



# National Coalition For Literacy

## A Response to the NETP from an Adult Education Perspective

The National Education Technology Plan opens with a big vision:

“By 2020, we will raise the proportion of college graduates from where it now stands [39%] so that 60% of our population holds a 2-year or 4-year degree [and] ...close the achievement gap so that all students – regardless of race, income, or neighborhood – graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and careers.”

The adult education community embraces this vision, but it is abundantly clear that in order to realize it, the nation must make substantial efforts to reengage adults who have left secondary and postsecondary settings or who have immigrated to the U.S and enable them to complete their education. The purpose of this document is to provide a response to the March 5, 2010 draft of the National Educational Technology Plan from an adult education perspective.

The adult education system, which serves students from age 16 through the lifespan, offers basic skills instruction, preparation for the GED, college-readiness training, workplace education, family literacy and parenting, civic engagement, citizenship preparation, and all levels of adult English language learning. Annually, the system serves approximately 2.3 million students in state-run and community-based programs. The need for basic skills is enormous as 93 million U.S. adults function at Basic and Below Basic proficiency levels on literacy tasks<sup>1</sup>. Breaking the cycles of poverty, underemployment, and low educational attainment must include focused investments in adults, their communities, and the professionals who serve them. Technology is essential to reach and engage adults in and out of the education system and to provide learning content across the lifespan to facilitate self-study and learning.

We largely support the goals and recommendations of the Plan, and appreciate the inclusiveness indicated by using the term “learners” rather than students or children. We also acknowledge the bullet and example on p. 20 that describes the needs of the adult workforce. However, we would like to see adult education referenced throughout the Plan as a significant provider of teaching and learning in the “life-wide and lifelong” learning model as shown in Figure 2 on page 17. There are innovative projects underway in the adult education system which could be highlighted as examples in the Plan to illustrate NETP goals, such as:

- **Learner Web**, a platform of customizable community-based resources that can support adult learners’ continued progress and personalized learning toward identified goals through blended combinations of programs and (sometimes facilitated) periods of self-study (see full description appended). (Learning 1.3, Infrastructure 4.3, Productivity 5.4)

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<sup>1</sup> Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., and Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in Everyday Life: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2007–480). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

- **U.S.A. Learns**, an always-on English language learning platform specifically designed for the adult immigrant population that can be used to supplement classroom instruction or as self-study (see full description appended). (Learning 1.3, Infrastructure 4.3)
- **Electronic-Professional Learning Communities**, a model toward supporting peer-to-peer professional learning that will connect teachers to colleagues, mentors and coaches, and resources that can be used to improve their practice (see full description appended). (Teaching 3.1 and 3.3)
- **Digital Stories**, English Language Civics and other programs are incorporating project-based learning through the production and e-publication of digital stories by learners to personalize and contextualize their Civics learning, involvement in their communities, digital literacy and basic skills, and English language learning (see full description appended). (Teaching 3.4)
- **Blended learning models**, the evidence base from adult education on the effectiveness of blended learning for adults reinforces the more robust evidence base from K-12 and adult professional literatures that show the promise of this model for effective and accelerated learning; several models of blended learning are in use around the country<sup>2</sup>. (Teaching 3.4, Productivity 5.4)

There are many needs if adult education is to ramp up service to meet expanding demand. We need the leverage of the National Education Technology Plan to substantiate federal investments to jumpstart innovation, the use of open source tools and resources, public-private partnerships, professional development, and meaningful uses of technology for teaching, learning and assessing rather than the incremental digitizing of existing practices. We need a systematic survey of the infrastructure capacity in the adult education field in order to create a comprehensive capacity-building plan for the adult education programs and professional development. Experience indicates that access to the Internet is not consistent across programs or states, and is certainly far from ubiquitous in learning environments. We remain concerned about the “digital exclusion” of low income, minority, immigrant, and disabled populations for whom the fastest connections and most powerful computers are priced out of reach, a phenomenon recognized in the FCC’s Broadband Plan. We need policy innovations that will free the field from barriers such as a tradition of using learner “seat time” for accountability metrics.

We hope that the authors of the Plan will recognize the value of the adult education system to achieve the President’s goals by including the system and adult learners more explicitly in the final iteration. We look forward to helping the U.S. Department of Education realize its goals for teaching and learning and for improving the educational attainment of millions of U.S. adults who strive for a better future.

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<sup>2</sup> McCain, M. (2009). The power of technology to transform adult learning. New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. Available at: [http://nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/POWER\\_OF\\_TECH.pdf](http://nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/POWER_OF_TECH.pdf); National Institute for Literacy (2008). *Investigating the literacy and language thresholds for independent online learning*. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/NIFLOnlineLearningReport.pdf>; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*, Washington, D.C., 2009. Available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>.

## Cited examples

### Learner Web

The *Learner Web* (LW: <http://www.learnerweb.org/infosite/>) is a web and telephone application providing guided support to adults in programs or working independently to improve their basic skills, prepare for the GED, college and workforce transition, family literacy or other learning goals. The *LW* is a *learning support system* that matches Learners' goals and progress to relevant on-line resources (including learner portals and distance learning products) and local community resources such as adult education programs, on-demand telephone help and tutors. *LW* users have their own online workspaces and e-portfolios for which they can give permission to their teachers, tutors, counselors or case managers to view.

The *LW* is a tool communities and coalitions can use to design and implement local learning support systems that include Learning Plans that identify resources and interim steps necessary to complete goals. State adult education systems, libraries, employers, volunteer and other community-based organizations can partner to support *LW* users in their regions. Numerous *Learning Plans* have been developed for goals such as GED preparation, ESOL for the workplace, college transition, family literacy, and so forth. Regions may customize these Learning Plans to connect in their local resources, programs and services and to align with state content standards or accountability requirements. *LW* is well suited to a range of career pathway, college and work transition programs and professional development activities for teachers and tutors.

## U.S.A. Learns

*U.S.A. Learns* ([www.usalearns.org](http://www.usalearns.org)) is a free ESL instructional program developed primarily for immigrant adults with limited English language skills who cannot attend traditional classroom programs because of difficulty with schedules, transportation, or other barriers.

The *U.S.A. Learns* Web site consists of 3 unique media-rich programs at two different levels of language instruction. Content offers topics, characters and situations that reflect the challenges of immigrants in U.S. society. Included are practice activities in listening, reading, writing and speaking skills as well as life skills necessary for success at work and in the community. All instructional materials are online; there are no videos, workbooks, or other materials for printing.

Learners use *U.S.A. Learns* in an independent mode, registered or unregistered, or it can be used under the auspices of a tutor or teacher. A separate website is available that allows teachers or tutors to track learner progress and provide feedback on selected activities.

Numerous state adult education programs have incorporated *U.S.A. Learns* into their existing distance learning programs. Local literacy programs, libraries, and a broad range of non-profit organizations also promote and incorporate *U.S.A. Learns* into the instructional offerings. Nationally, more than 14,000 teachers and tutors are using *U.S.A. Learns* to support ESL instruction. In the 18 months since its launch, *U.S.A. Learns* has provided at **over 1.8 million hours** of free ESL instruction.

## CALPRO's Electronic-Professional Learning Communities (e-PLCs)

Harnessing the potential of social networking technology to support professional learning is a promising new practice in the education field. Organized as electronic-Professional Learning Communities (e-PLC) and electronic-Communities of Practice (e-Cop), platforms such as those offered through Ning, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and others allow professional to engage in collaborative inquiry, joint problem solving, joint-planning and collaborative critical reflection. The essence and primary goal of e-PLCs and e-CoPs is to encourage active participation and leadership among its members by providing a facilitated peer-to-peer networking and learning environment. Members of e-PLCs (used in individual direct service educational programs) and e-CoPs (used among a broader professional community to focus on specific areas of inquiry) have broad authorship ability and the capacity to start discussions, post resources, begin new forums and groups.

The California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO: <http://www.calpro-online.org/>) has developed two such platforms recently. In October of 2009 CALPRO opened its California College Transition e-CoP as a resource to support adult educators from across the state, who participated in a professional development initiative offered through CALPRO to improve College Transition services for adult learners. In December 2009, CALPRO opened its *Virtual Workroom for Multilevel ESL Instructors*. The Virtual Workroom provides direct distance professional development utilizing a broad range of PD resources, such as a series of podcasts (short audio presentations), and related application activities, sample assessments, lesson plans, instructional materials, and options for more in-depth study.

Educators participating in the Virtual workroom are also invited to join CALPRO's *Multilevel ESL electronic-Professional Learning Community*, a companion Web site to the Virtual Workroom. In the e-PLC instructors are able to network with other teachers of multilevel classes, get advice and support from subject-area experts, discuss the content based resources in the Virtual Workroom.

## Digital Stories for Civic Engagement

In community technology centers, schools, and makeshift portable labs throughout the country, individuals are searching through photo albums, editing audio, and listening deeply as they learn to “digitize their stories”. Digital stories, brief personal videos bringing together voice, images, music, and video, have proven to be a powerful tool to document, reproduce, and communicate the stories of our lived experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Since the birth of digital storytelling in the early nineties<sup>4</sup>, disenfranchised groups have recognized the potential of this methodology as a tool to allow communities to speak for themselves. In the past decade community digital storytelling has become a strategy for labor organizing, domestic violence prevention, immigrant rights work, and, most recently, the adult education classroom.

### Digital Stories in the Adult Education Classroom:

Adult educators have long understood the value of our students’ stories: stories packed with wisdom, struggle, and achievement over adversity. As a process that allows students to document and preserve these stories while gaining skills in new technologies, digital storytelling is a natural next step for the field of adult education. It provides students and teachers with the tools to tell their own story, in their own words, using their own voices. The process boosts confidence, encourages collaborative, student-centered, project-based learning and serves as a new way for students to share their experiences within their communities. The digital storytelling methodology brings together widely divergent skill areas including:

- **Multimedia technology** – In addition to basic computer navigation skills, participants learn the basics of scanning, downloading images, and manipulating digital photos. Each participant records his/her own voice and learns to edit audio and video together using digital video software.
- **Media literacy** – Through the process of creating a multimedia piece, participants move from being passive consumers of media to critical viewers and media producers.
- **Written and oral literacy** – A variety of creative writing techniques encourage participants to learn the craft of developing and refining a personal narrative.
- **Civic engagement** – The process of sharing, listening to, producing, and viewing stories can play a central role to understand issues, create a sense of efficacy, and move people to action.<sup>5</sup>

Digital storytelling can facilitate the transition of adult education learners to postsecondary education or the workplace through a variety of approaches:

- **Recruitment tool** – Stories produced by those learners who have successfully transitioned can be used in outreach efforts.
- **Motivational tool** – Instructors can show stories during orientation or classes to motivate students to stay in the program and/or support goal-setting activities.
- **Data collection** – Digital stories can complement quantitative data collection to document program impact for funders and affiliates.

See adult learner and educator stories at: [http://www.creativenarrations.net/stories?tid\\_1=22](http://www.creativenarrations.net/stories?tid_1=22)

See PCAE’s successful civics organizing video at [http://storiesforchange.net/storyteller/pima\\_college\\_adult\\_education](http://storiesforchange.net/storyteller/pima_college_adult_education)

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<sup>3</sup> Freidus, Natasha. “Our Stories, Their Decisions: a lesson in voter education,” in Fox, Irani, & Solinger, *“Telling Stories to Change the World”*. New York, Routledge, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Lambert, Joe. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Freidus, Ibid.