Adopting a Growth Mindset to Better Serve Adult Learners

By Liana Gamber-Thompson | EdSurge Solutions Studio

"Sometimes you do need to reinvent the wheel," explains Jana Harper, Instructional Specialist at Central Arizona College (CAC), where she lends her skills to program design and curriculum/assessment development in CAC's Adult Basic Education department.

Harper and her colleagues shifted to online learning in a matter of days in March of 2020 after learning of CAC's closure at the start of spring break, and it wasn't a smooth transition at first. Forced to reimagine teaching and learning on a dime, it would take a growth mindset—rooted in experimentation, authenticity and transparency— to make online learning a success in their local context.

Getting students connected to online courses was a challenge in the rural community served by CAC. Harper says, "Our county is rural. There are cows, horses and large expanses of desert where there is nobody, so internet connectivity is always difficult. I would guess that most of our students have smartphones with limited data. Most of our students do not have internet at home or do not have good connectivity."

The team had some laptops to distribute, online curricular resources at their disposal and access to CAC's Learning Management System (LMS), Blackboard, but they were more accustomed to supporting faculty with in-person learning given their student population's ongoing challenges with internet access. Undeterred, Harper was convinced she could compile some existing resources to bring CAC's students and faculty up to speed with online learning while strengthening their digital literacy skills. Thinking back to March, Harper recalls telling herself, "We're not going to reinvent the wheel because there is stuff out there. We just need to cull and curate the resources and put it all together."

But after six weeks of sustained technical challenges and decreased enrollment, Harper knew she had to help her faculty and students with online learning in a way that was unique to her local community. She and her colleagues would need to make their own instructional resources and videos for how to get started with online adult education at CAC. She recalls thinking, "We need our own wheel because our wheel is very particular. It's the CAC-specific Blackboard, it's our group of students, it's our logistical issues, and it's our internet connectivity issues."

UPSKILLING ONLINE WITH SKILLRISE

In the midst of her re-assessment, Harper connected with SkillRise, an ISTE initiative that helps organizations leverage edtech to improve adult education and training programs. SkillRise provides an actionable framework for organizations looking to build on their adult education offerings, as well as an online course that helps programs like Harper's develop a plan to advance adult education with technology in their own setting. Those enrolled in the course are supported along the way through the SkillRise community of practice and through personalized coaching and mentorship.

"The course content and resources were really valuable," says Harper. "There's so much out there, it's easy to get lost down a rabbit hole. The course helped us stay focused

on the task, and having a timeline has been helpful, even if we can't stick to it. We have a path forward and know that we're not leaving out some really important steps and considerations in the process."

Victoria Ruelas, also an Instructional Specialist at CAC, has been working alongside Harper, retooling adult learning at the college to meet the students' needs during COVID-19 and beyond. She agrees that SkillRise was instrumental in helping her team build on their realization that more student support and customization was needed during this transition: "SkillRise gave us this wonderful framework in which to take these questions one at a time and really dive into them, making parts of a plan, or pieces of a plan, that would one day hopefully come together into something that was usable."

Armed with ideas and tools like workbooks and evaluation rubrics from their SkillRise course, Ruelas, Harper and the rest of their team moved forward with planning a back to basics workshop that would help all adult learners at CAC succeed in online learning. SkillRise also provided advice and moral support throughout the process. Harper explains that SkillRise coach Joey Lehrman asked, "What are the top three things your students need to be able to do in order to participate on the first day of class?" Knowing the answer to that question was "the basics," Ruelas, Harper and team used Lehrman's provocation as a lodestar as they planned their workshop during the summer months.

APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED

The CAC team surveyed students and found that most needed basic digital literacy skills in order to move forward with GED and other coursework. So, topics like how to use browser tabs, copy and paste text and check internet connectivity were addressed at the start of the workshop. Since most students were using mobile devices as their primary means of accessing the web, desktop navigation was also covered. Additionally, special attention was paid

to Blackboard Collaborate features to help students get the most out of the platform CAC has adopted campus-wide. Harper also produced a series of instructional videos for students to reference during the workshop and any time in the future as a way to ensure the overview stuck.

CAC instructors were part of the learning process, too. Ruelas says, "We just kept on reassuring our teachers that we were in this together. It wasn't going to be perfect. It was going to be a work in progress, but it's through the process that we would come through with a really nice end result. It's going to be messy, but at the end we're going to have a beautiful piece of art which is this online curriculum."

The creative process paid off, with the CAC team coming up with a "nice end result" indeed. When asked to share how they felt at the end of the workshop, students were positive across the board. A student named Monica said she felt "motivated and ready to go" after participating in the workshop, while Benjamin said he was "most ready to get started." Ginny explained she found the workshops "very informative." She continued, "I'm excited to finish this and prove to my son that at 51 I'm going to graduate!"

Ruelas, who has been leading some of the workshops, explains that having permission to feel like "we're all starting at the beginning" helped foster real community among CAC's adult education instructors. This enabled them to model that approach for students, who leveraged the affordances of the online learning platform to create community in new and unexpected ways, too. She says, "When we expressed [to the students] that, 'Hey, we're new at this, too. You're going to see us fumble about, but that's okay,' it gave them permission to be real too. It was really, really nice. It was very authentic— that's the word that comes to mind." She recalls a student who, during a particular class, was repeatedly pulled away to take care of her children: "Just, boom, a whole bunch of emojis in chat saying, 'You've got this girl. I've got kids, too. We can do this.' I mean, the key was just giving people permission to be people."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Harper, Ruelas and the CAC adult learning team plan to continue offering the workshops even after students return to campus, firm in the belief that giving themselves and their students permission to go back to basics and learn to navigate the systems around them is crucial to their success. Harper reflects, "On any of those lists of 21st-century skills, they always say one of the key skills that our students need is navigating systems. All of this has given me a really different, deeper understanding of what a system might be. A system might be school, but it might be the internet. Or a system might be Blackboard." Now, whatever system CAC's students encounter, they will be prepared.

The workshop will continue to change to meet their students' needs as the learning environment at CAC evolves. How will they ensure the workshop still primes their students for success? "I think because we had a growth mindset, we were open to these discoveries," says Ruelas. "Acknowledge and embrace the imperfections of what you do and go ahead and do it anyway. As we get into the upper echelons of higher education, there is this idea that you must know everything at all times. But when you acknowledge that even you don't know, but you're willing to find out, I think that's when the good stuff happens." ■

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