Coaching Adult Learners:
An Inspirational Guide for professionals in Adult Education

rescale

Inspirational material for the realization of
Reskilling Labs

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About the RESCALE project

The 2020 OECD statistics show that 9% of the 25-64 year-olds with an educational level below upper secondary school are unemployed. Besides, lots of in-transition workers, unemployed and inactive adults are not joining adult education. In addition, the EU argues that the green transition and digital transformation is likely to unevenly affect sectors. Therefore, the RESCALE project will develop an innovative approach to up- and reskill skills of in-transition workers, unemployed or inactive adults for new tasks and new jobs in particular from declining sectors into the green and digital economy.

By developing an innovative infrastructure called the 'Reskilling Lab', the labor market position and level of proficiency of transversal, basic, digital and green skills of these vulnerable adults will be improved. First, a comparative analysis will be realized to compare the educational and labor market infrastructures throughout Europe focussing on up- and reskilling skills. As a result an assessment tool for identifying skills among these adults and an innovative European 'Reskilling Labs' model will be developed, existing of a blueprint for the European 'Reskilling Lab', a model for enhanced career guidance, counselling and mentoring and innovative training materials and -methods. In cooperation with stakeholders like companies, adult education and training providers and public and private organizations 'Reskilling Labs' in 7 countries for 210 to 350 in-transition workers, unemployed or inactive adults will be realised. These 'Reskilling Labs' will be scientific evaluated. Based on these results a digital European 'Reskilling Labs' manual and roadmap for sustainable implementation for professionals will be developed in addition to a policy-model for policy-makers existing of a prototype of a digital decision support system and a business model in order to stimulate effective strategies to up- and reskill skills of in-transition workers, unemployed or inactive adults.

Disclaimer

This product has been translated by use of AI. Although everything has been checked thoroughly still some minor imperfections can be noticed. For the official English document see https://rescale-eu.com/.

Content

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Introduction: Why Coaching Matters in Adult Education for Vulnerable Adults

Coaching is a powerful tool for supporting vulnerable adults in education programs. Unlike traditional instruction, coaching focuses on personal growth, confidence, and self-direction — all essential for learners who may have faced barriers such as poverty, trauma, learning difficulties, or long gaps in education. Coaching influences the learning process in five ways.

1. Builds Confidence and Motivation

Many vulnerable adults come to education programs with low self-esteem or past negative experiences with school. Coaching helps rebuild their confidence by focusing on their strengths and setting achievable goals. When learners start seeing small successes, they become more motivated to keep learning.

2. Encourages Independence and Lifelong Learning

Coaching teaches adults how to reflect on their progress, solve problems, and make informed choices. These are lifelong skills that extend beyond the classroom — supporting them in employment, parenting, and community life.

3. Supports Individualized Learning

Every adult learner has unique needs. Coaching allows program managers and tutors to personalize support, ensuring that learners get guidance suited to their pace, background, and goals. This flexibility is especially valuable for people balancing education with family or work responsibilities.

4. Improves Retention and Completion

When learners feel seen and supported, they're more likely to stay in the program and complete their goals. Coaching provides accountability and emotional support, reducing dropout rates and improving overall program success.

5. Builds Trust and Safe Learning Environments

Vulnerable adults often need to feel safe before they can learn effectively. Coaching relationships are based on trust, empathy, and respect — creating an environment where learners feel valued and capable.

In this inspirational guide, we will present some tips to develop a high impact coaching process.

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Key features of impactful coaching

We start with the key features of impactful coaching. Next, we focus on dialogic feedback. Feedback is key in each coaching process. Feedback is not just about telling someone how they're doing — it's about helping them understand, reflect, and grow through dialogue. In adult education, especially with vulnerable learners, effective feedback dialogues can make the difference between disengagement and lasting progress. Next, we go into more detail in the process of dialogic feedback.

We propose 9 key features of coaching:

1. Understand the Adult Learner
2. Build a Coaching Relationship
3. Set Clear Goals Together
4. Use Coaching Conversations Effectively
5. Encourage Reflection and Self-Evaluation
6. Provide Constructive Feedback
7. Adapt to Individual Needs
8. Foster Continuous Motivation
9. Evaluate and Evolve Your Coaching Practice

1. Understand the Adult Learner

Adult learners differ from younger students in motivation, life experience, and learning goals.

Key principles (Knowles' Andragogy):

- Self-directed: Adults prefer to take responsibility for their learning.
- Experience-based: They bring valuable life and work experience—use it as a resource.
- Goal-oriented: Learning is often linked to career, family, or personal development goals.
- Relevance-focused: Adults need to see why something matters to their lives or work.
- Practical: They value problem-solving and real-world application.

- Respect: They expect their opinions and experiences to be respected.

2. Build a Coaching Relationship

Coaching relies on trust, collaboration, and respect.

Do:

- Establish a safe and supportive environment where learners can take risks.
- Practice active listening—pay attention to both words and emotions.
- Ask open-ended questions ("What approaches have worked for you before?").
- Show empathy and patience—adults often juggle many responsibilities.
- Encourage self-reflection rather than giving direct answers immediately.

3. Set Clear Goals Together

Help learners define what success looks like.

Steps:

1. Use SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).
2. Identify both short-term (weekly) and long-term (course or life) goals.
3. Align learning activities with the learner's personal or professional objectives.
4. Review and adjust goals regularly.

4. Use Coaching Conversations Effectively

Structure coaching sessions around growth and reflection.

Typical structure:

1. Check-in: How are things going since last session?
2. Focus: Identify a current challenge or goal.
3. Explore: Ask guiding questions to help the learner think critically.
4. Plan: Co-create an action plan for next steps.
5. Commit: Have the learner summarize their plan in their own words.

Useful prompts:

- "What do you think is holding you back?"
- "What's one small change you could try this week?"
- "How will you know you've made progress?"

5. Encourage Reflection and Self-Evaluation

Reflection builds ownership and deeper learning.

Strategies:

- Have learners keep learning journals or progress logs.
- Use peer discussions to share insights.
- End sessions with "What did you learn today?" and "What will you do differently?"
- Reinforce progress and celebrate milestones.

6. Provide Constructive Feedback

Feedback should build confidence and guide improvement.

Effective feedback:

- Be specific and timely ("Your summary clearly identified the key points—next time, try adding an example to support them.").
- Balance strengths and areas for growth.
- Use coaching language: focus on potential and action ("Next step could be…").
- Encourage self-assessment first before giving your input.

7. Adapt to Individual Needs

Adults have diverse preferences and barriers.

Adapt by:

- Using a mix of visual, auditory, and hands-on methods.
- Being flexible with pace, scheduling, and assessment types.
- Providing additional support for literacy, digital, or language needs.
- Recognizing and accommodating learning differences and cultural diversity.

8. Foster Continuous Motivation

Adults often need encouragement to persist.

Motivation boosters:

- Connect learning to personal values and goals.
- Highlight progress, not perfection.
- Create peer learning communities for support.
- Celebrate achievements—even small wins matter.

9. Evaluate and Evolve Your Coaching Practice
- Ask learners for feedback on your coaching style.
- Reflect regularly on what's working and what's not.
- Stay updated on adult learning theories and coaching techniques.
- Seek peer mentoring or professional development opportunities.

Summary Checklist for Coaching Adult Learners

- Build trust and rapport
- The core of coaching is dialogic feedback
- Asking open questions is more valuable than telling
- Set SMART goals collaboratively
- Foster reflection and self-direction
- Give supportive, actionable feedback
- Adapt to individual needs
- Encourage persistence and confidence

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Dialogic Feedback for High Impact Learning (HILL)

Based on: Dochy, F., Segers, M., & Arikan, S. (2022). Dialogic feedback for high impact learning. London/ New York: Routledge.

This framework defines Dialogic Feedback as an interactive, two-way process—a conversation between the learner and the coach where interpretations are shared, meanings are negotiated, and expectations are clarified. The goal is to shift from a "consumption and testing culture" to a "learning and feedback culture "that promotes the lasting competence development required for High Impact Learning (HILL).

1. Establishing the High-Impact Foundation (Mindset Shift)

For adult learners, the success of dialogic feedback relies on a fundamental shift in philosophy, placing *Learner Agency* and *Trust* at the core.

Traditional (One-Way) Feedback	Dialogic (Two-Way) Feedback
Teacher Role: Judge, transmitter of deficit information.	Coach Role: Facilitator, partner, resource for growth.
Learner Role: Passive recipient of comments.	Learner Role: Active partner, co-constructor of the action plan.
Goal: Explain past errors and justify the grade.	Goal: Focus on Feed Forward (future actions) and skill transfer.

Key Pre-requisites are:

- Establish Trust: Trust is the non-negotiable foundation. The learner must feel psychologically safe to reveal weaknesses, take risks, and critique the feedback they receive.
- Encourage Feedback-Seeking Behavior: The coach must actively create a culture where the learner is empowered to ask questions, seek clarification, and initiate the dialogue, thereby demonstrating ownership of the learning process.
- Focus on Assessment-as-Learning (Afl.): Feedback is not a final step, but an integrated component of the learning activity. The ultimate goal is to enable the adult learner to internalize standards and become their own coach.

2. The Perfect Dialogic Feedback Process (The Progress Content Process-Coaching Cycle)

Effective dialogic feedback follows a structured, iterative pro-

cess—often termed PCP-Coaching – that maximizes learner uptake and self-regulation.

PCP coaching emphasizes that, during the coaching process, three key areas are central to discussion: the learner's progress toward their goals, their understanding of the content, and their overall learning process.

Dialogic feedback consists of three phases:

1. Initiation and Elicitation (Learner Self-Assessment)
2. The Core Dialogue (Negotiating Meaning)
3. Feed Forward and Action (Closure)

Phase 1: Initiation and Elicitation (Learner Self-Assessment)

The coach must begin by validating the learner's agency by asking them to assess their own performance first.

Action Step	Rationale (Adult Learner Focus)
Set the Context	Remind the learner of the learning goal (Urgency) and the criteria being used.
Ask for Self-Reflection	The most critical step. Use open questions:" What were your goals for this task? Where did you succeed? What is the single biggest obstacle you are facing right now?"
Listen Actively	The coach's primary role here is to listen, not to interrupt or correct. Understand the learner's perception of their own effort and result.

Phase 2: The Core Dialogue (Negotiating Meaning)

In this phase, the coach introduces their perspective, creating a negotiation that fosters deeper understanding.

Action Step	Rationale (High Impact)
Share Specific Data	Coach presents observations, not judgments. "I noticed you used three sources, but the required criteria were five peer-reviewed sources." (Focus on objective behavior).
Negotiate the Gap	Compare the learner's self-assessment with the coach's data. Ask: "How do you explain the difference between the intended outcome and the actual result?"
Co-Construct Shared Meaning	Clarify any misunderstanding regarding terminology, criteria, or expectations. The dialogue ensures the learner fully grasps why the gap exists.

Phase 3: Feed Forward and Action (Closure)

The dialogue must conclude by translating insight into clear, actionable steps for the future.

Action Step	Rationale (Transfer and Lasting Impact)
Develop a Concrete Plan	Ask the learner: "Based on our discussion, what is the one next step you will take on the next assignment to address this issue?"
Focus on Process/Strategy	Ensure the action plan focuses on changing the learning strategy (e.g., "I will spend 30 minutes pre-reading the criteria") rather than just correcting the final product.
Schedule the Follow-up	Agree on a time to check in on the implementation of the plan (enforcing accountability and sustained effort).

3. The Quality of the Feedback Message

To be "perfect," the content of the feedback must support the core tenets of the HILL model:

- Be Specific, Constructive, and Timely: Feedback loses impact if it is too general, overly critical, or given long after the learning event.
- Target the Process, Not the Person: Focus on the strategies, metacognitive processes, and efforts that the learner can control.
- Encourage Connecting Networks (Connectivism): Help the adult learner see how the current task connects to other knowledge networks, past experiences, and future professional competencies (Urgency).
- Embrace the Emotional Dimension: Acknowledge the effort and the emotional impact of the feedback. Use language that is empathetic and supportive, preserving the trusting relationship.

4. Short guideline for dialogic feedback

1. Reflection and feedback should together form an integral part a feedback dialogue.
2. Feedback is cyclical and compares current and previous products/progress/behaviour.
3. Feedback should occur as soon as possible after an activity to maximise benefits.
4. Feedback should be frequent, supportive, facilitative and encourage self-reflection; it should be specifically targeted, relevant and non-judgmental.
5. The dialogue should provide confirmation that the learner understands the feedback.
6. Feedback should include an the learner's action plan for future development.

In order to help you to develop an impactful feedback dialogue, we have attached in the appendix The Dialogic Feedback Checklist.

Appendix

The Dialogic Feedback Checklist

This checklist provides a clear, step-by-step guide for conducting a dialogue that builds trust, promotes learner agency, and focuses on future action, aligning with the principles of High Impact Learning.

Phase 1: Initiate and Establish Trust

Build Rapport:

- "How are you today? Everything going well?"
- (Rationale: Establishes a trusting, supportive relationship.)

Phase 2: Learner Self-Analysis

Elicit Learner's View & Goals (Agency):

- "Thinking about this task, what were your initial goals?"
- "Where do you feel you succeeded, and how did the process go overall?"
- "What do you see as the single biggest obstacle or challenge you are facing right now?"
- (Rationale: The learner reflects first, demonstrating ownership and setting the agenda.)

Phase 3: The Core Dialogue (Negotiate Meaning)

Share Coach's Observations:

- The coach presents specific observations and data, avoiding personal judgment.
- "Based on the criteria, how do you explain the difference between the intended outcome and the actual result?"
- (Rationale: Compares the learner's perception with objective data, ensuring the learner understands the performance gap.)

Phase 4: Planning for Progression (Feed Forward)

Determine Needed Progress:

- "Considering this gap, what is now needed to progress?"
- "Is it now clear what should be done to reach the target standard?"
- (Rationale: Focuses the conversation on the future and confirms understanding.)

Phase 5: Commit to Action

Learner develops Action Plan:

- "What are the specific next steps you will take to address this? (e.g., Step 1:..., Step 2:..., etc.)"
- (Rationale: Turns discussion into a concrete, measurable plan of action owned by the learner.)

Phase 6: Schedule

Schedule Follow-up (Cyclical Feedback):

- "When should we meet again to discuss your progress on these steps?"
- (Rationale: Ensures the feedback is continuous, making it an embedded learning cycle.)

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