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Citizen literacy: A story of changing educational practice

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This paper recounts our journey of changing practice from teaching adult literacy to helping other teachers by creating digital and printed learning resources and tutor training materials to support a foundational literacy program designed to help those who teach English speaking adults to read and write.

Keywords: *adult literacy, new literacies, technology, post modernism, activism, social justice*

About the Citizen Literacy organisation

The Citizen Literacy CIC is a non-profit company registered in Scotland; we are a Community Interest Company (CIC) Registration SC671958. We work in the field of adult literacy - specifically reading and writing in the English language. This paper describes how we have moved our practice from teaching adults to read and write in community settings to creating learning resources and training materials for other teachers to

use. There is no physical centre where we teach adults. Although we do teach some adults remotely via video conference and phone calls.

About the Citizen Literacy Program

Our focus is on creating resources to support teachers and organisations who help adult speakers of English who need to learn to read and write. Our resources include a free learner web app and the Tutor Hub Service – that may be first of their kind in adult literacy. The program is designed and developed by adult literacy specialists with feedback from learners and tutors around the world. The program is designed to help educators overcome some serious learning resource and training gaps in adult literacy education. Our approach is a good fit with ideas connected to evidence-based approaches to teaching literacy skills but use very different methods to those used with children. The program is split into three parts, each of 30 lessons that are equivalent to UK Functional English Entry Levels 1-3 qualifications. The program and its resources are designed to be used and adapted by a wide range of tutors and organisations in different contexts. The program is unusual in that it is specifically intended to be used and delivered by third parties, although we do still teach a small number of adults ourselves. In 2024, we released the first 30 lessons of Part 1 of the program in print and digital formats.

Educational needs analysis and justification for the program

The UK has an adult literacy problem affecting about 20% of the working age population according to the National Literacy Trust [2024] and government statistics. This is a persistent and worsening problem. In 2024, nearly 40% of school students failed to pass their English exams [FT 2024]. In 2013, an OECD report (OECD 2013) indicated that children leaving school in England were less literate than retired people. Research into adult literacy in the English language in the UK by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDCALN 2008) and in the USA by the Barbara Bush Foundation (2021) identified these critical problems:

1. An acute lack of instructional resources specifically designed for adults
2. An acute lack of training materials for tutors to help improve adult literacy, especially in using phonics
3. An acute lack of basic research.

The Citizen Literacy program is designed to contribute to helping to solve the first two of these critical gaps and we hope to work with others on the third.

With few exceptions, the status, support, and resources for those seeking to help improve adult literacy in the English-speaking world is extremely poor. What support that exists is highly fragmented, uneven, and hard to access. Our learning resources and training materials are designed in collaboration with others involved in adult literacy in the UK and elsewhere to help fill these gaps. Due to many of our resources being freely available online, we receive comment and feedback from a broad variety of organisations and individuals. We are also involved in online discussions and attend conferences to inform our design and development processes. Because training and support for adult literacy tutors is often limited, our resources are intended to be dual-purpose and are designed to support new literacy tutors to learn 'on the job' as they go along with their learners.

Our understanding of the adult literacy challenge in the English-speaking world and our role in helping to alleviate it can be summarised in these three points:

1. The challenge is so large no single organisation can solve it alone
2. A collaborative approach is needed to develop solutions (co-design etc.)
3. There are many systemic factors involved in the causes of low literacy – social, cultural, economic, poor education systems and dysfunctional policy etc.

About the name 'Citizen Literacy'

An additional challenge to improving adult literacy is that the reporting and understanding of low literacy in societies dominated by neoliberal

ideology, like the UK, is controlled by economic transactional thinking (Harvey 2007). Neoliberalism stresses individuals taking responsibility for improving their own lives in economic terms, including literacy, as a means of reducing poverty and inequality. Critiques of neoliberalism, however, argue that low literacy is not the cause but a symptom of existing poverty, inequality, and poor educational systems, and that improving it is an issue of social justice. Fintan O'Toole (2010) summarises this perspective in the Irish context as:

> *"Literacy is overwhelmingly an issue of social exclusion and disadvantage". A dark Irish secret that few of us want to talk about. Irish Times. December 11, 2010.*

We chose the name 'Citizen Literacy' and the strapline 'Every citizen in society should have the right to be able to learn to read and write, as a matter of social justice', to distance ourselves from such transactional approaches to literacy. It also reminds us that citizens in society have rights as well as responsibilities. This is particularly relevant in the UK context where a Prime Minister (Margaret Thatcher) is credited with the statement 'There is no such thing as society' and, more recently, senior government ministers stating that they do not believe in any human rights at all (Brown, 2023).

Changing our practice from teaching to supporting teachers

Our early practice involved over twenty-five years of adult community education in a wide variety of settings. Latterly this was in a community college in Glasgow working with adults in basic skills classes to prepare them for vocational training. We were also involved in community education activities across the city including recovery education, forensic mental health and working with homeless learners. The original impetus for our changing practice was encountering adult learners taking vocational college courses who could not read or write at all.

Searching for learning resources to use with these learners revealed that there was very little specifically designed for adults and extremely minimal resources for adults that used phonics methods. Trying to use children's learning resources was regarded negatively by these learners; it was perceived as demeaning and added to the stigma and trauma that these learners had already experienced in the education system.

There was another resource issue as well. Adults, unlike children, are not beginner learners who are still developing cognitively, they have a whole set of life experiences to draw upon. Children's resources employ methods, activities, approaches, media, and cultural styles that are not always suitable for adults. (UCL IoE & ccConsultancy, 2019).

In common with many other community education tutors, we tried using parts of primary education, ESOL / ESL resources and copying resources from magazines and newspapers and devising ad hoc activities. What we realised was needed was a more coherent approach that used phonics and customised resources. Over time, this led to the design of an instructional program with a set of classroom activities supported by tailored literacy learning resources to use in class. This became the first basic adult literacy program that used phonics accredited by the UK City and Guilds qualification authority. The content of the activities and learning resources included adult themes like shopping, fashion, food, and sport etc. The instructional design of the program had an emphasis on customisation to meet the needs and interests of the learners, greatly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (Freire, 2005). This program ran successfully for several years. During this period, we were fortunate to be able to work with some leading UK literacy specialists and researchers in the creation of the 'Post 16 Phonics Handbook' funded by the Department of Education via the Education and Training Foundation (UCL IoE & ccConsultancy, 2019). This added to our knowledge and confirmed that our approach was correct.

In this period, we encountered colleagues with similar interests and aspirations working inside and outside the adult education system who were highly skilled in a range of educational, linguistic, media and web development disciplines. This led to the formation of a consortium to explore the feasibility of designing a foundational adult literacy program that was designed to be adopted and adapted by teachers in a wide range of education settings. A key part of our design discussions was to explore how we might use technology appropriately to support adult learners and their teachers. The rationale for including technology in our design was from our previous experience of teaching adults to read and write, when we noticed nearly all the students owned and used a smartphone, indicating this was a viable digital platform to reach these learners. This, and the fact that our consortium had the technical skills to develop content for smartphones and other platforms, meant that there was a

strong digital strand to our work.

Some educational colleagues were surprised that we were thinking of using smartphones as a learning platform with low literacy learners It's worth pausing here to reflect on the pervasive negative stereotypes about adults with low basic skills that often dominate thinking about this topic. An OECD study presents a useful corrective analysis:

> *Low-skilled adults are a diverse group. It is sometimes assumed that the majority of adults lacking basic skills are school dropouts, outside the labour market and living on benefits. In fact, rather few meet this description. The low-skilled are a surprisingly varied group, the majority are in work of some sort or other and include a number of migrants. More than 5 million are in work.*
>
> *Adult skills in England 2016 OECD*

Due to our use of technology, the consortium was successful in gaining research and development funding to develop our ideas, which led to the creation of our first digital and print prototypes from 2019-22. After this time, it became unfeasible for us to continue with this work inside a community college due to government funding cuts that have continued since the global economic crisis of 2008 (LWI, 2024. FTa, 2024). We had foreseen this eventuality and had formed a non-profit limited company to enable us to continue this work independently. By summer 2024, we had completed the printed and digital resources to support the first 30 lessons in Part 1 of the program. We celebrated our hard work with an event in a Glasgow community centre where family, friends and colleagues were invited. We even had a piper to mark the event.

We are now at the stage of promoting our completed Part 1 resources to the varied communities that are engaged in adult literacy development work in the English language around the world. Next steps include creating resources for Parts 2 & 3 of the program as well as a guide for beginner adult literacy tutors.

Using technology appropriately

Our print and digital resources are designed to be used by third parties, whom we may never meet. In fact, our free web app, which is designed

to support the face-to-face classes in the program, is already used worldwide by people we have never met. We know from web analytics and personal testimonies from teachers that the web app is used in a wide variety of contexts and not just to support our program. Here is a description of what it does, taken from our website:

> *Our revolutionary Citizen Literacy Learner web app is free to use, does not require user registration, has no adverts, no in-app purchases and takes no personal information. Featuring a voice driven interface suitable for low literacy learners with two virtual teachers that provide instruction and instant personalised feedback. It keeps track of each learner's progress anonymously to provide feedback. Importantly, the design avoids looking like a children's learning resource – a strongly demotivating factor for older learners. There is multimedia interactivity and gameplay, together with voice and handwriting recognition. Enabling some of the first online independent learning opportunities for low literacy learners. From a standing start, by the end of lesson 2, learners are beginning to read and write simple sentences.*
>
> *Free Learner App Overview. Citizen Literacy website. https://citizenliteracy.com/learner-app/*

The idea behind the Learner web app is that it enables learners to practice between classes and get feedback. This is also intended to take some of the workload off teachers – teaching adult literacy is a demanding and under resourced activity. The app activities are tied into the lesson plans in the Tutor Handbook so that the teacher can tell learners which app activities to work on between classes. In effect, the app takes on some of the tutor role to enable a degree of independent learning.

This approach that fosters learners' independence and our program design is consistent with the findings of Benjamin Bloom's later research into improving learning outcomes. Bloom found dramatic improvement in learning outcomes by providing individual expert tutoring to learners and 'mastery learning' methods (progress is only possible by showing mastery of previous tasks). This became known as Bloom's 2 Sigma problem: How do you replicate a massive improvement in learning

outcomes for whole cohorts with methods requiring a very large investment of teaching resources and expertise that are only available in elite educational settings? (Bloom 1984). Bloom speculated that part of the answer lay in the effective use of a future technology (web) and a coherent educational design. We think our approach fulfils part of an answer to the 2 Sigma problem.

A total literacy method for teaching adults

We are dealing with adult learners, who have all the cares and duties of adults, who need to feel they are making rapid progress, not school children who are forced to attend class daily. To this end, the program is designed to cover the wide range of skills they need in their daily lives to make a difference. We call it 'Total Literacy' after the system of multiskilled training of footballers to play in any position called 'Total Football'.

These are the skills we seek to develop in our learners:

- Phonics – blending (i.e., Phonological Awareness and Letter Correspondence)
- Decoding – breaking down
- Reading
- Spelling
- Listening
- Writing
- Speaking
- Alphabetical Awareness
- Punctuation
- Comprehension
- Composition
- Grammar

Learner testimonies

Perhaps one of the best ways we can reflect on our experience is by sharing some of the feedback we have received from the adult learners using these web resources through Citizen Literacy, which in turn puts the spotlight on their voices and insights from having engaged in this form of digital learning (often in conjunction with face-to-face learning). These testimonies have been collected by interviews as part of the evaluation process for funded research projects:

Citizen Literacy user-centred evaluation (Nesta 2021)

> *"I went on YouTube, and I saw a video cos it was like for kids… there's nothing for adults…so it sang the words out…but this app it's like for grownups so it's much better…it's refreshing"*
>
> *"When you can't read and write you feel always small in a box, and you put yourself in the box forevermore…it's very difficult to come out and climb out and say 'ok I'm gonna do this"*
>
> *"I feel more knowledgeable, I feel that, because I'm learning every week, I can turn the app on, and I can start doing it…it helps you cos we only go to college once a week so the app when you got into it you've got it there every day"*

Citizen Literacy – Ufl final evaluation report March 2021 learners feedback - interview audio transcriptions (Ufl 2021)

> *"I done it [the question] and it said it was right and I felt so relieved so happy inside."*
>
> *"I will go out, we got a shop called (name) the shop down here and I never can remember its name so what I did is I spelled the letters out you know, and I remembered it…I told my daughter she said 'where are you mum' and I went 'I'm in that shop' 'what shop' and I went 'ok yeah' I was there that's it and I spelled it out read it to her what shop I was in but I felt so good inside."*
>
> *"The reading part, I will read something now like and if I know it's a mistake, I will go over it a few times… I do go through it a*

couple of times just to read it properly, write it properly"

"I've got a lot better on that app by using it. I can make mistakes on it."

"The app…it makes you think, and you can always go back you can say 'alright I don't want to know today I'll go back tomorrow' you can go back to it all the time you don't have to go 'oh I'm going to lose it or it's not going to be there anymore."

"My son called me yesterday and he asked how my learning was getting on and I should get really good he asked me to spell EastEnders, and I spelt it without thinking nothing I just felt straight away and thank you thank you thank you."

"My tutor told me about the app, and I went into it the first [lesson] and it was brilliant. Honest and truth I was amazed because all the words what you've been learning are on that, and even if you get it wrong 'please try again' and you do it again and then it makes you think what is the word, like stamp that's what I got muddled up with. Oh god what is it and I couldn't think, and I sat down at the computer and said, 'no you have to look at it properly' so I done it, and it said it was right and I felt so relieved so happy inside."

Tutor testimonies

Here we reflect on our experience of working with tutors, volunteers, and advocates by sharing some of the feedback we have received from their use of our web resources through Citizen Literacy, which in turn puts the spotlight on their voices and insights from having engaged in this form of digital teaching (often in conjunction with face-to-face learning).

It is worth noting that our web analytics reporting indicates that our App is being used widely around the world in variety of contexts. The personal testimony from an ESL / ESOL tutor (please see video links in the references section) describe using our App with Afghan refugees. Our next phase of work hopes to share international feedback on the use of our digital and printed resources. Many of the testimonies shared

here have been collected by interviews as part of the evaluation process for funded research projects in the UK:

Citizen Literacy – UfI final evaluation report March 2021 – tutor interviews and survey responses (UfI 2021)

> *"The app is great, it fills a big gap and having a fully integrated app and course materials is just what a tutor needs. A lot of good work has previously been done by many people, but resources and materials are distributed all over the internet and in different publications and it's tiring and time-consuming to find it all and fit it together – a fully integrated course like this solves that problem.*
>
> *The structure and the sequence of activities are very good, making it easy for the learner to self-study and progress at a speed which is best suited to him/her.*
>
> *It is really good that the app includes a combination of listening to identify a word and speaking a given word. This is missing from many apps.*
>
> *I think the app is well designed and should be easy for learners to use in my literacy class. It is welcome that there are no distracting animations, it treats the learners like adults, and having the consistency of using the same app throughout the course will facilitate access, making it much easier for learners to achieve autonomy in study.*
>
> *Many of our literacy learners have come to us through our ESOL assessments - so it is good that this course targets that group as well" Donal, Adult Education Tutor, London*
>
> *"I did love the 'well done, you're doing well' I thought that was great, there was a lot of affirmation throughout it… I think the confidence level will come…by being perhaps scaffolded a little bit with a bit of support" Sally, advocate*
>
> *"I liked the encouraging feedback of the 'well done you're doing great' I think learners really need to hear that especially if*

they're doing it on their own, I think this particular learner that I've been supporting that would be really boosting for him just to hear that" Emma, teacher

"You could see there was an awful lot of pedagogy and thought process and really it came from a really hugely strong base" Sally, advocate

"Again, I've seen it working with students who they thought they'd never be able to learn using a computer or they'll never be able to learn using an app you know their mobile phone, but they can, and it just takes a bit of time" Blair, teacher.

Personal testimonies

"The handbooks provide a clear and friendly introduction to the program, it's rationale structure and contents with detailed lesson plans broken down into exercises, step-by-step lesson plan activity guides and teaching tips to get tutors up and running quickly. It's exhaustive [with] very good lesson plans"

"So, there are also free resources for us [tutors] if we're just starting or we're going back to teaching literacy. So, on the website, you've got free tutor training and development resources, free training guides and sequence for new tutors, a post 16 phonics approach toolkit, now this is this is huge. But it's fantastic if you're beginning with literacies, if you're just starting off. It takes a very structured approach and, as I was saying before, if you don't know your phonemes from your graphemes or if you don't know your IPA from whatever, then this is a very good place to start"

"So, it can be used by tutors and others to develop reading and writing, speaking, and listening skills in their low literacy level learners/ And, as I was saying, it's a program designed to be adopted, adapted, and delivered by others. It's an integrated set of digital and paper learning resources to support tutors and their students, so you've got the tutor handbooks, the learner workbooks, you've got the tutor platform and, their words not mine, the revolutionary citizen literacy learner web app,

which is quite a quite a mouthful, but I do actually agree with it!" NATECLA Scotland 2022-23 Workshops. Ciaran: An ESOL Group Tutor Fife, Scotland (NATECLA Scotland 2022-23)

"There is no reason why this could not be used in schools" Kevin, Special Educational Needs Teacher 2024, Personal Interview

"This could be useful for economical CPD training in literacy for teachers to develop their literacy teaching skills at a time of funding cuts." Jon, Primary School Head Teacher Bristol 2024, Personal Interview

Locating our practice in adult literacy as a social justice issue

Literacy is very much a 'bread and butter' issue affecting working class, minority, migrant and indigenous communities in society. Those from wealthier backgrounds can afford the private tutoring needed to acquire literacy, as is very much the case in the USA. As the UK follows the USA closely in socio-economic trends and policies, it is instructive to look at what is happening there. For Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and poor white communities in the USA, the levels of poor literacy are high (NCES 2002, 2019) This has led to calls from NAACP civil rights activists to pressure local educational school districts to improve the methods of literacy education in schools (Luscombe 2022) and discard some of the discredited methods supported by commercial publishers. Paulo Freire in the UK (1980s) comments that there is a strong tendency for educational systems and those who operate them to avoid taking responsibility for poor outcomes. Freire observes that this leads individuals and communities that are affected by low literacy to internalise negative self-images and stereotypes about themselves that builds further barriers to learning. So, providing quality basic literacy education for adults can be a powerful tool for building self-esteem, confidence, and the basis for the development of critical views of the status quo. From this perspective, improving adult literacy can be seen as an act of resistance to injustice. Remember, Paulo Freire was thrown in jail for teaching peasants to read and write so that they could challenge their unfair contracts from landowners.

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About the authors

John Casey has worked as a manager and designer on many leading UK education technology projects including the University of the Highlands and Islands, where he helped to create a unified distance learning platform. He was also involved in the establishment of a national UK higher education learning resources collection, where he was instrumental in introducing the Creative Commons licences system and the use of open software into the service. While working at Stirling University, John created 'The Instructional Media Programme' that was delivered to community college lecturers across Scotland, to help them design learning resources for online delivery. He was later invited to deliver the course to postgraduate student teachers at Cambridge University. John has worked as an instructional designer with many subject experts to create online courses in a wide variety of subject areas. In the process of his involvement with online learning John has developed an interest in cognitive psychology and its relation to the design of learning resources. Since becoming a founding partner in Citizen Literacy John has been able to put his wide experience to good use in coordinating the work of a talented multiskilled team.

Diane Gardner has been teaching adult literacy and ESOL literacy for over 25 years, initially as a volunteer and then in a range of community organisations and colleges, gaining a range of professional qualifications along the way. She started developing resources for adult literacy students with very low literacy levels after encountering a college student who could not read or write. Diane found there was a shortage of suitable resources for adults and hardly any using phonics methods. In this process Diane authored the first phonics-based adult literacy course in the UK accredited by the City and Guilds qualifications body. Diane has also been a content adviser for the BBC Skillswise basic skills website and a contributor to the 'Post 16 Phonics Handbook' funded by the Department of Education. Recently Diane has also been a reviewer of the basic skills learning resources for the UK NCFE qualifications body. Since becoming a founding partner in Citizen Literacy Diane has been involved in the design and development of a growing range of printed learning resources and ground-breaking digital tools for literacy teachers and their learners in the field of adult and ESL / ESOL literacy.

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