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LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

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SUPPORTING DIGITAL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN LESLA LEARNERS

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Abstract

Low print literacy skills have been one of the defining characteristics of the Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) population. In our increasingly digital world, the acquisition of second languages and literacies encompasses online materials and activities that require digital literacy. This paper considers the issues of digital literacy for second language learners and the ways in which these issues broaden the LESLLA framework.

We begin with a justification for inclusion of digital literacy in the range of literacies central to academic success for LESLLA learners. Next we present a description of an innovative learning technology called Learner Web and a Learner Web project designed to support digital literacy. The Learner Web project, part of the national U.S. Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP), is a large multi-state project that is exploring ways of supporting digital literacy development in LESLLA

learners through tutor-facilitated use of online content. We conclude by discussing the key features of the Learner Web project that have wider implications for the LESLLA field. The paper will highlight both programmatic and research issues that have emerged during the content development and implementation of the project. Many of these issues relate to the need to support language and print literacy development as components of digital literacy development for LESLLA learners.

Introduction

In 2010, the Obama administration released a new National Education Technology Plan calling on educators to embrace technology and innovation to transform the way students in the United States learn. Transformation is needed, according to the report, because of the rapid pace of innovation and the integration of technology in daily tasks (2010, p. xvi). The report highlights what we know to be true from our own professional and personal lives: everyone needs some digital literacy to participate fully in economic and civic life. This cultural shift is relevant for all LESLLA learners, but particularly for those defined as “Low-educated: an adult who has at most ten years of education in the country of origin” (van de Craats, Kurvers, Young-Scholten, 2005). For these learners, digital literacy is becoming increasingly important for acquisition of English as a second language, as progressively more language learning occurs in online environments.

Focusing on the multidimensional aspect of literacy is key to describing the importance of digital literacy for LESLLA learners. Literacy practices are embedded in work, school, and life and exercised differently in each context (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Reder & Green, 1983). Because many of these literacy practices now occur in digitalized environments digital literacy must be included into the scope of literacies needed by LESLLA learners and digital literacy instruction needs to be incorporated broadly into learning opportunities for LESLLA adults. In a literature review of learning technology research,

Sites concurs with this assertion in suggesting that basic skills be redefined to include digital literacy, writing that they are “important basic skills for life in the 21st century” (2004, p. 110).

Helping LESLLA learners acquire digital literacy is not simply a matter of teaching learners to click and then putting them in front of computer-based learning materials that are nothing more than digital workbooks. Research suggests that all learners benefit from rich instruction that provides opportunities for learner-driven input and learner-centered activities. Those learning in web-based environments are immensely helped by different types of support including face-to-face support and on-line support (e.g., clicking on a word and seeing a translation pop up or selecting a text to speech options) (Coiro, 2003; Hicks, Reid & George, 2001).

These principles guided the development of content and initial implementation design for the Learner Web BTOP project, the digital literacy training project for LESLLA and other learners that will be described in this article. The focus of this article is on how the design criteria for the project meet the needs of LESLLA learners for digital literacy acquisition. As more field experience is gained in the project with LESLLA users, future articles will focus on their digital literacy acquisition outcomes.

The Learner Web BTOP project was funded under the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2010). The project is based on using an innovative online learning support system called the Learner Web, one of two technologies recognized in the National Educational Technology Plan for use with adult education students (2010, p. 22). Several features of the Learner Web software and the way it is used in BTOP are intended to scaffold learning material so it is accessible to the widest possible range of learners. By “accessible” we refer to Silver-Pacullias concept of usability threshold: flexible and different for every learner depending on an “interaction among learn-

er's skills, the online environments they encounter, and the support available..." (2008, p. 34). As we will illustrate below, the design and implementation of Learner Web allows for flexibility on all three of Silver-Paculla's criteria.

What is the Learner Web?

The Learner Web is a web-based application that supports adults working independently to improve their basic skills and then prepare for the workforce or more advanced learning goals (<http://www.learnerweb.org>). It is not a plug-in and play distance-learning product. Rather, it is a learning support system that can be used to match learners' goals and progress to relevant on-line discrete learning experiences and community resources such as adult education programs, on-demand telephone help, and tutors. It is conceptualized to scaffold the potential for future use of online learning for ABE learners, by providing technology support and guidance afforded by the software's design. Through the use of Learner Web, learners can boost their digital literacy skills and learn how to make choices about online resources.

The Learner Web was initially funded by a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 2007. Since that time, Learner Web software has been in development at Portland State University and in use in numerous piloting regions across the country. Each region has its own local domain name. Each region is responsible for configuring its local Learner Web portal to best fit local target learners. However, work done by each locality is shareable among Learner Web regions across the country.

The Learner Web BTOP project commenced in October of 2010. Project partners serving learners across the county have been using Learner Web to provide access to resources that support learning in the following areas:

- Digital Literacy (Computer and Internet Skills)
- Broadband Consumer Education
- Orientation to Career Pathways and Job Search

Both content and face-to-face support are key to learner success using the software in the BTOP project. A project team consisting of technology experts, instructional designers, and LESLLA researchers created online content that addresses a range of digital literacy skills and Internet practices for adults with diverse LESLLA backgrounds. The delivery of the learning content is provided through a tutor-facilitated model, which uses volunteers or paid staff as tutors who scaffold learners' access to and use of technology. Tutors are trained to work with these digital literacy students using the same online technology that the learners themselves use. Tutors and learners are coming together in approximately 90 public computer labs across the country - situated in schools, workforce centers, libraries, community-based organizations and other venues.

Technology and Infrastructure

Learner Web is based on the concept of a learning plan. Each learning plan is a series of steps that a learner follows to reach a learning goal (Figure 1). Within each step the learner accesses resources, which could be websites, referrals to agencies or specific individuals, books in a library, or other media resources (Figure 2). The step's content and resources are designated by learning plan authors or, alternatively, dynamically matched by the software to information in profile fields that describe the user/learner.



Figure 1. Steps and Tab Structure of Learner Web Learning Plan

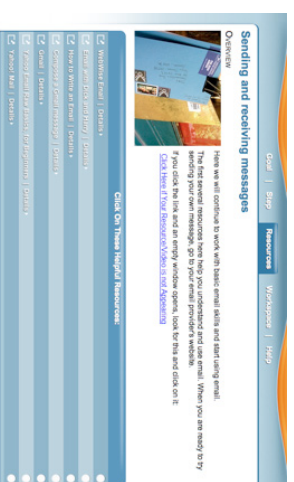


Figure 2. Learning Plan Resources or Links to External Websites

After the learner explores the step's content and resources, he or she can produce synthesizing material, such as a quiz or a written or verbal response, in a portfolio section of the website called the Workspace (Figure 3). Teachers, tutors or others working with the learner can monitor the learner's progress through viewing or giving feedback asynchronously on the workspace items created by the learner. These assistants can also shape a learner's path through a learning plan or a series of learning plans as needed. By interacting fully with the step, the learner can build the skills or become familiar with the information needed to advance to the next step.

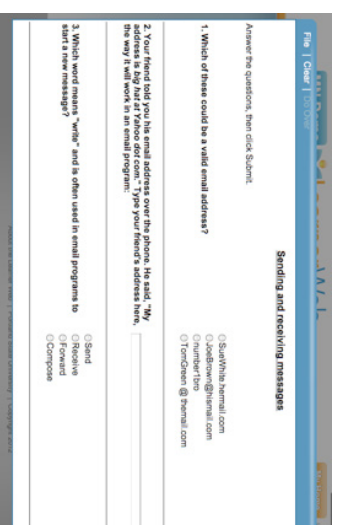


Figure 3. Workspace Item

Learner Web Features that Support LESLA Learners

Research shows that the digital divide is caused as much by a dearth of learning technologies that meet the needs and interests of LESLA learners as by the lack of physical access (Stites, 2004, p. 140). A general aim of the federal BTOP program is to bridge the digital divide by enhancing broadband access to the Internet and providing appropriate content for motivating digitally marginalized populations to use broadband connections. The Learner Web project shares these goals. To reach these vulnerable populations, both our content and implementation planning incorporated aspects of effective adult learning design as defined by Stites:

- Active engagement of learners
- Participation in groups
- Frequent interaction and feedback
- Connection to real-world contexts (2004, p. 140)

These concepts are represented by software features that support *code-switching, tutor-supported* learning environments, and content *customized* to learners for relevance and interest. These characteristics of the Learner Web project scaffold access to learning for a wide variety of LESLA learners.

Code Switching

Teaching digital literacy skills to LESLA learners with English language content complicates their acquisition of the target skills. Making parallel content available in a learner's L1 can be a highly effective way to scaffold mastery of the L2 content. To understand why, it is helpful to consider Freire's concept that reading the world must precede reading the word (Freire, 1984, p. 11). Allowing LESLA learners to interact with the digital literacy content in their L1 supports construction of codification, attaching a definition to a skill or concept in the L1 that can then be applied to both the digital literacy and L2 skill development. Even for those learners with some emerging L2 literacy, much digital literacy training content

on the Internet is text based and written at a level incomprehensible to LES/LA learners (Sites, 2004, p. 128). Enabling learners to code switch, to alternate easily between the same content in L1 and L2, can mitigate this problem.

The Learner Web allows for code switching between L1 and L2 to help learners understand both website layout and navigation and comprehend learning content. The software allows for learners to choose their preferred language for online instruction and to switch as desired between L2 and L1 (See figures 4 and 5). Thus, lack of L2 proficiency need not be a barrier to understanding the tasks or scope of skills required for digital literacy or feeling comfortable in the online environment.



Figure 4: Learning plan in Spanish



Figure 5: Learning plan in English

Tutor-Supported Learning

LES/LA learners motivated to access the Learner Web BTOP content in English and low-literacy native English speakers who cannot rely on code switching need a different kind of support. The literacy level needed for instruction of many digital literacy skills likely exceeds the English literacy level necessary to practice and apply that same skill. This may be analogous to Sticht's contrast between reading to learn a job versus reading to do a job, where the literacy level needed (in training) to learn how to do many entry level jobs exceeds that required for performing the job (1975, p. 158). Consequently, tutors play an important role in the project's implementation.

Providing face-to-face support when learners are first learning a skill can facilitate a more rapid and complete acquisition of that skill, especially skills involving motor components such as using a mouse and keyboard. For example, it is easy to show someone how to hold a mouse by actually, if they are willing, touching their hand and positioning the mouse. It is more difficult to teach the same skill through video demonstration or text-based instruction. During instruction, a tutor can actively gauge a learner's comprehension of learning material and provide supplementary instruction and practice as needed. This supports learner confidence and early application of that skill.

Sites includes both "active construction of new knowledge and skills" and frequent interaction and feedback as key to effective learning technology instruction (2004, p. 114-115). Tutors can provide support where the online content is inadequate for different learners. A tutor might see that a learner has exhausted the learning material provided but has not yet mastered the skill. In this case the tutor can use what he or she knows about the learner's skill level, interest, and experience to find additional relevant material. Hence, tutor-supported computer labs provide an opportunity for learners to overcome a major digital divide barrier - finding the necessary support to develop emerging digital literacy skills as a foundation for ongoing independent learning through technology.

Customizing Content

It is well established in both language learning and adult learning theory that appropriate and relevant content and context can enhance learner interest and support comprehension and learning. Our experience with computer- and Internet-based learning suggests this also applies to digital literacy skill development. Growley advocates finding content that reflects the interests of the learners (2000), and, as previously noted, Stites includes “connection to real-world contexts” as best practice (2004). Content and context were definitely important considerations in the development of the learning plans for the project. Designers consulted with adult basic education researchers and practitioners before defining the skills to cover and the context for the instructional content. Designers also used a feature of the Learner Web platform for customization of content to match learner characteristics and interests.

At the beginning of the project we searched for functional contexts relevant to many adult learners. The learning plans are structured so that learners, supported as need by tutors, first develop digital literacy skills through direct instruction and practice and then apply them in functional contexts. Instructional context is important throughout the learning plans but is especially important in the later plans in which learners have opportunities to apply emerging new skills. In these learning plans, we chose a functional context that many learners would likely encounter in the future - career exploration and job search (Figure 6).

When a learner first logs into Learner Web, he or she is presented with a series of questions that ask about native language, location, and skills. This last set of questions about skills is included in the Learner Web intake process to ensure that learners can self-identify learning needs. Of course, all of the content included in the plans was determined to be relevant by plan designers; however, it is the learner's self-selection of a plan that maximizes its relevance.



Figure 6. Career Exploration Content in Learner Web

The Learner Web allows for customization of content based on information in a learner's profile. Customized content – for internal webpage text, external resource lists, and workspace items – is triggered by defined values of learner profile fields. These profile fields can be created for a variety of learner characteristics such as reading level, language preference, personal interests, and geographical location. In our project, content was customized primarily in terms of location and, as shown earlier, for language preference.

Figures 7 and 8 show the customized content that learners in two different cities see in the step entitled “Using Maps.” The first four resources shown are the same for learners in each location, whereas the final resource shown varies with location. In each case the link takes the learner to the appropriate local public transit website.

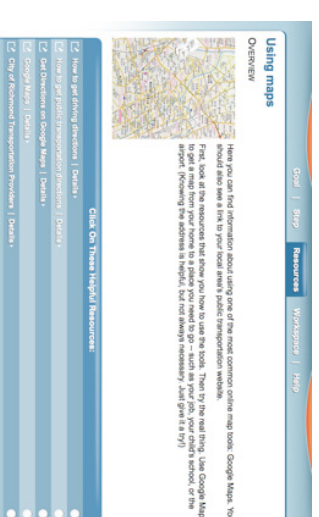


Figure 7. Using Maps Resource Page for Richmond, CA Learner

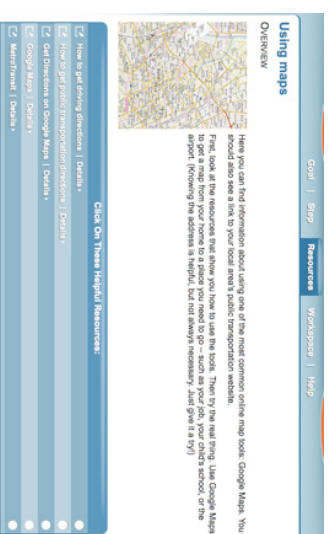


Figure 8. Using Maps Resource Page for St. Paul, MN Learner

The software feature allowing for customization of content makes using real world context in the learning plans relatively easy. The impact of the feature is great; Sites writes in a literature review of learning technologies that using real world context is central to learning because it supports the “transfer and retention of knowledge and competence” (2004, p. 118). In other words, learners can use the tool and the help of tutors to gain emerging digital literacy skills and are more likely to persist in practice and application activities if both context and content are meaningful to them.

Where does Learner Web fit within the larger world of technology-mediated learning for LESLA: Implications for the Field

The Learner Web expands the definition of second language literacy to include digital literacy as one of the many literacies that are required for full integration of immigrants and refugees. In the United States and elsewhere, being able to access information over the Internet, providing information on-line, selecting websites that address one’s needs and interests are now part of the basic skills that every citizen, native speaker or English language learner, needs. As technology expands expectations rise: Most companies including fast food restaurants want job seekers to submit an employment

application on-line; clinics routinely suggest that patients verify information about medication on reputable websites or monitor clinic websites for personal health information, and schools expect parents to check the school’s site to find out about homework assignments and school events. Increasingly, access to this information does not require full proficiency in English (school sites are often translated and Google translation provides an imperfect yet often serviceable understanding of key points on a site). Increasingly, in order to participate in technology infused cultures, all learners need a basic sense of how to access technology, how to navigate a web site and how to defend themselves against the onslaught of unreliable information and unsolicited products and services. The Learner Web provides second language learners a chance to develop the “new literacies” that are part of information processing in a digital age, and it does so by incorporating principles and ideas of purposeful teaching, adult learning theory, and instructional design.

In the LESLA field and elsewhere importance of contextualized instruction as a vehicle for deep learning of contents is widely accepted. The Learner Web includes a several important features that support what we know about the ways in which adults learn¹.

1. Learner Web is task-based. Tasks are authentic (a student uses a map to find locations with free Wi-Fi in her/his community) and take place in a real Internet environment. Tasks are challenging but success is achievable as the learner is guided through a series of steps by both tutors and the Learning technology. Learning is active and intentional as learners make decisions as to what sites and topics to explore for themselves. In this way, it offers an example of “situated

¹ See also National Research Council: *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, eds John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking. (Washington DC: National Academy of Sciences 1999)

learning” – that is learners do not learn skills first and then transfer them to a real life context; rather they use skills directly and immediately in the virtual environment they are exploring.

2. The Learner Web reflects real life language use among bilingual/multilingual adults. It is not a language-learning site where information is only offered in the target language (English) and high levels of proficiency are required to access content and develop skills. Rather, the Learner Web interface and introductions can appear in multiple languages (at this point, English and Spanish and to a lesser extent Hmong and Somali; others can be added). It is up to the learner to select the language that feels most comfortable at any given point. Just as the brains of second language speakers are never locked into one language only and tend to “toggle” between languages depending on context and need (a process called “translanguaging”²), so the Learner Web does not lock participants into the language they originally selected. Rather, it is possible to choose between languages at any point in the Learning Plan. For example, a learner may start in the native language to get her/his bearing and get a good sense of the overall topic and then move to L2 to complete a task. Conversely, a learner might choose to challenge herself and start in L2 only to feel unmoored and decide to switch to L1 to lessen frustration.

3. Expansion activities allow students to explore their own interests and tackle information that on the face may look too difficult for their language level. We know that a “need to know” often drives students to tackle challenging text and undertake complex tasks. A student who wants to know more about news from his home country may independently find a way to scaffold the information (by moving back and forth between a native

² Ofelia García, *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (Indianapolis: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008)

language newspaper and an English on-line newscast for example). In addition, the image rich nature of most websites allows students to understand context and overarching ideas, making comprehension of the printed word accompanying images much easier.

4. Face-to-face interaction and self-directed learning are blended (the ratio depends on the needs of the learner). In moving through a learning plan, learners can move as fast or as slowly as they want and repeat steps as often as they find necessary (as students like to say “the internet has infinite patience”). At the same time, a real live tutor is available to reassure students that they will become Internet proficient in spite of early frustrations and help them get unstuck when the technology does not perform the way we would like it to perform. Participation does not require mastery of applications such as Word, PowerPoint, or Excel – a staple of traditional computer skills classes that stops many LESLA learners cold. With Learner Web, there is no textbook to read or manual to consult. Instead, meaningful assistance is offered “just in time” in person and online as learners move forward through their plans or as they identify new topics to explore. This approach of receiving assistance and information “on demand” and as needed (rather than having to master a full set of skills ahead of time before they are applied to meaningful contexts) is one of the prime features of the interactive, dynamic learning models that young people increasingly respond to and that LESLA learners could benefit from as well.³

5. Through modeling, the tutor provides a form of “cognitive apprenticeship”⁴ that allows learners to see

³ James Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

⁴ See also Daniela Weisman, Hannes Hesse, *Lernprozesse beim Problemlosen unter nachherer Betrachtung der kognitiven Lerntheorien: Anchored Instructions, Zielbasierte Szenarien und Cognitive Apprenticeship*, (Grin Verlag 2007)

how a more expert person approaches Internet tasks and navigates the web. The thinking processes that most Internet proficient individuals use automatically are made visible as the tutor demonstrates a new task and the learner is guided through the steps. As a result, learning becomes transparent. The use of demonstrations, modeling of tasks, and use of “Think-Alouds” – a key part of tutor-facilitated learning – support what we know about the effectiveness of explicit teaching and engaged learning for learners who do not yet have strong academic skills and have little experience learning how to learn independently.

6. With some initial guidance, students are able to take advantage of Internet resources that facilitate comprehension. Google’s ability to translate websites (while still highly imperfect), allows students to get the gist of an article before they read it in English. Similarly, Google Translate allows students to look up translations of words and simple phrases, gaining greater confidence and competence in using vocabulary in the target language (sentence translations are too dodgy yet to recommend). Text-to-speech gives students a chance to hear the target language spoken as their eyes move along the print and speech-to-text gives them a chance to dictate what they may want to write (though accents may throw the machine for a loop).

7. The Learner Web puts the notion of socially constructed learning⁵ into practice. Learners interact with their tutors as they explore ideas together and select information that interests them. Every learner gets an e-mail account allowing her/him to communicate with others via the Internet; they learn how to Skype, allowing them to hear the voices and see the

⁵ Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*, Edited by Cole, M., John-Steiner, V., Scribner, S., Souberman, (E. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978)

faces of friends and family that they may not have seen for a long time at the fraction of the cost of a phone call. Because of the tremendous interest in Skype, participants and their friends help each other to make this technology work and learners often become teachers in the process. Other social media invite similar involvement. Individual sites have created Facebook pages for their Learner Web participants inviting them to share information about themselves and their communities in either or both the target language (English) and the native language. Posting pictures and messages on Facebook allows second language learners to find their voice and have their say while they are still learning a new language (there is a great deal of tolerance of imperfect language use on the web). Learners thus have the opportunity to feel part of a much larger community that is digitally connected.

8. Learners have the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that have currency in the modern world. No longer are LESL/A learners primarily defined by their perceived “deficits” (lack of literacy, lack of L2 proficiency). Rather, Learner Web participants can define themselves by the sophisticated knowledge and skills they are mastering and: finding information on the Internet, making informed choices about resources, successfully navigating websites and participating in social media. Since many other adults, foreign-born or native born, don’t yet feel comfortable with new media, LESL/A learners can feel a genuine sense of pride and accomplishment.

The Learner Web is not for every learner. Lack of literacy remains a barrier for LESL/A learners at the lowest levels and puts real limits to the possibilities for learning and interacting through technology (programs elsewhere are developing Internet-based programs for beginner LESL/A

learners). But for those learners who are new to learning technologies and possess some print literacy, tutor-facilitated models with bilingual options can open the door to a new world of digital learning.

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WAYS OF TEACHING READING AND WRITING: INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES IN ADULT LITERACY CLASSES IN EAST TIMOR

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Introduction

Many different methods have been used all over the world to teach adults and children to read and write, ranging from traditional spelling methods in which learners start learning the alphabet to methods based on the actual experiences that students bring to the classroom (Gray, 1969).

In East Timor, a developing nation in Southeast Asia that became independent in 2002, teaching reading has for a long time been guided by the method in which beginning readers start with learning the alphabet by heart, most often using the Portuguese or Indonesian names of the letters. In recent years, new methodologies and different didactic approaches have been introduced. One of them is the Cuban program *Yo, Sí Puedo!* (Yes I can), that was adapted to the East Timorese reality, resulting in *Sin Eu Posso* in Portuguese and *Los Hau Bele* in Tetum. This program, initially its Portuguese version and later mainly its Tetum version, has been used within the framework of the national adult literacy campaign that the Ministry of Education started in 2007 (Boughton, 2010). It provides the learner with three months of basic literacy training (Boon, 2011).

In section 2, we first present an overview of the different