

June 16th, 2026 at 1pm EDT

Attracting and supporting reluctant learners in literacy programs

Session overview

This moderated discussion focused on how practitioners can address psychological barriers preventing learners from joining literacy programs. Participants learnt practical and well-informed strategies to reduce stigma, build trust across diverse learner demographics, and create literacy environments that foster confidence and persistence.

Panelists

Stephanie Torr

*Learning Coach, Workplace Learning PEI,
Prince Edward Island*

Katina Deichsel

*Youth Employment & Skills Specialist,
New Canadians Centre Peterborough,
Ontario*

Lisa Persaud

*Program Manager, March of Dimes
Canada, Ontario*

Moderated discussion questions

1. How does your organization reach out to learners who aren't actively engaged in learning? What actions or conversations have been effective in reducing reluctance?
2. What actions or language do you notice from learners that signal they are facing psychological barriers to fully participating in learning? Are there early signs or signals that are good for practitioners to look out for?
3. Can you share your best practices for creating learning spaces that are safe and welcoming for learners who experience social exclusion or may often feel unwelcome or othered?

Key findings

The Importance of the Initial Meeting:

Start the first meeting by making it clear the learning is learner-led and will be catered to their specific goals. This can help to reduce hesitation, especially for learners who have had negative experiences with school in the past. Talk about possible barriers to participation early on and agree on how you'll stay in touch, such as by phone, text, or email.

Simplified Onboarding Process:

Keep paperwork and the registration process as simple as possible to reduce barriers to entry and get learners started quickly. It's also important to build on the learner's initial interest and enthusiasm. For example, in virtual programs, practitioners can encourage participants to log in during their first week of the course.

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Key findings continued

Envisioning Future Success:

Use empathy, curiosity and positive enforcement to help learners remain engaged in programs. Sharing past success stories can help learners to see what's possible, build confidence in their own abilities to succeed. Practitioners also suggested using physical "goal symbols", like learner certificates and job-descriptions, to motivate learners when they start to feel disengaged.

Inclusive Learning Spaces:

Create learning spaces where learners feel safe, welcomed and supported. Practitioners should stay flexible and adaptable. Programs should also consider cultural and religious differences so learners can fully participate. A good way to help build a sense of belonging and community among participants is to include 'fun' through social, shared experiences like breakfast and ice breaker games.

Additional comments/Q&A

Building Community Connections:

Supporting Indigenous learners came up during the Q&A period. The panelists discussed that building trust within the community is essential to attracting Indigenous learners to literacy programs. Establishing trusted points of contact, such as a community liaison can help create a welcoming and culturally supportive entry point. Engaging successful program alumni to share their experiences and contribute to the learning environment can also encourage new learners to participate.

Innovation Learning Labs

We're hosting 4 Innovation Learning Labs in 2026, thanks to the support of Canada Life through the *Canada Life Literacy Innovation Award*. In each webinar we discuss one topic of importance and relevance to the literacy field in 2026. [Watch recorded Labs and read summaries.](#)



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