

The Learner Web

Brief Concept Description

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The Learner Web is an innovative Web-based and telephony-based technology being developed to:

- help adults improve their basic skills
- help adults identify goals, make realistic learning plans and connect with and utilize supportive resources appropriate to their goals and plans
- be nationally scalable while being embedded in local communities
- strengthen community collaboration around adults' learning needs

The Learner Web (LW) is a Web- and telephone-accessed application providing online facilitation and support to adults seeking to improve their basic skills, prepare for the GED or pursue other learning goals such as citizenship, family literacy or preparing for college. The LW makes literacy resources accessible to learners on their own time and in their own environment. A learner's goals and skill needs are matched to supportive resources available online or offline in their local communities. Learners can also be connected with volunteer tutors in their community. The LW is designed to support and enhance, not replace, existing educational programs and resources in the community.

The impetus for the Learner Web comes from our recent research that has followed a large representative sample of adults with low education. This is the first rigorous study to systematically track changes in adults' basic skills over a long period of time and the strategies they use to improve their basic skills after leaving school. A key finding is that many low-education adults seek to improve their literacy skills through various activities we term *self-study*. Many adults who participate in formal programs also work on improving their basic skills and/or obtaining a GED through self-study with printed materials, media or technology. Many alternate between periods of program participation and self-study. Some who self-study never attend programs. Many of those who need or prefer to work independently do so without support or guidance and too often fail to progress or connect with programs and other resources that could help them.

By better connecting adults' self-study activities with programs and other resources in their communities, the LW will extend the reach and enhance the impact of learning already taking place in programs across the country. The LW does this by connecting learners with existing programs, resources and services, whether online or offline in their local communities. The LW helps learners identify their individual goals and needs and form realistic plans and develop basic skills needed to reach their goals. The LW

generates a customized list of resources and tools from its database that match a learner's goal, needs, skill level and step of a plan (e.g., online resources for improving basic math skills in preparation for taking the GED Math test). Adults may find the LW directly on the internet or be referred to it by local organizations or programs. Individuals can easily create their own Learner logins, using screen names if anonymity is desired (even anonymous Learners provide a zipcode that is used to identify appropriate local resources).

The Learner Web is quite different in conception and design from other online adult education websites and distance education systems. In fact, distance education systems, websites, print materials and other supports are entries (called Resources) in the Learner Web database that are matched to adults' individual goals, needs, skills and learning plans. In this way, the LW connects with and leverages other programs and resources, either online or offline in local communities. It connects learners with tutors, helpers and counselors either through the internet, over the phone, or face-to-face in their local community, depending on the preferences of learners and local partnering organizations and communities.

Partnership and decentralized design. The LW is designed as a central database of resources and matching functionality accessed through multiple user roles. The administration of the system is largely de-centralized to local and regional partners. The Learner Web is administered and maintained by Regions, defined by locality or service focus, which are often but not necessarily collaborations between various service providers. This decentralized design is an important component to the project's sustainability as it encourages diverse usability supported by common infrastructure.

In addition to on-line resources, it is important that learners access diverse resources in their communities. Benefits to participating in the LW for local and regional partners include:

- Outreach to learners and referrals to their programs
- Easily accessed resources to help learners at all levels
- Facilitation of local and regional partnerships among providers for better service – (e.g., coordination between adult basic education providers and local libraries)
- Coordination of literacy volunteers as tutors and helpers

Local adult education programs, libraries, social service agencies, CBOs, employers and other organizations or individuals can easily refer their students, clientele or neighbors to the LW (sometimes setting them up with LW accounts and getting them going on the spot). At the same time, since participating communities map their local resources into the LW database, they also receive referrals.

The Learner Web thus includes many types of users who interact through the system in different user roles. Accounts for all user roles (other than the Learner) must be created by local administrative users so that the organizational standards and practices of local programs, organizations and communities are built into the operation of the LW.

Resource Creators enter information into the database about Resources (e.g., online curricula and distance education programs; local adult education and tutoring programs; CBOs, social service agencies; etc.). *Resource Administrators* supervise and perform quality control over Resources entered by Resource Creators.

There are also several assistant roles – *Tutor, Helper, Counselor, Teacher* – who assist Learners in various ways as they interact with the LW. Assistants work with Learners online, by telephone or face-to-face. Individual preferences of Learners and assistants along with local organizational practices determine how Learners and assistants are matched and in which modalities they interact. A nationally-scalable toll-free telephone application is integrated into the LW that connects learners with on-demand Helpers working on call from their homes, from phone banks or other locations (without revealing either party's phone number). When Learners request help through the LW, they can specify the type of assistance they need (e.g., help using the LW system itself or help with a content area such as math or writing). They can also specify whether they want immediate help by phone, by email or in person. If they request immediate telephone assistance, for example, the LW quickly determines if Helpers with matching expertise are on call, and if so, gives the Learner a toll-free number to call and a ticket # to enter into the phone menu, after which they will be immediately connected to the matched Helper.

Learners can also be matched with Tutors for online, telephone or face-to-face assistance. The distinction between a Tutor and a Helper is that a Tutor has a long-term relationship with a Learner whereas a Helper is like a “customer service” agent. Teachers and Counselors are like Tutors in that they have long-term relationships with Learners (made by local partnering organizations) but work with Learners in specialized ways. A Counselor, for example, provides guidance in goal setting and educational planning, whereas a Teacher already has a classroom-based relationship with a Learner.

All of these assistants, with the Learner's permission, are able to view the Learner's goals, plans and history of steps taken and progress made towards improving basic skills and meeting goals. The shared confidential Learner history will help coordinate the efforts of the various assistants that may work with a given Learner over time. This will provide a less fragmented and discontinuous learning trajectory, something our research shows is a major issue in adult education.

Libraries, adult education programs and other organizations participating in the LW can manage some or all of these supportive roles. Managerial oversight is provided through the LW user roles of *Helper Administrator, Tutor Administrator, Counselor Administrator, Teacher Administrator and Resource Administrator*. These administrative users create accounts for and supervise local Helpers, Tutors, Counselors, Teachers and Resource Creators. Existing community partnerships or coalitions for literacy, which are called *Regions* in the LW, customize and manage the way in which local assistants, Resources and Learners interact. Regions may be large (e.g., an entire state or a metropolitan area) or small (e.g., a town or part of a large city) or anything in between.

Overall management of a LW Region is provided by a *Regional Administrator* who creates and supervises accounts for the Region's Helper Administrators, Tutor Administrators, Counselor Administrators, Teacher Administrators and Resource Administrators. Regional Administrators can configure their Resources and learning management systems to be viewable and usable only by Learners in their Regions or shareable by Learners across LW regions. This enables Regions to specialize in the development of content designed to support learners with various needs and goals, and then to share the fruits of their labor with other Regions. Because the Learner Web is compliant with major standards established for online learning objects and learning management systems (SCORM and IMS), materials developed with other standard-compliant systems can be integrated into the Learner Web.