific things that you couldn't do unless you continued to improve your reading and writing?
 - a. **PROBE FURTHER IF NEEDED:** Was the main reason to continue your education because of...
 - a) Professional/career goals (getting a better job/promotion, taking on new responsibilities, etc.)?
 - b) Personal goals (self-confidence, love for learning, educational goals like earning GED, etc.)?
 - c) Other reasons (encouragement from friends/family, want to set a good example for my kids, want to be able to understand more things like news articles, movies, etc.)?

NOTE: SPEND RELATIVELY MORE TIME ON THE ABOVE QUESTION, MAKE SURE EVERYONE ANSWERS, FOLLOW UP TO SPECIFIC COMMENTS, ETC.
3. Did someone encourage you/help you sign up for a class or program? If so, who? (e.g., family/friend, teacher, employer, etc.)
 - a. **PROBE IF HELPED (NOT JUST ENCOURAGED):** How did they help you sign up for classes? (e.g., filled out a form for them, took them to an in-person class/signup desk, made a phone call)
4. How easy was it to find a teacher, class, or program to help you improve your English reading and writing skills?
 - a. **IF EASY:** What made it so easy to find a program?
 - a. **IF CHALLENGING:** What made it difficult to find a program? What could be done to improve access or visibility of programs?
5. How did you find out about this program?
 - a. **PROBE IF NEEDED:** Your own research, heard from friends/family/coworkers, etc.?
6. Who was running the program you participated in?
 - a. **PROBE IF NEEDED:** Was it a library, school, company, or another local organization?

Benefits/Effects of Adult Education Programs – 20 minutes

1. Please describe how this program you participated in has improved your reading and writing skills.
2. How has life changed for you now that you've improved your reading and writing skills?
 - a. **IF NOT SPECIFIED:** A job, family life, confidence, ability to do things for themselves?
3. Have you achieved things you wanted to with the new skills you gained?
 - a. **NOTE: SPEND MORE TIME ON THE ABOVE TWO QUESTIONS, MAKE SURE EVERYONE ANSWERS, FOLLOW UP TO SPECIFIC COMMENTS, ETC.**
4. How do other people you know think about people like yourself, who are continuing their education as adults? Do they have any specific opinions about adult learners?
 - a. **PROBE:** How do you think the broader society in the United States thinks of adult learners?
5. How do you want other people to perceive your experience as an adult learner?
6. Do you want to continue learning or do you feel you now have the knowledge and skills you need?
7. And what advice or biggest learning would you share with others considering an adult education program?



Perceptions of/Experiences with Adult Education Programs – 20 minutes

1. Did you have any worries, fears, or concerns going into the program? If so, what were they?
 - a. How did you overcome those worries/concerns/fears and decide to move forward with joining your program?
 - b. What made you confident you could succeed in the program?
2. What challenges did you face while participating in the program?
 - a. Did you have any trouble getting to the class or finding time to participate? [EXAMPLES IF NEEDED: Transportation, childcare, not being able to take time off of work, etc.]
 - b. Did you have any challenges in the class? [EXAMPLES IF NEEDED: Keeping up with study materials, having sufficient help from the teacher, etc.]
3. Can you describe how you study or practice to improve your reading and writing skills?
 - a. PROBE: Where (at class, at home, etc.)?
 - b. PROBE: When (average frequency, in morning/evening, after work, etc.)?
 - c. PROBE: How/What (what techniques, what do they focus more on – writing vs. reading, etc.)?
4. What, if anything, do you wish had been done differently in your program?
5. What aspects of the program did you enjoy the most or find the most valuable?

Messaging Evaluation – 15 minutes

As you have all experienced and discussed, there are many benefits to learning. Some of these include...

- a. Benefits to the people who are learning – they might be more confident or better able to do things they couldn't do before
- b. Benefits to people who know the learner – for instance, the person who's learning might be able to help their child with their homework, take on more responsibility at work, or become a leader in their community
- c. Benefits to society – companies can be more successful, and society runs more smoothly when people have more education

1. Which of these different benefits matters most to you?
2. Which of these different benefits do you think would encourage companies and the government to put more money towards adult education?
3. Is there anything else you want to say about these different types of benefits?

Wrap Up – 5 minutes

1. In the last few minutes, I want to go around the room and hear from each of you. What's the one thing you would want other people to know about your experience improving your reading and writing skills?



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