SWITZERLAND

Report on methods for holistic literacy and emerging technologies (ET) in Adult Learning and Education (ALE)

Emerging Technologies for Holistic Literacy in Adult Education

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Desk research findings

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Policy Framework and Governance

Switzerland has adopted a decentralised yet increasingly coordinated approach to integrating digital competence and emerging technologies into its educational landscape, including adult education. Although there is no single, overarching strategy for adult digital literacy, various federal and cantonal policies, strategic initiatives, and innovative programmes support the lifelong development of digital skills.

The cornerstone of Switzerland's digital transformation efforts is the Swiss Digital Strategy 2025, led by the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER). This strategy prioritises inclusive digital transformation, promotes lifelong learning in digital skills, and underscores responsible use of artificial intelligence, open-source technologies, and robust cybersecurity. It actively involves federal, cantonal, and communal levels, as well as civil society and private actors, fostering a broad participatory model.

Complementing this is the work of Educa, the Swiss agency supporting digital transformation in education. Educa offers expert guidance and creates foundational tools and frameworks that promote responsible data use and technology integration within the digital education ecosystem.

Although adult education lacks a unified digital strategy, specific support exists, including SEFRI’s federal programme to promote basic skills in companies, which may include digital elements. However, cantonal responsibility leads to diverse levels of implementation and resource allocation.

The Swiss context presents both structural and social obstacles to digital inclusion in adult education. Fragmented governance between cantons can result in uneven access and opportunities. Older adults, migrants, and individuals with disabilities face a persistent digital divide due to access barriers, a lack of tailored support, and motivational challenges. Despite these obstacles, Switzerland benefits from a robust digital infrastructure, political support for digital inclusion, and a strong ecosystem of partnerships. The promotion of open-source tools and responsible AI use is seen to improve both efficiency and inclusion.

Several initiatives offer promising models for digital transformation and adult learning. The University of Geneva supports digital skills development across its academic community, addressing both general and tailored needs. The SVEB report on digital transformation in adult learning institutions introduces a self-assessment tool based on the European DigCompOrg model.

The 123digit platform offers free resources, courses, and tools for digital training and inclusion. It also provides monitoring tools, forums, and collaborative spaces for service providers. The DORA project, led by crfba.ch, supports trainers and institutions with pedagogical tools (e.g., photo cards, assessment instruments) and educational design principles for basic digital skills training. Educa's Navigator tool helps stakeholders evaluate and choose digital tools for education based on standardised criteria.

Switzerland's digital education landscape reflects a multi-actor, decentralised approach, balancing national priorities with cantonal autonomy. While challenges remain, particularly regarding inclusion, Switzerland is building a flexible and innovative ecosystem that other countries may look to for adaptive, context-sensitive models of digital competence development.

Sources and practices

- Swiss Digital Strategy
- Educa
- University of Geneva
- SVEB Report
- 123digit
- DORA Project
- Educa Navigator

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Interview findings and perspectives from stakeholders

Holistic literacy programmes and emerging technologies

The Swiss field research for Task 2.2 offers insight into how holistic literacy programmes are implemented in adult education contexts, with particular attention to learners from vulnerable groups. The findings capture key tensions between pedagogical intent and institutional practice, especially in the use of digital technologies to support adult learners' autonomy, engagement, and inclusion. Drawing from the perspective of an experienced adult educator, the research illustrates how digital tools are being integrated (or, in some cases, avoided) not due to lack of availability but because of deeper ethical, cultural, and emotional considerations.

A central theme in the Swiss data is the need to "de-mechanise" adult education. The interviewee emphasised that current digital systems often reflect rigid institutional logics rather than learner-centred principles. Adult learners, particularly those with complex life experiences, frequently encounter education not as a space for growth but as a system of control: timed assessments, predefined outcomes, and bureaucratic constraints. This environment, the educator argued, undermines key dimensions of holistic literacy: it narrows reflection, suppresses agency, and overlooks the emotional labour involved in returning to learning as an adult.

In contrast, the educator's own practice privileges slowness, reflection, and relationship-building. Learners are seen not as passive recipients of skills, but as individuals with histories, fears, and creative potential. This approach, though resource-intensive, fosters trust and engagement - two conditions the interviewee identified as indispensable for adult learning to become meaningful and transformative. While emerging technologies can support such environments, they often require deliberate adaptation. The educator described using digital tools selectively and cautiously, emphasising that the priority must always remain with pedagogy rather than innovation.

The interviewee challenged the assumption that all digitalisation equates to progress. For many learners in disadvantaged contexts, digital tools are more likely to trigger stress and self-doubt than empowerment. Some adult learners in their programs experienced "a sense of being surveilled" when asked to log in to online portals or interact with standardised learning management systems. Others struggled with basic navigation or feared making irreversible mistakes in digital environments. In these cases, the introduction of technology, particularly when unaccompanied by appropriate scaffolding, served to intensify existing inequalities, not alleviate them.

Holistic literacy, in this context, was defined not only as the development of digital or cognitive skills but also as emotional resilience, ethical reflection, and the capacity for critical dialogue.

The educator described using analogue methods, such as drawing, dialogue circles, and storytelling, as entry points into digital learning, allowing learners to first express themselves on their own terms. These practices are not technophobic; rather, they reflect a pedagogical belief that technology should follow the learner, not the reverse.

An important insight from the Swiss data is the critique of one-size-fits-all digital tools. The educator noted that many platforms currently promoted for adult education are designed for efficiency, not personalisation. They often fail to accommodate learners with neurodiverse profiles, trauma backgrounds, or low confidence. As a result, even when these tools are introduced with good intentions, they risk alienating the very learners they aim to support.

Institutional barriers further complicate the situation. The educator reported that while some staff are deeply committed to learner-centred approaches, they face time constraints, administrative pressures, and a lack of systemic recognition for their pedagogical labour. Funding structures reward quantifiable outputs rather than slow, relationship-driven processes. In such contexts, emerging technologies are more often used to meet reporting requirements than to enhance learning.

Despite these challenges, the interviewee expressed a cautious optimism about the future of adult education in Switzerland. There is growing dialogue among educators about how to re-humanise digital learning, integrate trauma-informed practices, and co-design tools with learners rather than for them. However, for these efforts to take root, systemic change is needed: investment in long-term educator training, flexibility in institutional structures, and a willingness to treat adult learners as co-constructors of knowledge rather than data points.

The Swiss field research underscores that the integration of emerging technologies into adult education is not merely a technical or logistical issue; it is deeply pedagogical, ethical, and relational. For adults from vulnerable contexts, learning is not a set of competences to be acquired, but a process of reclaiming voice, agency, and belonging. Any technological innovation that seeks to support this process must begin with an understanding of the learner as a whole person. Without that, even the most sophisticated tools will fall short of meaningful inclusion.

Learner Voice: Switzerland

This case study from Switzerland sheds light on the experience of an adult learner participating in the Simply Better at Work programme. Having migrated to Switzerland a decade ago and employed in an industrial company, the learner's motivation to improve digital skills is strongly professional. He had completed only compulsory schooling in his country of origin, making this adult learning experience his first structured engagement with digital literacy.

In daily life, he primarily uses a smartphone, which is more accessible and familiar than a computer. While he has encountered emerging technologies, such as AI-based chat systems or even virtual reality during museum visits, his interaction with such tools remains cautious and limited. Installing and using new applications is particularly difficult. The complexity of interfaces, often lacking in localisation or language support, amplifies the sense of exclusion: "If I don't understand what it says, I'm not going to risk clicking something wrong." This hesitation is compounded by mistrust and insecurity, especially when digital environments are perceived as unsafe or confusing. He noted concern about not knowing what is trustworthy online, reflecting a broader fear among people with limited educational backgrounds of "doing something wrong" or inadvertently compromising their privacy.

Access itself remains an issue. While the learner has a smartphone, he lacks consistent access to a computer or reliable internet. He therefore relies heavily on support from family members, particularly children or grandchildren, to navigate more complex digital tasks. Occasionally, he turns to teachers or staff in local libraries, who offer critical guidance in trusted, face-to-face settings. When asked about digital learning programmes, he expressed appreciation for those that offer clear, paced, and supportive instruction. The best learning environments were those that involved small groups or paired training, ideally hosted in familiar community settings like libraries or adult education centres. However, programmes that moved too quickly or used overly complex language were discouraging. "When the words are too difficult, or things move too fast, I just stop following," he explained. For digital learning to be meaningful, he emphasised the need for step-by-step guidance, repetition, and human presence. Apps with simple navigation, voice narration, and no advertising were considered much more usable. Above all, he stressed the importance of access to a person.

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