



National Coalition for Literacy

6 February 2023

Ms. Yufanyi Nshom
Office of Workforce Investment
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue NW, Room C-4510
Washington, DC 20210

Re: Digital Literacy and Resilience RFI
Submitted via email: DigLiteracyRFI@dol.gov

Dear Ms. Nshom,

The National Coalition for Literacy (NCL) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Labor's Request for Information on digital literacy and resilience, posted in the Federal Register on 8 December 2022. As a collaborative association of major stakeholders in adult education and family literacy, we welcome the chance to provide field-based observations and insights to the DOL Employment and Training Administration and its partners in the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce, and the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

NCL is an alliance of the leading national and regional organizations dedicated to advancing adult education, family literacy, and English language acquisition in the United States. Through its own initiatives and collaborative efforts with other advocacy organizations and individuals, NCL ensures that leaders and legislators at the national level make informed decisions about policies, regulations, and funding for adult education, family literacy, and English language acquisition in the United States. NCL also serves as an authoritative resource on national adult education issues, particularly the pivotal roles of foundational literacy, numeracy, and English language skills in enabling access to and successful participation in further education, workforce participation, and community life.

Since its founding in 1983, NCL has worked with its member organizations to identify and track the effects of educational inequity on members of underserved and marginalized communities. NCL's comments below on the foundational skill needs of these populations draws on the deep knowledge and broad experience of its national

and regional members as well as the formal and anecdotal data that it gathers through participation in research projects such as the CREATE Adult Skills Network (<https://createadultskills.org/>) and contributions made at national and regional conferences.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit these comments. A full listing of current NCL members is available at <https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/about/about-ncl/membership/>. You are welcome to contact me directly with any questions at deborah.kennedy@key-words.us.

Cordially,

Deborah Kennedy
Executive Director
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National Coalition for Literacy Response DOLETA Request for Information on Digital Literacy and Resilience

NCL's comments focus on making materials and resources for digital skills development accessible to adult learners at all levels of reading proficiency. They address the following questions from the RFI:

- Question 2a. What barriers are individuals experiencing in accessing digital tools and/or training?
- Question 2b. What challenges are instructors and/or training providers facing when seeking to deliver digital literacy instruction and training to learners and/or workers?
- Question 3a. What additional resources are needed for workers of all backgrounds to access and succeed in digital literacy upskilling/training opportunities?
- Question 3b. How can programs ensure underserved and/or marginalized populations are adequately targeted for digital literacy training opportunities?

The Challenge

Every individual's ability to obtain essential digital skills and develop digital resilience depends on that individual's ability to apply the foundational literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills that result from participation in quality education from kindergarten through graduation from high school.

However, data from the 2017 PIAAC survey (https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/current_results.asp) showed that, in literacy, 19 percent of U.S. adults ages 16 to 65 scored at Level 1 or Below Level 1, and 33 percent scored at Level 2. Major disparities emerged when additional factors were taken into account: 36 percent of Black respondents and 31 percent of Hispanic respondents scored at Level 1 or below in literacy, versus 12 percent of White respondents, and 33 percent of those born outside the United States scored at Level 1 or below in literacy, versus 16 percent of those born within the United States. The PIAAC descriptors for these levels are as follows:

- Those at Level 1 have a basic sight vocabulary and can read short texts on familiar topics to locate a single piece of information.

- Those at Level 2 can read paragraph-length texts, compare information from the text with what is already known, and draw straightforward inferences.

This means that many online resources for developing digital literacy skills require levels of reading proficiency that a substantial percentage of adults from marginalized or underserved communities do not possess. For example, GCFGlobal.org encourages users with invitations such as, “Get to know your device better so you can do more with the smartphones and tablets you use every day. Set up and maintain your device, understand app permissions, learn hidden features, and more,” which the Sitechecker readability tool rates as “fairly difficult to read” on the Flesch Index. Other tools use audio (Northstar Digital Literacy) or video (Microsoft Digital Literacy), but these involve complex sentence structures and some specialized vocabulary that would be challenging, if not incomprehensible, for adult learners with limited English listening/speaking proficiency.

In addition to posing obstacles for adults who seek to develop their digital skills on their own, this issue with accessibility of digital literacy training materials presents challenges for education professionals who recognize the importance of incorporating digital skills instruction into their work with learners in adult basic education and English as a second language (ABE/ESL) programs. These educators need both materials that their adult learners can use effectively and professional development on ways to integrate digital skills with language—and, in cases such as health literacy, content—instruction.

Meeting the Challenge

During the pandemic, to manage the enforced move to online instruction, adult educators rose to the challenge of finding ways to continue serving their learners in multiple creative ways. Digital skills that involved using tablets and mobile phones for learning, navigating an online learning platform, participating in online instruction, and searching the internet for information became integrated into instruction out of necessity, with teachers collaborating on development of strategies for guiding their adult learners in various skills and tasks. In the process, programs found ways to expand both their reach and their capacity. Examples of these successes are provided by the EdTech Center @ World Education in a series of reports on promising practices and programming that came out of the Remote ESOL Project (<https://edtech.worlded.org/remote-esol-project/#what>).

Further research on digital literacy in instruction for adult learners has been conducted by the Digital Resilience in the American Workforce (DRAW) project

(<https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/draw>). As one outcome of its national landscape scan, DRAW developed the Digital Skills Library (<https://edtech.worlded.org/the-digital-skills-library/>), a curated resource list of instructional content that addresses the needs of diverse learners and teachers; “The Digital Skills Library was built to enable stakeholders in any role, from learners to state leaders, to find what they need to learn or teach digital skills.”

Another important resource for education professionals is the LINCS resource on Integrating Digital Literacy into English Language Instruction (<https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/esl-pro/integrating-digital-literacy-into-english-language-instruction>). This resource provides a self-paced learning module and other readings that practitioners can use to develop their ability to integrate digital skills with content and language learning.

Ongoing Challenges and Recommendations

While the resources describe above begin to address the digital skill development needs of adults who are learning English, they do not overtly speak to the lack of accessible materials for adults with low levels of reading proficiency. For these learners to develop digital resilience—“the awareness, skills, agility, and confidence to be empowered users of new technologies and adapt to changing digital skill demands” (<https://edtech.worlded.org/findings-from-a-national-landscape-scan-on-adult-digital-literacy-instruction/>)—access to options for developing foundational literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills is imperative. NCL therefore recommends the following:

- Support ongoing research on effective strategies for integrating digital skill development with foundational skills for all adults in ABE/ESL instructional contexts and other learning environments such as public libraries and community centers, and fund projects that scale up such strategies
- Promote the development of materials and resources that specifically cater to adult learners with low levels of reading proficiency and fit the profile (open source availability) that characterizes other materials in the Digital Skills Library
- Expand the repertoire of professional development materials available on LINCS to include integrating technology into literacy and numeracy instruction for adult learners at the lowest levels of proficiency
- Encourage providers of online digital skills training to examine their materials for readability and develop alternatives that are more accessible

Adopting these recommendations will enable DOLETA and its partners to promote development of the full set of skills that make digital resilience possible for all.