

Defining the Skills That Matter



The Skills That Matter are the foundational skills needed for an adult learner to function effectively within the workforce and civic and community life. The Skills That Matter include the following:

Critical Thinking	
<p>Definition: Critical thinking involves being open-minded and rational. It is informed by evidence and helps users arrive at decisions or conclusions that go beyond factual recall. In adult education classrooms, critical thinking skills involve actively applying thinking strategies that range from analyzing relationships between components to drawing conclusions from a variety of data. Critical thinking skills are essential for adult learners to thrive in their communities, workplaces, and postsecondary or career training opportunities.</p>	<p>Example: Following a survey asking about community members’ attendance at school events, learners analyze the data and draw conclusions about possible actions that would increase attendance at these events.</p>
Communication	
<p>Definition: Adults with strong communication skills can convey information to others effectively and efficiently, and they can do so verbally, nonverbally, and in writing. They can repair communication breakdowns when they occur and can adjust their communication style and register (e.g., formal, informal, or colloquial) to match their listeners’ or readers’ needs and expectations. Communication skills also include the effective use of visuals, multimedia, and digital platforms to convey information.</p>	<p>Example: Team members working on a task typically engage in informal communication to complete the task—negotiating meaning and repairing communication breakdowns as needed. When the same team members prepare to present their task results, they will switch to a formal register and intentionally adjust their volume, pitch, and body language to convey their message.</p>
Processing and Analyzing Information	
<p>Definition: Processing and analyzing information requires an analytical and systematic thought process. This methodical, step-by-step approach to thinking makes it possible to break down complex problems into manageable components. In processing and analyzing information, adult learners first identify a topic, problem, or issue, then gather the information they need in order to develop and apply solutions. Finally, learners assess and reflect on the results of their analysis.</p>	<p>Example: Learners work with material from the Innocence Project. They read and analyze transcripts and evidence from court cases to determine whether the defendant should be granted a retrial.</p>

Self-Awareness

Definition: Self-awareness is the ability to take stock of one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and recognize their impact on one's own (and others') behavior. It is the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations while maintaining a "growth mindset." Being self-confident and demonstrating self-efficacy are attributes of self-awareness that allow adult learners to set and achieve personal and professional goals.

Example: During a lesson on household budgeting and ways to save for unforeseen repairs, students are researching the local gas company's "monthly repair plan" and are calculating its cost/benefit. A student less proficient in math becomes anxious and begins to disengage from the lesson but does some self-talk to remind himself that any mistakes help the team learn. He also asks a classmate to work as his partner for this portion of the lesson.

Problem-Solving

Definition: Problem-solving has been identified as one of the top two skills employers look for in job applicants, but it is also part of adult daily life (e.g., work/life balance; parenting choices; managing finances; etc.). The key stages in problem-solving are to 1) identify the problem, 2) propose solutions, 3) analyze solutions (and consequences) in order to select a solution, and 4) apply or implement the solution. In the adult education classroom, these four stages often take the form of 1) reading or listening to a problem scenario and determining the problem; 2) brainstorming solutions; 3) creating a pros and cons T-chart for the solutions to select one; and 4) applying the solution in a writing task (making a claim and supporting it with evidence) or a role-play or oral presentation that envisions the scenario from problem to solution to consequences.

Example: Learners listen to a woman's story about being at a family party when she hears her sister's fiancé make a racist comment. The woman states that she didn't know what to do and that she had wanted to say something but hadn't. She's looking for advice on how to solve that problem in the future. The class listens for the main idea and key details in the passage then moves into teams to use the facts to define the problem. The teams report out and the class decides on the problem everyone will work on. Teams continue with the problem-solving process and present their solution (advice) in the form of an oral presentation to the class.

Navigating Systems

Definition: Navigating systems is the ability to successfully operate within the institutions and organizational structures that are part of 21st-century communities, workplaces, schools, and families.

Example: Learners read and analyze the following scenario: A teenager has become withdrawn, her grades are down, she's lost a lot of weight, and she no longer spends time with friends or doing her favorite activities. Her father is worried but doesn't know how to help. Teams research the support services within the community that will help the father and daughter and report on ways to contact, finance, and manage care from those services.



Adaptability and Willingness to Learn

Definition: Adaptability is the quality of being able to “roll with” new situations, such as a change in leadership, a revised work assignment, or an unexpected life event. Adaptability (or flexibility) is highly valued in the workplace and is a factor of emotional intelligence. Willingness to learn is often related to adaptability, especially when a new situation requires new skills. Demonstrating an interest in (and pursuing) continuing education and professional development is key to success in the technology-rich environments of the 21st century.

Example: When presented with a different mode of instruction (e.g., using cell phones for research) or different types of assignments (e.g., flipped learning), learners respond positively. Students less familiar with the technology are given sufficient time and support to complete the task; those who catch on quickly assist others.

Respecting Differences and Diversity

Definition: Diversity is a hallmark of 21st-century workplaces, training rooms, classrooms, and communities. Adults’ success in these environments requires the ability to interact with others respectfully, accommodating their different lifestyles and needs and accepting their diverse viewpoints and expertise. Learners demonstrate this skill by actively listening to, considering, and responding appropriately to teammates from diverse backgrounds.

Example: While planning a community event to present class projects, learners bring up the idea of having a potluck. During a brainstorm of the dishes they will make, a student mentions that none of the dishes are halal. Learners ask what that means and after a brief explanation, the class discusses why and how to make the potluck appropriate for all by including vegetarian, pork-free, and other dishes that meet dietary restrictions.

Interpersonal Skills

Definition: Sometimes called “people skills,” strong interpersonal skills are the qualities and behaviors a person uses to interact with others appropriately. These skills are essential to successful communication and systems navigation across contexts. Examples of interpersonal skills sought after in the workplace include team management and team building, conflict management, consensus building, and problem-solving. Qualities associated with strong interpersonal skills include demonstrating empathy, a positive attitude, honesty, patience, diplomacy, and leadership.¹

Example: Learners form teams to complete a project about distinguishing between and selecting health care plans. Team members employ an array of interpersonal skills by assuming roles such as team manager, administrative assistant, or technical assistant and take on responsibilities such as time management; presentation of ideas, and leadership.

¹ See <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/interpersonal-skills-list-2063724> for an extensive list of interpersonal skills.



Definitions Adapted From the Following Sources:

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