

Technology Solutions for Adult Basic Skills Challenges

Using Technology to Help Students Set, Monitor, and Achieve Goals

Anthony Burik, Outreach and Technical Assistance Network

The focus of each Technology Solutions for Adult Basic Skills Challenges column begins with a common challenge facing adult basic skills practitioners. Solutions offered for these challenges, at least in part through the use of technology, include: hardware such as desktop and laptop computers, smartphones, electronic tablets, VR goggles, robots and electronic whiteboards; software applications such as websites, course management systems, learning management systems, and databases; and apps for mobile devices. Each article begins with a description of a challenge and examines one or more solutions that use technology.

The column for this issue was written by invited author Anthony Burik, a project specialist in technology with OTAN in California.

David J. Rosen, Newsome Associates

Description of the Challenge

Imagine it is the start of a school year or a new term or semester, and you plan a goal-setting activity with your new students to kick off the class. You download an online goals worksheet or get your teacher-developed copy ready for use. When you meet your students on the first day, you take time to have students make a list of their goals and maybe even detail a plan for reaching those goals.

And then? While some teachers and students will return to the goals to monitor progress and check off completion, in other classrooms that is the last time the goals will appear, filed away as another thing to get to as the curriculum, instruction, and assessments take hold and become the priorities for everyone involved.

In other programs and schools, some teachers do not even get to the first step. Goals are checked off by students during intake and registration and submitted by schools and agencies to satisfy federal and state data accountability requirements. Information about the checked boxes may or may not make its way to instructors. This becomes the only attempt by students to let us know why they come to our schools and programs and what their goals are.

While there is little doubt as to the importance of goal-setting and its connection to student persistence (See a short summary of the research in “Set and Monitor Goals” at <https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/teal/guide/setgoals>), many adult educators may not have a plan for not only helping students identify goals, but monitoring the progress of those goals and identifying if and when those goals have been achieved, and even reformulating student goals when issues in achieving them arise.

The political landscape of 2020 has also catapulted the issue of equity to the forefront. If students never get to state their goals, or do state their goals but nothing is done to help students reach them, how does that make the students' experiences in our adult education programs equitable? Why is attention to student goals not considered when we plan for what will happen on a daily basis in class?

Like many other aspects of the educational process, adult educators are looking to the possibilities of technology in the shift from print to digital solutions. Some questions that arise, then, are, can technology make a difference in the goal-setting, -monitoring, and -achieving process? Can technology help everyone - teachers, students, staff - be more attentive to and productive with student goals? And how can we use technology to promote our student success stories as students work towards and reach their goals?

Possible Solution

The solution has five parts: adopting a goals framework; determining technology access, connectivity and ability; nudging; selecting the tech tools to use; and celebrating student achievement and success.

Adopting a Goals Framework



It is important to adopt a goal-setting framework that will provide the language and structure

moving forward. Many adult educators are already familiar with SMART goal setting, which originally comes from the business world. SMART is an acronym which stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound, and each component helps students focus on what they want to and can achieve in a certain period of time. SMART goals also lie at the foundation of some of the edtech tools that will be discussed shortly. There are many SMART goal-setting guides and handouts online; a good place to start would be this San Diego Continuing Education webpage with handouts (See “Decision Making Goal Setting - SMART” at <http://cds.sdce.edu/decision-making/SMART-Goal-Setting>) and this handout developed by the Lake County (FL) Library System (See “Goal Setting Strategies” at https://www.mylakelibrary.org/pdfs/adult_literacy_program/tutor_training_orientation/goal_setting_strategies.pdf).

Determining Technology Access, Connectivity, and Ability

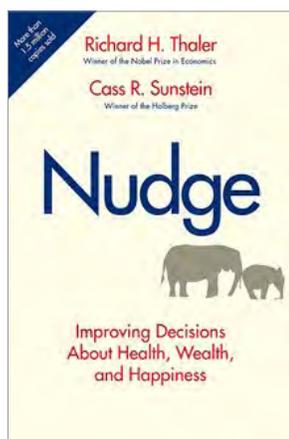
If students are going to use technology in goal-setting, -monitoring, and -achieving, then it will be important to determine student technology access, connectivity, and ability, whether the student and teacher or staff member are in a physical space (for example, program, school, learning center, library, job center, etc.) or online. A simple survey, like these that ask about cell phones (See Susan Gaer’s cell phone survey at <https://www.quia.com/sv/501056.html> and Soledad Knipp’s cell phone features at <https://www.quia.com/sv/460110.html>), should help the adult educator determine this for each student and what steps need to be taken to address any issues with students using technology.

The teacher or staff member should consider the full range of ways to connect with students where

they are, from phone calls, texting, and email, to messaging through a learning management system (LMS) or the program or school's student information system (SIS), social media, and virtual meetings (via Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, etc.). You should also be mindful of devices students are using, planning for student usage on mobile devices primarily, and be prepared to offer goals-related apps and tools that are accessible to students with low to high digital ability (for example, mobile apps, but also fillable SMART goal worksheets to e-portfolios to showcase student progress towards achieving goals).

Nudging

To keep students on track to reach their goals, the adult educator should refine their ability to “nudge” students. In Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's book *Nudge*, the authors present what they term “choice architecture” that provides a framework for adult educator communication that helps students make good choices and not be deterred in reaching their goals. Here are the six NUDGES components for “choice architects” (or in this case, adult educators) to consider to prevent students from straying from the path of reaching their goals:



- iNcentives - “Sensible [choice] architects will put the right incentives on the right people... The most important modification that must be made...is salience. Do the choosers actually notice the incentives they face?” (pp. 97-98) A teacher should present an incentive unique to that student, and help the student recognize the incentive being presented even in the midst of a difficult situation.

- Understand mappings - “A good system of choice architecture helps people to improve their ability to map and hence to select options that will make them better off. One way to do this is to make the information about various options more comprehensible...” (p. 92) Students can get bogged down and become frustrated deciding between options; teachers can help students chart a path through options that make work on their goals and life manageable.
- Defaults - “...many people will take whatever option requires the least effort, or the path of least resistance... [I]f, for a given choice, there is a default option - an option that will obtain if the chooser does nothing - then we can expect a large number of people to end up with that option, whether or not it is good for them.” (p. 83) The historic default for many adult students is to drop out or give up, so we have to steer students clear from past behavior.
- Give feedback - “The best way to help Humans improve their performance is to provide feedback. Well-designed systems tell people when they are doing well and when they are making mistakes.” (p. 90) We should always strive to provide clear, meaningful feedback for students.
- Expect error - “Humans make mistakes. A well-designed system expects its users to err and is as forgiving as possible.” (p. 87) We gently remind students that mistakes are natural and a part of the learning process, though they may not see them that way.
- Structure complex choice - “When we face a small number of well-understood alternatives, we tend to examine all the attributes of all the alternatives and then make trade-offs when necessary. But when the choice set gets large, we must

use alternative strategies, and these can get us into trouble.” (p. 94) For students unaccustomed to goal-setting and -achieving, this may seem like a tall order in their minds. One of our primary tasks is to help students structure their big goals into manageable chunks. (Note: page numbers above refer to this edition: ISBN-13: 978-0300122237)

There are apps like **Signal Vine** (signalvine.com) that educators can use to nudge students that are not necessarily goal-setting specific; in the future as technology develops, we foresee chatbots serving as the first point of contact that will also take on the role of nudging students to remind them of deadlines and tasks to do. As a practice, however, teachers should beef up their nudging skills because as they monitor student progress towards achieving goals, they will need to nudge students from time to time; communicating the right nudge in a given situation is critical and being familiar with choice architecture and how to provide a timely nudge should help teachers in this regard.

Selecting Tools

There are a number of edtech tools to consider using in the goal-setting, -monitoring, and -achieving process. Some of the tools offer both a free and subscription-based version.

Lifetick

Lifetick (lifetick.com) is the tool that pays the most attention to SMART goals. A student can create a free account (and a subscription-based version is available) and get started creating their goal(s) by providing answers to and information about questions on each S-M-A-R-T component. Once the goal is created, the student can add tasks to the goal that break the work into smaller, measurable chunks. The student can select how

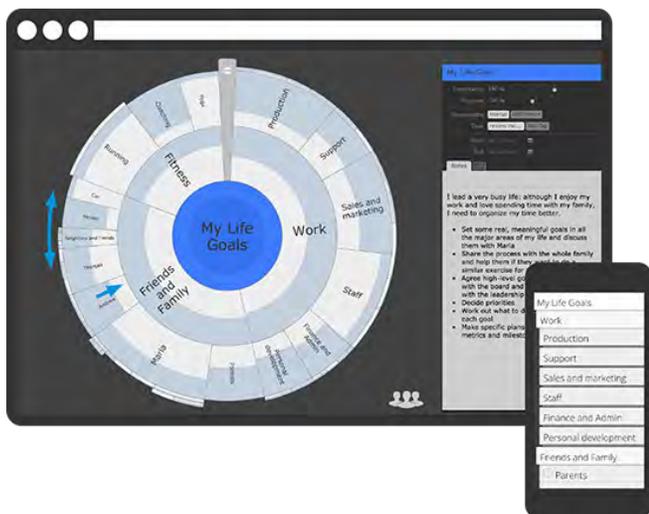
often they will receive reminder notifications from Lifetick about tasks they have created. One of the best features is that a student can add a “supporter” to their goal, such as a teacher, counselor, or other staff member, who can monitor student progress and do some nudging by messaging the student within the app.

Strides

Strides (stridesapp.com) is a tool that pays some attention to SMART goals. A student can create a free account (and a subscription-based version is available) to get started. It is best used as an app on iOS (i.e., Apple) devices only, so there is that limitation. While not as explicit as Lifetick in using the SMART goals framework, Strides still asks the student, using the Project tracker in-app, to name the goal and add tasks with due dates, and reminder notifications can be set up. Many users like the simplicity of the Strides app,

which bears a lot of resemblance to to-do apps such as Todoist, Any.do, and Toodledo. One drawback, though, is that Strides has been slow to incorporate features such as adding supporters, similar to Lifetick, and offering an Android version of the app.

Goalscape, GoalEnforcer, and Goals on Track



Goalscape (goalscape.com) is a visually-oriented, goal-setting tool that pays some attention to SMART goals. To get started, a student can create a free account (and a subscription-based version is available). The strength of Goalscape is being able to organize the goals and tasks visually, which may appeal to certain students (and adult educators as well). Goalscape is similar to Lifetick in that a student can add a supporter who is able to view the goals and tasks and communicate with the student in-app.

GoalEnforcer (goalenforcer.com) is another visually-oriented goal-setting tool. You can download a demo version of GoalEnforcer to try it out, but purchase is required to allow the user to save their work and return to their goal to monitor progress.

Another tech tool adult educators might consider is **Goals on Track (goalsontrack.com)**, which pays attention to SMART goals but is only available with a paid subscription.

Other tools for monitoring and staying connected with students include:

Creating a Facebook Group

One option for staying connected with students is to set up a private Facebook Group (by changing the settings of the Group to keep all activity within the class). A Facebook Group can be used to share information with students, for learning activities, to learn more about the students, and to encourage students, create connections, and build relationships. A teacher can use a Facebook Group to nudge, monitor, and keep students on track, and with other students in the Group, peers can encourage each other towards achieving everyone's goals. Many students are already familiar and comfortable with Facebook, so this might be a particularly appealing and easy tool for the class to use.

Learning Management System Options

Another possible option for monitoring student goals and nudging students is through a learning management system (LMS) such as Moodle, Canvas, Schoology, or Google Classroom. The first step would be to see if the LMS has an add-on, plugin, module, or some other component that is useful for acknowledging, establishing, and monitoring goals. Barring this, it is going to take some work and creativity to think about how to help students set, monitor, and achieve goals within the LMS. One option, for example, is to consider exploring calendar groupings (meaning, a group with the teacher and student) and settings to schedule events and push event notices out to students.

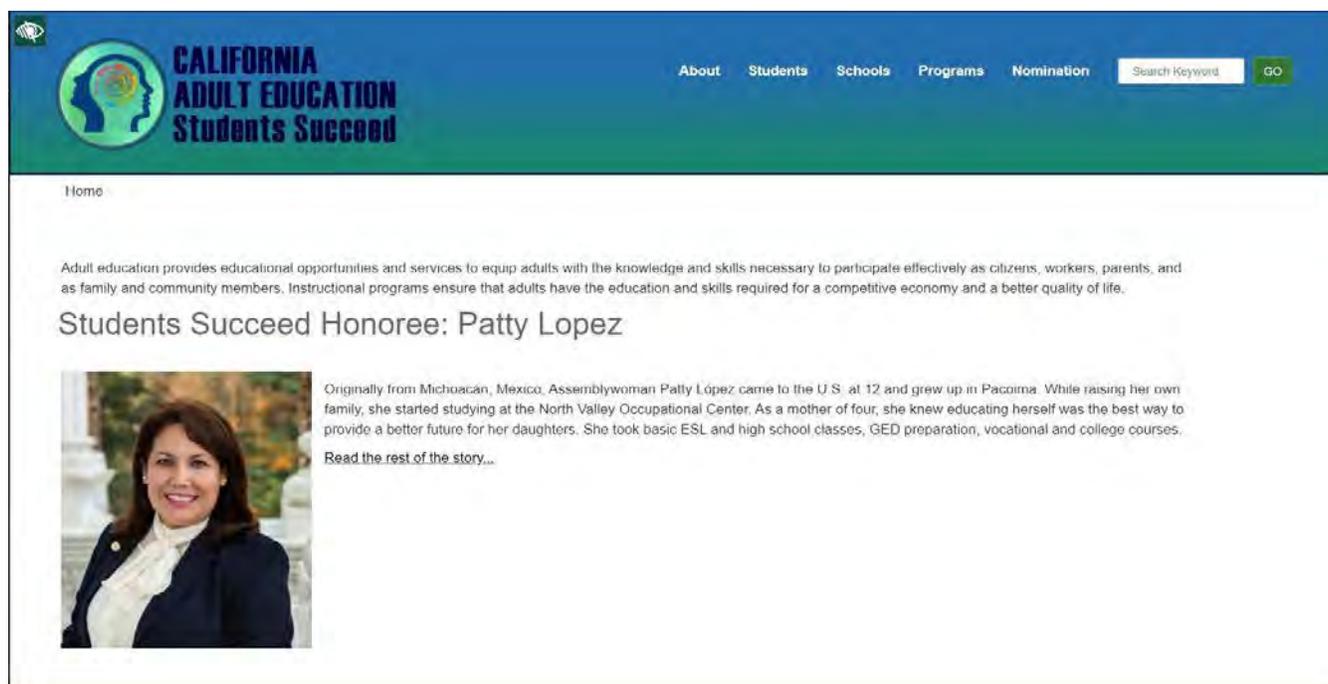
Celebrating Student Achievement and Success

Highlighting student successes, large and small, encourages students because they can see accomplishments and receive validation for their work. It is important to try to “document the process” and not leave celebrations to just major achievements, such as graduations, ceremonies, and milestones. Social media is a great tool for documenting and promoting success, as it tends to be where our students are online and can be shared with students even if they are not active on social media. Also consider making use of a program, school, or agency website to house success stories. In both cases, this is an opportunity for teachers and students to create using video, which is a versatile medium and a primary way of sharing information with audiences, with a program such as **Adobe Spark Video** (spark.adobe.com/make/video-maker) and beautiful graphics, using a program such as **Canva** (canva.com), **Piktochart** (piktochart.com), or **Vennngage** (venngage.com).

As an example of a way to promote student

success, my organization, Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN), hosts the **California Adult Education Students Succeed** website (adulthoodlearners.org), which includes written and video stories of successful adult education students from ESL, ABE, ASE, and CTE programs. These kinds of stories can be shared in class to motivate learners and let them know that they are not alone in reaching their goals, even though they sometimes may feel like others cannot relate to the challenges they may be facing.

To promote student success, start with intake and registration, the first day of class, the first successful assignment...and keep going! For some students, attending an adult basic skills program, or even setting foot on an adult education campus, is already a major achievement in their lives, so celebrating these accomplishments also becomes continual promotion of the value of adult education. Finally, by relying more and more on technology, we now have new ways to stay connected to students even after they leave our adult education programs, as we seek to follow-up with students on postsecondary and employment outcomes.



Home

Adult education provides educational opportunities and services to equip adults with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively as citizens, workers, parents, and as family and community members. Instructional programs ensure that adults have the education and skills required for a competitive economy and a better quality of life.

Students Succeed Honoree: Patty Lopez



Originally from Michoacán, Mexico, Assemblywoman Patty López came to the U.S. at 12 and grew up in Pacoima. While raising her own family, she started studying at the North Valley Occupational Center. As a mother of four, she knew educating herself was the best way to provide a better future for her daughters. She took basic ESL and high school classes, GED preparation, vocational and college courses.

[Read the rest of the story...](#)

Further reading

Persistence Plus website: [*What is a Nudge and How Can It Help More College Students Graduate?*](#)

EdTech Magazine: [*Digital Alerts, Or Nudges, May Help College Students Stay on Track in STEM Courses*](#)

Education Dive: [*Giving a nudge: How digital alerts can keep students on track*](#)

EDUCAUSE Review: [*4 Best Practices for Excellent Digital Communication*](#)

[*Nudging Ahead*](#) blog on the Psychology Today website

Reflections

Goal setting is an activity that we should be doing with our students, but it often becomes difficult to monitor the progress of student goals given the many other things we are responsible for in our classes, programs, and schools. The benefits are worth it, though, as students with clear and attainable goals supported by adult educators

persist longer in adult education programs. In addition, schools create an equitable environment that attends to the goals of all students. Technology can help achieve both these ends.

There are a number of technology options available to adult educators, backed by a foundation of SMART goal-setting and continual work on nudging students towards achieving their goals, that you can adopt as you develop a process that works best for you and your students. After selecting an edtech tool or tools for your learning environment, it will take time getting to know these tools to feel comfortable and adept in using them. You may want to start small with a few students or a pilot group, see how effective the tool or tools are with your students and what needs fine-tuning, and then plan for a larger roll-out with a larger group of students. The promise of this technology, though, lies not only in helping students reach their goals, but getting to know students at a deeper level as we help students overcome challenges and be with them on the road to success.