



Design It to Last

Building Literacy Programs That Prove Impact
Literacy Texas 2026 Conference

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Melanie has spent 20+ years leading change across nonprofit and public-sector settings, including serving as CEO of Literacy Advance of Houston, where she guided merger with Memorial Assistance Ministries (MAM) that doubled service capacity.

She holds a BS in Sociology, an MBA in Leadership, an MSW in Administration and Policy, and certifications in Prosci Change Management and IDEO Design Thinking. She founded Adaptive Ascent Group to bring senior-level strategy and design support to small and mid-size nonprofits.



What We'll Build Today

01

The Right Question

Design thinking, personas, and the bias lens that makes them real

02

Build & Pressure-Test

Draft a persona at your table, then stress-test it against real data

03

The Why Underneath

Persistence research and purposeful gathering as your foundation

04

Design to Story

Mapping the learner journey and turning design into your grant narrative





Building the Persona

Design thinking, personas, and the bias check that keeps them honest



Building Programs Against the Clock

► The familiar pattern

A grant deadline lands. A wish-list program gets drafted over a weekend (maybe a few weeks if we're lucky?). It gets funded. Congratulations! We get to planning the implementation. Twelve to eighteen months later, the report is due. We are left wondering why enrollment is soft or outcomes are thin. Or what actually happened along the way.



Human-Centered Design Thinking

Borrowed from IDEO & applying what's useful for us

► The core idea

Understand the human first. Define the real problem. *Then* build.

Most program failure is a failure to ask the right question, not a failure of execution. You can execute a wrong program beautifully and still end up with a wrong program.

The **Define Stage**: after you've listened to people, before you've built anything, **write the actual problem in plain language**.



What Is a Persona & Where Does It Come From?

► The Definition

A composite picture of a real type of person you serve, built from patterns in actual data and real conversations. Not a guess. Not a stand-in for 'the average person.'

Why it matters for funders: a persona built from real intake data becomes the backbone of a grant narrative that reads as evidence.

► Where It's From

Personas are a product and UX design tool, popularized by software designer Alan Cooper in the 1990s. We're borrowing it because the underlying need is the same: you can't design well for someone you're imagining instead of someone you're listening to.



A Lens Shift

► The program challenge

Many learners enroll with enthusiasm, but attendance begins to decline after the first three or four weeks.

Possible assumptions:

Learners are not sufficiently motivated. They do not understand the importance of attendance. They are not ready to commit. The program needs a stricter attendance policy. We need a new curriculum.



Build a Rough Draft Persona

► How this works

Each table builds one persona together, using a real learner population from your own programs.

Go fast and rough right now — this is a first draft, not a final answer.

Use the canvas fields: who they are, what event brought them in, what almost stops them from staying.



Let's Stress Test

► Pressure-Test Questions

- Whose voice is in the data you used, and whose isn't?
- Are you describing a barrier as a personal trait ('unmotivated') when it's actually structural (no evening childcare)?
- Would your most disengaged learner recognize themselves in this persona?

► If You Don't Have Formal Data

Many of us run programs without a formal data system, and that's not a lesser starting point.

Use staff and volunteer observation patterns instead: what do the people closest to your learners consistently notice?



Checking Your Assumptions

► What would we design differently?

Initial assumption	What the persona helps us notice	New design question
Marisol is not committed.	She has a specific, personally meaningful career goal.	How might we reconnect weekly learning to that goal?
She needs an attendance warning.	A warning may increase shame and make returning feel harder.	How might we normalize interruption and make re-entry easy?
She needs more class hours.	She has small, unpredictable windows for studying.	How might we offer meaningful 15-minute learning activities?
She should contact us when she misses class.	She avoids unfamiliar calls and may not know she is welcome back.	How might we proactively contact her through a trusted channel?
Online materials provide flexibility.	The portal itself creates a technology barrier.	How might we deliver make-up work through tools she already uses?
Progress is measured at the next assessment.	Eight weeks is too long to wait for evidence of growth.	How might we make progress visible every week?



Where AI Can Help?

► Two concrete uses

- Drafting bias-check questions to stress-test a persona draft before you call it done.
- Turning messy intake notes into a first-pass data summary.
- Everything we went through today works without AI. So, if AI isn't part of your workflow, skip it!





The Why Underneath

Persistence research and purposeful gathering as your foundation



Four Things Keep Adult Learners Coming Back

NCSALL's persistence research — our field's own evidence base

01

Managing the Forces

Naming and managing the real positive and negative pulls on someone staying — a force-field approach

02

Self-Efficacy

The felt sense 'I can do this specific thing,' not general confidence

03

A Clear Goal

Named early, personal, and revisited as it changes

04

Visible Progress

Progress toward that goal the learner can see and measure



Before You Design Decide Its Purpose

► The Art of Gathering

We default to a category (or ‘Doing’)
instead of asking what specific
transformation a gathering is for.

WHY? **WHO CARES?** WHO SHOULD
CARE? WHO DO WE WANT TO CARE?
AIMS & AUDIENCE? **S.M.I.T?** HOW DO
YOU WANT THEM TO **FEEL?**

► Why It Pairs With Persistence

A program with a sharp, named
purpose gives learners a goal to hold
onto — exactly the third week
persistence support. Purpose and
persistence reinforce each other.





From Design to Story

Mapping the learner journey and turning design into your grant narrative



Every Learner Enters the Same Doors

► **Entry** → **Early Weeks** → **Midpoint** → **Completion**

At each transition point, ask two things:

- What could cause someone to fall away here?
- What's one piece of data that would tell you if it's happening?

Concrete example: the 'week three' drop-off many programs see maps directly to self-efficacy and progress. If nobody's marked a visible win by week three, that's often where people go quiet.



Your Design Matches Your Story

Bring it back to the ask

► The link

- A persona built on real data. A defined purpose. A plan for where people are likely to fall away.
- This is design & a stronger, more specific grant narrative than 'we serve underserved adults.'
- Funders increasingly want to see the thinking, not just the outcomes.
- What you built today at your table is already the start of that narrative.

