



XXI Adults

**Adaptation of the adult educational
system to the XXI Century**

The Good Practices Template



INSTITUTE for
ROMA and
MINORITIES
INCLUSION



**DIPUTACIÓN
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Name of the Good Practice

Letters for Life (Letras para a Vida)

Summary of the Practice

Brief, easy-to-understand summary: What is the practice, for whom, and for what purpose?

Letters for Life (*Letras para a Vida*) is a community-based literacy programme developed and implemented by the Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra – School of Education (ESEC), in Portugal. It is designed for adults who, for various reasons, did not have the opportunity to acquire basic reading and writing skills during their schooling years.

The practice involves students from the ESEC Education and Social Work programmes, who become literacy volunteers. They engage in one-on-one or small group sessions with adult learners, offering personalised support in reading, writing, and basic communication skills.

The goal of the initiative is not only to improve literacy levels, but also to promote social inclusion, empowerment, and intergenerational solidarity. The learning process is rooted in the daily realities, needs, and interests of the adult participants, respecting their life experiences and personal pace. The project also contributes to the practical training of future professionals in education and social intervention.

Description of the Practice – min. 2000 characters

1) Context / Background

What was the initial need or problem?

Who was the target group?

Was it part of a larger programme or project?

In Portugal, despite significant improvements in education, adult illiteracy and functional illiteracy remain critical challenges—particularly among older adults and vulnerable populations who had limited access to schooling in their youth. Many of these individuals feel excluded from daily activities that require basic literacy skills, such as reading labels, filling out forms, or using public services.

The *Letters for Life* (*Letras para a Vida*) project emerged from this pressing social need. The initial problem was the lack of structured, dignified, and personalised literacy support for adults who are often ashamed or reluctant to participate in formal literacy programmes. These individuals are typically older adults, often women, with low qualifications and limited participation in public life.





The main target group includes:

- Adults with low or no literacy skills;
- Older adults (often over 60 years old);
- People in social vulnerability or isolation.

The project also serves a secondary target group:

- Higher education students from the School of Education at the Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra, who take part in the initiative as literacy volunteers, thus gaining hands-on experience in educational intervention, communication, and civic engagement.

Letters for Life is not part of a larger governmental programme but was created as a community-based intervention initiative within the ESEC's Social Education and Community Intervention units. It aligns with broader national and European goals related to lifelong learning, social cohesion, and educational equity, but its development and implementation are deeply rooted in the local context and academic community of Coimbra.

This small-scale but high-impact project embodies a partnership between academia, local institutions (such as parish councils, social centres, and libraries), and civil society. It represents an alternative to formal adult education by offering informal, respectful, and context-sensitive literacy support tailored to each learner's personal goals and life trajectory.

2) Objectives

What were the goals of the practice?

What did it aim to improve or change?

The *Letters for Life* project was designed with the dual purpose of promoting adult literacy and fostering social engagement among future educators and social workers. Its goals are both pedagogical and social, with an emphasis on empowerment, inclusion, and community transformation.

Main objectives:

- **To reduce illiteracy and functional illiteracy** among adults who had limited access to education, especially older individuals;
- **To promote personal autonomy**, enabling participants to perform daily tasks that require reading and writing skills;
- **To strengthen social inclusion**, giving participants the tools to engage more actively in their communities and access essential services;





- **To create intergenerational bridges**, fostering solidarity and respect between younger and older generations;
- **To enhance the training of higher education students**, by involving them in real-world, community-based literacy interventions;
- **To develop a model of literacy education that is flexible, humanised, and rooted in the lived experience of each participant.**

This practice aims not only to improve technical reading and writing abilities, but also to reinforce dignity, confidence, and the right to learn at any age. It seeks to counter isolation, encourage active citizenship, and strengthen the bonds between academic institutions and local communities.

3) Implementation / Methodology

How was the practice carried out step by step?

What activities or methods were used?

How long did it take?

The *Letters for Life* project follows a participatory, learner-centred methodology rooted in non-formal and informal education principles. The implementation is structured but adaptable, ensuring that both adult learners and student volunteers can co-construct the learning experience.

Step-by-step implementation:

1. Initial Mapping and Partnerships

- ESEC identifies local needs through contacts with parish councils, community centres, and social organisations.
- Partnerships are established with these local stakeholders, who help reach potential participants.

2. Recruitment and Training of Student Volunteers

- Students from Social Education and Community Intervention programmes at ESEC are invited to volunteer.
- Prior to fieldwork, they receive training on adult education, communication, and ethical approaches to literacy work.

3. Participant Enrolment and Diagnosis

- Adult learners are enrolled based on interest and referral from local entities.
- A basic informal assessment identifies their literacy level, motivations, and life context.





- No tests or formal placement are used—respect and trust are central.

4. Definition of Learning Plans

- Learning goals are defined collaboratively: from reading labels and writing lists to understanding bus timetables or reading children's books.
- Activities are tailored to individual needs, avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions.

5. Literacy Sessions (One-on-One or Small Group)

- Sessions take place weekly in familiar, accessible locations (e.g. local libraries, parish halls).
- They follow a dialogue-based approach using everyday materials (newspapers, leaflets, photos, handwritten notes).
- Emphasis is placed on learner agency and emotional safety.

6. Supervision and Reflection

- Student volunteers participate in regular reflection sessions with ESEC tutors to share experiences, difficulties, and learning outcomes.
- This pedagogical accompaniment ensures ethical integrity and reinforces the learning of the volunteers themselves.

7. Closing and Continuity

- Learning cycles typically last several months (variable depending on each dyad).
- Some learners continue in the following year, others move on to more formal learning paths.
- Events and exhibitions (e.g. reading circles, public readings) celebrate participants' progress.

Duration and Intensity:

- Projects are usually implemented over an academic year.
- Each literacy pair typically meets once or twice a week, with sessions lasting 60–90 minutes.
- The rhythm is adapted to the availability and comfort of each learner.

4) Results / Outcomes

What were the concrete results?

How did the practice impact the participants?





In short, *Letters for Life* creates real educational opportunities for people who have been left behind by the formal system, while shaping the future professionals who will serve these populations. Its human scale, flexibility, and relational approach make it both impactful and inspiring.

5) Participants' Stories – optional

Short quotes, personal reflections or experiences shared by participant

6) Success Factors

What made the practice effective or innovative?

Were there any unique or creative elements?

The success of *Letters for Life* is due to a combination of pedagogical sensibility, community engagement, and human connection. Several elements distinguish this practice and make it both effective and deeply meaningful:

1. Personalised, Human-Centred Approach

- The sessions are designed around the interests, experiences, and goals of each learner, which fosters trust, motivation, and emotional safety.
- Respect for the learner's dignity is at the heart of the method—there is no judgement, no pressure, only accompaniment.

2. Intergenerational Relationship

- The dynamic between young students and older adults creates a powerful learning environment based on empathy, patience, and mutual respect.
- It challenges stereotypes and promotes solidarity between generations.

3. Flexibility and Informality

- There is no rigid curriculum or formal assessment. This flexibility allows each literacy path to be adapted in real time to the learner's needs.
- Learning happens in community spaces, creating a familiar and informal atmosphere that reduces anxiety and resistance.

4. Strong Local Partnerships





- Collaboration with parish councils, libraries, and NGOs helps identify learners and provide welcoming learning spaces.
- These partnerships root the project in the local context, ensuring sustainability and social relevance.

5. Integration into Academic Training

- By embedding the project in the training of education and social work students, *Letters for Life* provides a real-world learning experience that reinforces theoretical knowledge through practice.
- Students benefit from structured reflection sessions, ensuring pedagogical quality and ethical awareness.

6. Low-Cost, High-Impact Model

- The practice requires minimal resources—just time, dedication, and local coordination.
- Its sustainability comes from the commitment of volunteers, academic mentors, and community partners, rather than financial investment.

Together, these factors create a deeply transformative learning experience—for both the learners and the student volunteers. The project proves that small, relational, community-based interventions can make a significant difference in adult education.

7) Transferability / Recommendations

Can the practice be used elsewhere?

What conditions are needed for successful implementation?

The *Letters for Life* model is highly transferable to other contexts, particularly those where adult illiteracy or functional illiteracy remains an obstacle to social inclusion. Its simplicity, low cost, and community focus make it an accessible and adaptable solution for a wide range of organisations.

Why it is transferable

- The model is based on **volunteer-student engagement**, which can be replicated in any higher education institution with social education, education, psychology, or community-based programmes.
- It requires **minimal infrastructure**—basic training, a coordination team, and access to community spaces such as libraries, parish halls, or NGOs.
- The learning sessions are **non-prescriptive and learner-driven**, making the model suitable for diverse populations and cultural contexts.





Conditions for successful implementation

1. **Partnerships with local organisations**
Local authorities, civil society organisations, and community centres play a key role in reaching the target population and offering suitable learning spaces.
2. **Involvement of academic institutions**
Integrating the practice into the curriculum of education-related degrees is essential. Pedagogical supervision and reflective practice support quality and ethical delivery.
3. **Volunteer preparation and follow-up**
Student volunteers must receive basic training on adult education, communication, and empathy. Regular group reflections help sustain motivation and ensure responsible practice.
4. **Cultural sensitivity and flexibility**
The learning content must be based on the learners' lives, needs, and aspirations. There is no one-size-fits-all lesson plan.
5. **Respect and trust as foundations**
The interpersonal relationship is the core of the practice. Successful implementation depends on a culture of respect, listening, and mutual growth.

Recommendation

Organisations wishing to replicate the model should start with a **pilot version**, involving a small group of students and a few adult learners. Building local partnerships and creating a safe, informal learning environment are critical first steps. The project can then be scaled gradually, with adjustments based on context and feedback.

8) Tips / Implementation Advice – optional

Checklists, lessons, or advice for those wishing to implement the practice.

Based on the experience of implementing *Letters for Life*, here are some practical tips for organisations or institutions wishing to replicate the initiative:

Before Implementation

- **Map local needs:** Identify communities or groups where adult literacy is still a barrier to participation and autonomy.
- **Establish partnerships:** Reach out to parish councils, community centres, and libraries early—they are key to accessing the target audience.





- **Select and prepare volunteers carefully:** Motivation, empathy, and openness are more important than prior teaching experience.

During Implementation

- **Create a welcoming environment:** Use familiar, non-threatening spaces where learners feel comfortable.
- **Co-create learning content:** Start with the learners' goals—whether it's reading medication instructions or writing to a grandchild.
- **Keep materials simple and real:** Use newspapers, handwritten notes, menus, photos—anything from daily life.
- **Allow time to build trust:** Don't rush the process; relationships are the foundation of progress.

Pedagogical Advice

- **Use dialogue and storytelling:** Invite learners to talk about their lives and transform these stories into reading/writing material.
- **Avoid formal testing:** Focus on progress, confidence, and personal achievement, not grades or performance.
- **Provide continuous support for volunteers:** Regular supervision helps prevent burnout and supports learning from challenges.

Sustainability Tips

- **Celebrate milestones:** Public events, exhibitions, or simple certificates can give learners visibility and pride.
- **Document the process:** Keeping short records or journals can help with reflection and replication.
- **Involve former participants:** Some may become ambassadors or even peer supporters in future cycles.

9) Lessons Learned - optional

Biggest surprises, obstacles or key takeaways during implementation.





Over the years, the implementation of *Letters for Life* has revealed several valuable lessons that helped refine the practice and deepen its impact:

1. Learning begins with trust, not textbooks

Many learners arrive with a long history of educational failure and shame. Building trust takes time and empathy. The emotional relationship must come first—only then can learning truly happen.

2. Volunteers need support just as much as learners

Although student volunteers are highly motivated, many initially feel unprepared to face the responsibility of teaching literacy. Ongoing supervision, collective reflection, and emotional support are essential to sustain their motivation and ensure ethical engagement.

3. Flexibility is a strength, not a weakness

Trying to apply rigid lesson plans or assessments often led to frustration. The project works best when it embraces each learner's rhythm, interests, and life circumstances—even if progress seems “slow” by formal standards.

4. Small steps make a big difference

For many participants, writing their name, reading a short sentence, or understanding a medicine label is a life-changing milestone. Recognising and celebrating these small victories keeps learners engaged and proud.

5. Community involvement enhances sustainability

The most successful iterations of the project were those where local stakeholders (parishes, libraries, social centres) took ownership—offering space, helping to recruit learners, or providing transportation. Community anchoring helps maintain continuity year after year.

6. Storytelling is a powerful tool

Encouraging learners to tell and write their own life stories creates meaningful content for literacy development. It validates their identity and makes the learning process more relevant and memorable.

10) Photos illustrating the described practice





Please attach at least 3 photos related to the described good practice

PRACTICE PROFILE – CLASSIFICATION CHECKLIST

Please tick all categories that apply to your described practice. You may choose more than one.

TYPE OF THE PRACTICE

- ☒ Learning by doing
- ☒ Intergenerational learning
- ☒ Community-based learning
- ☐ Digital / blended learning
- ☒ Peer learning
- ☒ Mentoring / coaching
- ☒ Cultural / creative approaches
- ☒ Collaborative / partner-based
- ☐ Other (specify):

TARGET GROUP

- ☒ Adults with low qualifications
- ☐ NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training)
- ☐ Migrants / Refugees
- ☒ Older adults
- ☒ Women
- ☐ People with disabilities
- ☒ Other vulnerable groups
- ☐ General adult population

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- ☐ Formal
- ☒ Non-formal
- ☒ Informal

SKILLS / COMPETENCES DEVELOPED

- ☒ Literacy (reading, writing, comprehension)
- ☐ Numeracy (maths, logical thinking)





- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| ☐ | Digital skills |
| ☐ | STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) |
| ☒ | Personal, social and learning to learn |
| ☒ | Civic competences |
| ☐ | Entrepreneurship |
| ☒ | Cultural awareness and expression |
| ☐ | Language skills |
| ☐ | Job-related / vocational skills |
| ☐ | Green competences |
| ☐ | Other (specify): |

POTENTIAL USERS

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ☒ | Teachers / Educators |
| ☐ | Administrative staff |
| ☐ | School / Centre management |
| ☒ | Policy makers / Public administration |
| ☒ | NGOs / Community organizations |
| ☐ | Other (specify): |

Glossary of Categories (Explanation of Checklist Items)

Type of the Practice

- Learning by doing – learning through hands-on activities, practice-based methods such as workshops or real tasks.
- Intergenerational learning – activities involving participants from different age groups learning from each other.
- Community-based learning – learning that takes place within the local community, often through real-life engagement.
- Digital / blended learning – education using digital tools (online), or a mix of online and face-to-face methods.
- Peer learning – learning among participants of similar status or experience, supporting each other.
- Mentoring / coaching – one-to-one support from a more experienced person to help learning and personal growth.
- Cultural / creative approaches – use of arts, music, theatre, storytelling etc. as learning tools.
- Collaborative / partner-based – practices involving cooperation between organisations or groups.
- Other (specify) – any other method not listed above.





Target Group

- Adults with low qualifications – adults who have low levels of formal education or basic skills.
- NEETs – people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (often young adults).
- Migrants / Refugees – individuals who moved from another country, often facing integration challenges.
- Older adults – Adults aged 65+
- Women – practices specifically addressing women's needs.
- People with disabilities – individuals with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health disabilities.
- Other vulnerable groups – groups at risk of exclusion (e.g. long-term unemployed, homeless).
- General adult population – average adults not in specific categories.

Learning Environment

- Formal – learning within official education systems, certified courses (e.g. schools, universities).
- Non-formal – organised learning outside the formal system (e.g. workshops, community training).
- Informal – learning through everyday experiences, without a structured course (e.g. volunteering, family).

Skills / Competences Developed

- Literacy – reading, writing, and understanding texts (including functional texts like forms).
- Numeracy – using mathematics and logical reasoning.
- Digital skills – using digital tools e.g. CV creation, online tools, online platforms.
- STEM – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
- Personal, social and learning to learn – self-awareness, motivation, teamwork, lifelong learning skills.
- Civic competences – active citizenship, understanding of democracy and social responsibilities.
- Entrepreneurship – creativity, innovation, project management, risk-taking.
- Cultural awareness and expression – appreciation and creation of cultural content (e.g. arts, music).
- Language skills – ability to communicate in one or more foreign languages.
- Job-related / vocational skills – practical skills useful in specific jobs or professions.
- Green competences – knowledge and behaviours supporting sustainability and environmental care.
- Other – any other skills developed (please specify).





Potential users – groups who could benefit from applying, adapting, or being inspired by this practice in their work context.

Note: These categories follow EU frameworks such as the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018), the Action Plan on Basic Skills (2025) and the Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025 – Glossary





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