

# Re-Conceptualising Literacy among Adult Learners in a Post-Pandemic World

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**Abstract:** This article explores the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the field of adult education, with a particular emphasis on the importance of health literacy in adult literacy programs. Research shows that the pandemic has prompted educators to re-examine the concept of adult literacy, recognizing that traditional, narrow understandings of adult literacy may limit the effectiveness of adult learning interventions. The article also pointed out that regions such as Australia have the problem of low adult literacy rates. Although measures have been taken to improve literacy rates, many adults still lack basic literacy skills. Additionally, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital skills and health literacy, signaling how adult learning will continue to evolve in the future. The authors plan to use the acquired knowledge and skills to engage in curriculum redesign to ensure the reach and impact of adult literacy programs.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; adult education; adult literacy; digital literacy; health literacy; Australian literacy rate; educational intervention; Course Design; community support.

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly among the most significant developments of the 21st century. As Onyeaka et al. (2021) observed, the impact that the pandemic has had on humanity has been profound and unprecedented. Essentially, there is virtually no element of the human experience that has escaped the effects of COVID-19. Adult education is among the areas where the impact of the pandemic has been felt most profoundly. In this essay, I discuss how the conceptualisation of adult learning has to be reconsidered in light of the pandemic. Some of the specific issues that I address include the traditional understanding of adult learning, and how this notion should be revised to reflect the transformation that the pandemic has generated. In the essay, I reflect on how my personal perspective regarding adult learning has changed in response to the insights acquired across the course. The overarching purpose of the essay is to demonstrate that the pandemic has created a new reality that presents far-reaching implications for adult literacy.

One of the issues that have emerged in recent years is that the adult literacy rate in Australia is appallingly low. According to Belot (2023), a study has revealed that in such areas as Tasmania, an alarmingly high number of adults lack basic literacy skills despite the measures that have been put in place to boost the literacy rate. Belot (2023) adds that the high prevalence of illiteracy among adults in Australia harms the nation's economy, and undermines its global competitiveness. Data indicates that as many as 44% of Australian adults are unable to exhibit rudimentary literacy (Adult Learning Australia, 2021). This statistic is indeed worrying as it raises questions about the effectiveness of the adult literacy programs that Australia has implemented over the years. More importantly, the data underscores the need for Australia to reconsider its approach to adult literacy. Perhaps the low literacy levels highlight the need for an overhaul of the adult education system, and its replacement with a broader and more robust understanding of the essence of adult literacy that better reflects the post-pandemic reality that the nation faces

today.

## 2. The Traditional Notion of Adult Learning

One of the goals that I wish to accomplish as an educator is to participate in efforts to reinforce and expand literacy among adults. In particular, I plan to be involved in programs designed to extend literacy opportunities for vulnerable adults in developing economies. In readiness for the challenge that lies ahead, I have gathered a tremendous amount of insights regarding the dynamics of adult literacy. Previously, I felt that adult literacy is concerned with the skills, knowledge, and competencies that adults acquire through conventional education that allow them to function effectively within their societies. This definition is largely in line with the conceptualisation developed by such scholars as Tett et al. (2006) who acknowledged that adult literacies entail the competencies essential for proper functioning. However, as will be revealed in a later section, the pandemic has necessitated a rethink of this conceptualisation. While adult literacy remains concerned with functional skills, thanks to the pandemic, its understanding is now broader.

Despite being rather narrow and shallow, the traditional notion of adult literacy outlined above remains dominant. Scholars have raised concerns that this notion could be undermining the delivery of impactful adult learning interventions. For example, Trudell et al. (2019) noted that the limited conceptualisation of adult literacy frustrates efforts to address the unique needs of adult learners in rural and other disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, according to Trudell et al. (2019), the traditional notion fails to recognise that for optimal outcomes, adult learning solutions need to go beyond merely supporting adults in acquiring reading and writing skills. Instead, adult literacy should be expanded to account for the need to equip the adult learners with a wider array of skills and competencies. As the discussion in the next section demonstrates, by generating unprecedented challenges, the pandemic is compelling educators to adopt a new and wider understanding of adult literacy that is more

consistent with the dynamics of the 21st century.

I now find the traditional understanding of adult literacy to be problematic. Even before the pandemic, this notion did not fully encompass the range of skills, experiences, and competencies that adult learners required. Most of the adult literacy initiatives put in place merely sought to provide the adult learners with basic reading and writing skills. While these skills are certainly essential, they do not prepare adult learners for the wide range of complex challenges that they grapple with. According to Gutiérrez-Carvajal et al. (2021), for the best outcomes, adult literacy solutions should be comprehensive and holistic. Other than reading and writing, these programs should also be designed to provide access to other opportunities and areas of development. Kolawole and Pusoetsile (2021) appreciated the changing face of adult literacy. Focusing their attention on adult learning programs in Botswana, Kolawole and Pusoetsile (2021) make it clear that for such solutions to remain relevant and impactful in the 21st century, they should be expanded to incorporate such developmental areas as enhancing lifelong learning. For adult learners in the Global South, it is especially crucial to guarantee that the literacy training and guidance that they receive allow them to confront the many problems with which they grapple. Furthermore, according to Kolawole and Pusoetsile (2021), today, it is generally expected that adult literacy interventions should reflect and celebrate local cultures and languages. Essentially, educators are realising that to achieve maximum impact, they need to empower adult learners to integrate their own experiences and cultures into the learning process. It is indeed encouraging that scholars are recognising the inadequacies of the traditional understanding, and are even proposing new frameworks for approaching adult literacy and learning. The pandemic certainly shed light on the shortcomings of the dominant traditional perspective regarding adult literacy.

### **3. Adult Learning and Literacy during the Pandemic**

As indicated earlier, the pandemic significantly transformed adult learning and literacy. In addition to changing how adult learning programs are delivered, this crisis has also led to a new and improved understanding of the essence of adult literacy. As Lotas et al. (2021) established, during the pandemic, many educators involved in adult literacy programs were forced to suspend in-person learning and embrace the distance learning model. I can confirm that the pandemic disrupted learning. For example, just months after it had been declared a global emergency, my institution suspended all forms of activities that required in-person interactions. We faced some challenges in implementing online learning. Given that the pandemic was an unprecedented crisis, we lacked the experiences, competencies, and resources necessary for the effective delivery of online learning. However, while the digital technologies facilitated the transition toward remote and online learning, for adult literacy, they presented a challenge. As noted above, the bulk of the adult literacy programs in place today are rather basic and they do not pay any meaningful attention toward digital literacy. Among the key insights that the pandemic has revealed is that for adult learners, digital competencies and literacies are indispensable. According to Rosen (2020), educators working with adult learners are appreciating the need to incorporate digital skills

into the curricula that they design. Rosen (2020) makes it clear that in order to be competitive in the 21st century job marketplace, adult learners simply need to acquire and hone their digital skills and competencies. I experienced first-hand how schools struggled to respond to the pandemic effectively. For instance, my school struggled to deploy a digital learning program that all students could access seamlessly.

Other than digital literacy, the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted adult learning and literacy by underscoring the need for adult learners to align themselves with the emerging knowledge economy. This is one of the main observations that Lotas (2021) made following her investigation into the changes that adult literacy and learning had undergone in response to the pandemic. According to Lotas (2021), during the pandemic, new challenges that could only be resolved through knowledge emerged. Institutions and educators providing adult literacy solutions adapted their techniques, pedagogies, and curricula to reflect this new reality. For instance, Lotas (2021) describes how the Academy of Hope, a facility dedicated to adult literacy training and education underwent far-reaching transformation due to the pandemic. Lotas (2021) reports that among the specific changes that occurred at this institution was a greater focus on equipping adult learners with more practical skills that helped to enhance their competitiveness in the job marketplace. Brown (Brown 2021) is among the experts who agree that adult literacy and learning experienced significant shifts during the pandemic. Brown (2021) focuses his attention on the labor gaps that arose during the COVID-19 crisis. He proceeds to argue that prioritising the skills that employers seek, adult learning institutions can prepare their learners to meet the needs of employers reeling from the labour shortages that the pandemic generated. I agree that the traditional approach to adult literacy is inadequate. During my interactions with adult learners, one of the lessons that I have obtained is that some of these learners are deeply disappointed with the training and education that they have received. They find that these programs do not go far enough in helping them to resolve the serious challenges that they face.

In addition to the issues described above, the pandemic also impacted adult literacy by highlighting the value of health literacy. Essentially, thanks to the pandemic, it is now clear that for adult literacy interventions to be meaningfully important, they need to integrate health literacy. Tezcan (2022) offered insights into how health literacy became an essential component of adult literacy and education at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. According to Tezcan (2022), the pandemic highlighted the need for adult literacy solutions to equip learners with the knowledge and skills that they can leverage to contribute to securing public health. Tezcan (2022) continue to highlight how existing adult learning problems have failed to enlighten learners regarding how they can respond to the unique challenges that the pandemic has generated. Furthermore, Tezcan (2022) emphasises the role that lifelong learning plays in helping adult learners. According to the issues Tezcan (2022) explores in the text, it is clear that measures for learning interventions should be complemented by a revised curriculum that emphasises practical skills. Considering the unique challenges that adult learners encounter during a pandemic can help provide a clearer understanding of how the pandemic is redefining adult literacy and learning. Wang et al. (2022) set out to identify these issues and explain how adult learners and educators can respond to these challenges. In their research, Wang et al.

(2022) used a case study approach and focused specifically on how educational authorities in Texas sought a new way to ease the transition from traditional to distance learning for adult students. One of the major findings that the study yielded is that in Texas, state leadership and involvement played an essential role in easing the difficulties that adult learners faced. According to Wang et al. (2022), the Texas state government instituted a range of interventions designed to ensure smooth and seamless transition toward remote learning, and supported educators in rolling out special programs intended to equip adult learners with digital literacy skills. The case of Texas certainly shows that for success in the 21st century, adult literacy and education demand a collaborative approach that brings together various stakeholders and partners. The problem with the traditional conceptualisation is that it does not create sufficient opportunity or space for such other stakeholders as government agencies to play a significant role. The pandemic therefore offered vital lessons as it underscored the need for the traditional perspective to be replaced with a new conceptualisation which accommodates and encourages collaborative multidisciplinary partnerships.

As the discussion above has shown, the pandemic provided vital lessons that adult literacy experts and educators can harness in their quest to enhance adult literacy in nations like Australia where literacy rates are surprisingly low. However, the pandemic also compounded some of the challenges that frustrated the delivery of adult literacy programs in past years. According to James and Thériault (2020), among the outcomes of the pandemic is that it reinforced and in some cases, amplified inequalities in access to adult literacy programs. Australia is among the nations that are plagued by the inequality problem. Green et al. (2023) are among the scholars who have acknowledged that inequality remains pervasive in the Australian adult education system. In their text, Green et al. (2023) lament that as opposed to other developed nations that have made remarkable progress toward ensuring equal access to educational opportunities for adults, Australia continues to lag behind. As a result of the inequalities in Australia, such vulnerable and historically marginalised groups like native communities continue to report some of the lowest levels of literacy. As James and Thériault (2020), the pandemic only served to worsen inequality by making it difficult for disadvantaged populations to take advantage of available adult literacy programs and resources. The negative impact that the pandemic had on access can be blamed, at least in part, on the narrow traditional understanding of adult literacy. This notion of adult literacy is problematic because it does not properly account for the complexities that surround the delivery of adult literacy interventions. In particular, it fails to appreciate how factors like socioeconomic disadvantage can yield poor outcomes among adult learners. Therefore, going forward, there will be a need for the various stakeholders involved in the implementation of adult literacy interventions to broaden and enrich their understanding of adult literacy. The pandemic has certainly offered crucial insights regarding how a deeper understanding can be gained.

As an aspiring education professional, I recognise the significance of the developments outlined above. I personally witnessed the far-reaching and tremendous impact that the pandemic had on how adult literacy programs are delivered. One of the specific observations that I have made is that unlike the previous situation where student involvement was

minimal, today, educators working with adult learners are strongly encouraging and supporting these learners to become active partners in the learning process. I find that collaborative learning tends to produce optimal outcomes as it challenges learners to join forces with educators as opposed to being mere recipients of knowledge. While its overall impact was adverse, the pandemic did reveal that educators should spare no expense in their efforts to empower adult learners through partnerships.

#### **4. Adult Literacy and Learning in a Post-Pandemic World**

The discussion above has revealed that during the pandemic, adult learning and literacy changed significantly. The changes that were witnessed are likely to be sustained as adult literacy is transformed to keep up with the emerging realities of a 21st century post-pandemic world. In its report that it issued as it sought to shed light on the new face of adult literacy, the European Association for the Education of Adults (2021) predicted that in the future, adult learning and literacy will place greater emphasis on capacity building and bolstering the resilience of adult learners. Essentially, the pandemic demonstrated that for success, adult learners need to be able to withstand disruptions. In the coming years, it is reasonable to expect that an increasing number of adult literacy institutions will focus their efforts and attention on enhancing the capacity and resilience of their learners.

Expanding the range of modes through which adult literacy programs are delivered is yet another change that is likely to persist post-pandemic. This is according to Carroll (2020) who made projections regarding the future of adult learning and literacy in South Africa. In her text, Carroll (2020) begins by acknowledging the disruptive effect that the pandemic has had, noting that many institutions that serve adult learners were forced to suspend their operations as the nation's government introduced such restrictions as lockdowns. Now that these restrictions are no longer in place, some of these facilities remain closed, with those that have resumed operations struggling to restore normalcy. Based on these developments, Carroll (2020) indicates that in the future, adult literacy interventions will have to adopt a broader array of delivery methods in order to reach as many learners as possible. For example, Carroll (2020) argues that such digital platforms as WhatsApp are likely to play an even greater role in facilitating adult literacy development and learning. Carroll (2020) argues that such applications as WhatsApp are gaining greater adoption due to the failure of traditional digital solutions to minimize the disruptive impact of the pandemic. I share Carroll's optimism regarding the changes that adult literacy development is likely to undergo as a result of new technologies. Thanks to these technologies, we can expect that adult literacy centres across the globe will be better positioned to confront challenges like inequalities and the digital divide which have greatly hampered their effectiveness.

Apart from the projections outlined above, the post-pandemic world is also likely to witness renewed focus on adult literacy and learning. The problems that emerged during the pandemic demonstrated that adult learning is essential for countries to successfully combat crises. According to Lopes and McKay (2020), thanks to COVID-19, across the globe, nations have recognised that adult literacy is a potent resource for ensuring public health. Lopes and McKay (2020) report

that for countries to successfully guarantee public health, they need an adult population that possesses basic reading and writing skills, and most importantly, health literacy. Therefore, in the future, as they strive to prepare adults for the challenges of the 21st century, it can be expected that nations will invest greater amounts toward adult literacy interventions. These programs were likely to be particularly designed to support adult learners in becoming more involved in promoting public health.

As I reflect on what the future of adult literacy looks like, I find excitement and hope. It is unfortunate that nations have failed to institute adequate measures to provide adult learners with the opportunities that they need to obtain crucial skills that are essential for proper functioning. I am from a community with a large illiterate adult population. I took part in conducting a survey designed to shed light on the prevalence of illiteracy and the challenges that frustrate adult learning in the community. One of the main insights that I gathered from the survey is that many adults are reluctant to pursue learning and development opportunities because of the other commitments and priorities that demand their attention. This challenge was particularly prevalent among socioeconomically disadvantaged adults who worked low-paying jobs for long hours. Despite their desperate wish to expand their skills and protect their relevance in a job market that is becoming increasingly competitive, these adults were simply unable to enrol in adult learning programs. The findings from this study challenged me to recognise that the future of adult literacy in a post-pandemic world will be shaped largely by how we respond to the problems that illiterate adults grapple with. While it is critical to expand the coverage of adult learning programs, for optimal outcomes, these interventions need to be accompanied with solutions that drive economic empowerment.

## 5. Reflection on Personal Experience and Perspectives

The discussion above has focused on the insights that have emerged from literature and scholarship. I can confirm that most of these insights capture the situation on the ground. As noted earlier, I am from a community whose adult population is mostly illiterate. The pandemic has only served to compound the illiteracy challenge that the community faces. For example, during the pandemic, one of the two adult learning centres serving the community was forced to suspend its operations. While the second one has resumed its operations, it has had to scale back its activities. Through my interactions with some of the adults undergoing training at these institutions, I have gathered that their closure has had devastating effects. For example, one adult with whom I spoke lamented that they were excited to expand their skills set and knowledge base, and they were looking forward to re-joining the workforce after years of unemployment. With the adult learning centre now closed, the future of this individual now hangs in the balance. Another crucial lesson that I have acquired is that the adult literacy programs that are in place today are ill suited to the post-pandemic reality. Most of the adult learners in my community can only read and write after undergoing education and training. The pandemic made it clear that these skills are not sufficient to become competitive in the job market. I hope that the surviving adult learning institution will revise its curriculum to reflect the lessons that the pandemic has provided.

## 6. Conclusion

In closing, the pandemic has undoubtedly transformed adult literacy development and education. Unlike the previous situation where adult literacy received little attention, during and after the pandemic, nations began to recognise that their capacity to respond to major crises depend hugely on the literacy and competencies of their adult population. It is certainly encouraging to witness an increasing number of countries setting up programs that are particularly built to foster adult learning. One of the specific changes that adult literacy has undergone is that its conceptualisation seems to be expanding. Traditionally, adult literacy has been considered only in terms of reading and writing skills. These skills are indeed crucial elements of adult literacy. However, the traditional perspective fails to appreciate that the 21st century adult learner requires a broader range of competencies. The pandemic helped to demonstrate that adult learners should be able to support public health initiatives by exhibiting health literacy. Furthermore, the disruptions that the pandemic generated also underscored the value of digital skills. One can expect that in the future, adult learning will continue to evolve. This evolution will be driven by the crucial lessons that the pandemic has provided. Personally, I am excited to be taking part in transforming adult literacy. I plan to harness the knowledge and skills that I have acquired through this course to support communities in their efforts to boost literacy. In particular, I wish to participate in curriculum redesign with the goal of ensuring that adult literacy programs are extensive and impactful.

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