

Connect Hackney – recommendations for teaching digital skills to older people

Teach digital skills that match the interests and abilities of the participants, in a friendly and informal learning environment.

“Everybody was very kind, very nice people and because of their ways they encouraged you to learn and I think because of that I managed to learn quite a lot” – digital inclusion project participant

1. Base your project in the interests of those you teach

Many older people are keen to learn digital skills and are aware that using the internet can add to their lives in a range of ways, from listening to music and keeping in touch with friends to finding bus timetables. Many initiatives to improve older people’s digital skills are driven by a desire for them to access services online, however it’s important to know why older people themselves want to learn to use the internet. Delivering sessions in a person-centred manner grounded in the motivations of participants helps keep them engaged. It’s important to ask people what they want to learn at the start of the training session(s) and check in with them midway through to see if they’re progressing towards their goal(s).

2. Recognise that signing up to a digital skills class can be a big step

In an ageist society where older people are often dismissed for a lack of technological know-how, signing up to attend a digital skills class can require both confidence and humility. Learning something completely new in front of a group of people is often challenging, but ageism adds an additional barrier to learning digital skills. Marketing and publicity strategies should be designed with this in mind, eliciting excitement while acknowledging insecurities. Publicity could include testimonials from previous attendees, clear messaging about the skill level required and communication about having a friendly,

welcoming atmosphere.

3. Understand the less obvious skills and competencies required to use digital technology

The ability to use the internet requires a wide number of skills and competencies. Knowledge of the QWERTY keyboard, fine motor skills, literacy skills and the ability to recall passwords are just some of the capacities needed. Not all participants will have these capacities so be prepared to address barriers as they arise. For example, for those with reduced fine motor skills it is often easier to use a stylus rather than fingertips. Those with visual impairment may find it easier to use a tablet where font size can be enlarged. Different tools and approaches will work for different people, so be prepared to have options for people to test to see what works for them.

4. Either purchase uniform equipment or prepare to teach on different devices and for different operating systems

Participants will likely arrive at sessions with different devices making it impossible to teach the same steps to the whole class. Purchasing devices to be used in the classroom enables everyone to learn together, while offering 1-1 support allows for people to learn how to use their individual devices.

5. Plan to create uniform software and operating systems

It may be more efficient to teach courses based on a specific operating system (e.g., iOS (Apple), Android). It can also be helpful to spend time updating software so that all participants are using the same system.

6. Create a supportive, informal learning environment

The importance of creating a supportive and friendly learning environment is crucial for engaging older people in learning new digital skills. Giving a warm welcome, having kind and patient facilitators who can use humour to relieve tension as well as providing unstructured time for participants to interact and get to know each other were all key components of successful projects.

Facilitators found that being open and honest about the challenges of learning technology and acknowledging that learning new skills was interesting and fun (and did not always go right) supported people's learning.

7. Foundation skills courses should ideally be for a minimum of 8-10 weeks, with up to eight participants benefiting from ideally two facilitators, and a volunteer

A group of around eight participants was optimum to create a supportive and friendly learning environment, and this size group could be successfully led by two facilitators and a volunteer. Larger group sizes would benefit from an additional helper. Foundation courses should be at least 8 weeks. Follow-up events or opportunities to continue developing skills were key to maintaining momentum and continuing to develop skills. Ideally a monthly drop-in or follow-up courses that alumni participants could attend should be offered to refresh skills, trouble-shoot, and facilitate continued socialising.

8. Take technology out of the classroom

Consider using technology to plan and deliver a class outing; finding a local place of interest using a search engine or website and then planning the trip using an online map or bus timetable app etc. Doing so not only highlights how technology can be used to organise daily life but also provides a memorable social occasion, strengthening connections between participants.

9. Encourage the social element of group learning

Social connections were key to engaging older people with the learning on offer in the sessions, helping to create a supportive and non-threatening environment in which to learn new skills. This included getting to know the facilitator and volunteers, or other people in the group. Participants can also use technology to stay in touch with each other through tools such as WhatsApp groups that can be set up during the course.

10. Be aware of the barriers to digital inclusion and consider how your project can work to overcome them

Prohibitive costs, language skills, frustrations dealing with errors and mistakes, accessibility, cognitive and fine motor skills and lack of internet access outside the course are some of the barriers to digital inclusion. A full list of the barriers that our providers encountered is listed in Box 3.1 on p26 of the digital inclusion report available on our website. Plans to mitigate these issues should be part of the design of any digital inclusion project.