



Co-Designing Assessments Through Purposeful Partnerships

Background and Context

The [ASAP](#) initiative was launched to address a persistent gap in adult education and workforce development: the lack of flexible, meaningful assessment tools that reflect the real skills adult learners use in educational, workplace, and everyday contexts. ASAP aims to discover and document assessment needs across adult education and workforce systems and to meet those needs by developing online banks of literacy and numeracy tasks. Rather than approaching this work as a traditional academic study, ASAP has functioned primarily as a product development effort informed by embedded user experience (UX) research. From the outset, the project emphasized partnerships with practitioners and learners as central to ensuring relevance, usability, and impact.



The Challenge: Disconnect Between Assessment Design and Classroom Reality

Assessment developers and researchers often work at a distance from adult education classrooms and job training programs. When tools are designed without sustained engagement with educators and learners, assessments can fail to reflect how tasks are interpreted, experienced, and used in real instructional contexts. This disconnect can lead to tools that are technically sound but misaligned with curricular language, instructional goals, or the practical constraints educators face when administering assessments.

For ASAP, this concern was particularly salient. The initiative sought to serve multiple audiences—adult learners, educators, employers, and researchers—each with distinct needs and expectations. Without deliberate strategies for partnership, the team risked producing assessment items that overlooked how learners actually navigate tasks or

how instructors use assessment data to inform instruction. Simply piloting tools at the end of development would not provide sufficient insight into how assessments functioned in practice.

The Strategy: Treating Partnership as a Design Choice

ASAP approached partnerships not as a byproduct of the work, but as a **deliberate design strategy**. The project began with a comprehensive needs assessment conducted in adult education settings across Alabama, Arkansas, Massachusetts, and New York. These early studies grounded the work in practitioner and learner priorities, ensuring that development efforts responded to needs rather than assumptions.

Building on this foundation, the team adopted a UX-oriented approach that treated educators, learners, employers, and employees as “users” whose experiences with the platform and assessment items would drive ongoing refinement. Focus groups and feedback sessions allowed practitioners to comment on platform functionality, interface design, and the clarity and relevance of individual tasks. Teachers using ASAP for math and reading assessments provided direct input that shaped both item development and tool functionality.

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Co-design activities extended beyond formal research sessions. The team collaborated with practitioner advisors throughout development and engaged instructors working with related tools, such as SkillBlox, to ensure alignment with classroom practices and instructional language. By inviting educators into the design process, ASAP gained insight into what kinds of supports helped users interact with the platform, how assessment results were interpreted, and what refinements were needed to make the tool more usable in instructional settings.

Critically, these partnerships required openness to critique. Feedback was not always positive; practitioners frequently identified confusing items, unclear instructions, or features that did not align with classroom realities. Rather than treating this as a setback, the team embraced critical feedback as essential data. Iterative cycles of testing, reflection, and revision ensured that assessments were not only psychometrically defensible, but also meaningful and practical for everyday use.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

By embedding co-design throughout development, ASAP produced assessment tools that reflect the lived experiences of adult learners and the instructional needs of educators. Partnerships strengthened implementation, increased trust among users, and ensured that the platform evolved in response to real-world use rather than theoretical assumptions. The project demonstrated that sustained engagement with practitioners is not a constraint on research and development, but a catalyst for producing higher-quality, more relevant tools.

Key Takeaways

- **Build a network of partners.** Effective assessment design depends on cultivating relationships with diverse practitioners across education, workforce, and policy contexts.
- **Sustain engagement over time.** Partnerships must be continuous and iterative, not limited to early needs assessments or end-stage pilots.