



Waltham Connections
for Healthy Aging

Evaluation of Fall 2024 “Welcome to the Digital Age” Class

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About Us

Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging is a coalition of senior activists and agencies that are working to make Waltham an aging-friendly community, as well as a model for community involvement for seniors. The group has its roots in a 2015-6 study led by Brandeis Professor Walter Leutz and his partner, Betsy. Our theme of "Connections" expresses our aim to connect seniors to one another and to a more age-friendly city. Connections has led a number of initiatives to create a more age-friendly and inclusive Waltham. We have focused on social participation, communication, nutrition, physical activity, lifelong learning, and civic participation.

Introduction

The Welcome to the Digital Age (WDA) program offers free Chromebook computers, WiFi, and classes to low-income seniors in Waltham, MA. Since 2021, WDA has been organized by Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging, recently with support from federal Title III grants through Springwell.¹

In September 2024, Connections began its tenth WDA class. This report covers how the classes were organized, how seniors were recruited and enrolled, and how the class went, including a pre/post evaluation of skills acquired.

As with prior WDA sessions, the class met at the Waltham Senior Center. There were nine sessions of two hours each on Tuesdays from 3-5 PM, including a combined makeup class and graduation. The classes were taught by a lead instructor, two assistant instructors (one a Spanish speaker), and several helpers, all of whom were graduates of the course.

Marketing was done through announcements in the CoA monthly newsletter, the CoA's Ugandan and Latina outreach workers, and word of mouth among the nearly 100 course graduates. The participants were also drawn from a waiting list from prior courses.

Methods

On the first and last days of class the participants were asked to complete pre-class and post-class surveys. The Pre survey asked about demographics and current use of computers. Both surveys asked about participants' knowledge about and use of computers. All 13 participants completed both the Pre and Post surveys.

¹ For prior evaluations of WDA, see the Reports section of the Connections [website](#).

Findings

Demographics

This was the most diverse WDA class to date. Of the 13 participants, only three were born in the U.S., one of them in Puerto Rico. Other home countries included Italy, Haiti, China, Kenya, and Guatemala. First and second language combinations included English only, Spanish/English, French Creole/English, Chinese/English, English/Kiswahili, English/Swahili, and French Creole/Spanish. Only one reported speaking no English at all.

Demographics (among those who answered²):

Marriage status	2 married couples participated in the course together. The remaining 9 participants were unmarried.
Gender	9 women 4 men
Age	4 were under 70 years old 6 were in their 70's 1 participant was 81 years old 1 was 94 years old
Living arrangements	5 lived alone 7 lived in a household of two 1 lived with four people
Highest education level	8 completed college 2 completed high school 1 completed eighth grade
Employment	10 retired 2 unemployed
Income	6 had a household income below \$20,000 4 had an income between \$20,000-\$49,000
Housing assistance	10 received no assistance for housing 3 had (or previously had) a housing voucher

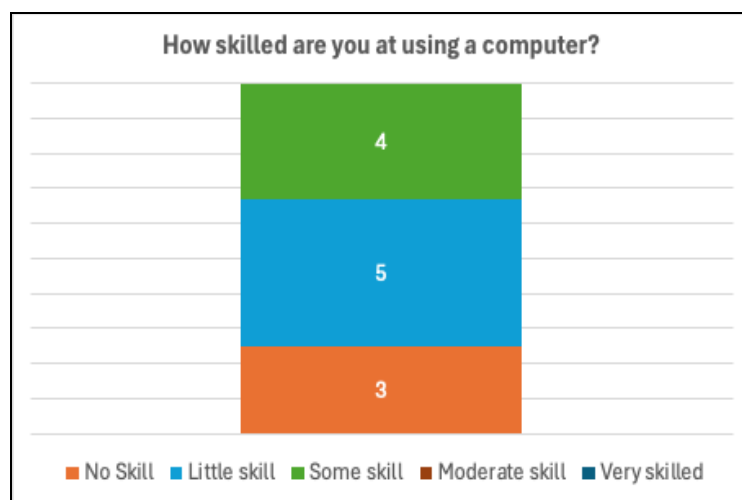
² In the reporting that follows, we do not include a category “no answer.” Calculations of percentages are made based on the number answering each question.

Prior computer use

The results below show that prior to the class only two had computers, all but two had WiFi, and computer skills were limited. None had ever used a Chromebook, which has features that were completely new to all participants, even those who had used a computer in the past.

As of the first day of the program...

- **Do you have a working computer?** 2 yes; 11 no.
- **Do you have WiFi at home?** 10 yes; 2 no.
- **How skilled are you at using a computer?** None checked very or moderate skill; 4 reported some; 5 little; and 3 no skill. (see right)



Pre/Post Comparisons

The tables below compare participants' answers to questions about knowledge and skill on the first and last days of class.

Tables 1 and 2 respectively show very good progress on connecting power cords and devices but less on features inside the computer. Only 54% knew a lot about the microphone and screen items at the end of class, and only 46% knew a lot about the camera. This left 46% (6 people) not knowing much about the microphone or screen items, and 54% (7 people) not knowing much about the camera.

Table 1	Part of a computer - Do you know how to...?
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	Yes		No		Don't know	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Connect power cord?	54%	92%	31%	0%	15%	8%
Connect mouse and devices?	38%	92%	54%	0%	8%	8%

Table 2	How much do you know about these features after you open it up?					
	A lot		Not much		Don't know what it is	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Power button	38%	85%	31%	15%	31%	0%
Microphone	0%	54%	31%	38%	69%	8%
Camera	0%	46%	46%	54%	54%	0%
Screen	15%	85%	54%	15%	31%	0%
Screen items (e.g. shelf)	0%	54%	31%	38%	69%	8%

Table 3 shows the students' Pre and Post skill levels using 10 computer features, as well as avoiding scams. Skill levels were very poor coming in, except for using a mouse/trackpad and searching on the internet, where 53% and 38% respectively were at least pretty good. By the post period, 58% or more were at least pretty good in all categories, and mouse and internet skill levels rose to 85% being at least pretty good. However, the table also reveals weaknesses. In eight of the ten categories, 25% to 38% of respondents (3 to 5 people) reported being not at all good. Finally, on the table's last item – avoiding internet scams – the class did well: only 23% were very or pretty good to start, while 93% believed they did that well by the last class.

Table 3	How good are you at using these features?							
	Very good		Pretty good		Not at all good		I don't know what it is	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Using mouse/trackpad	15%	23%	38%	69%	31%	8%	15%	0%
Using shelf items	8%	8%	8%	54%	31%	38%	54%	0%
Using Chrome browser	0%	31%	8%	38%	31%	31%	62%	0%
Searching for info on internet	15%	31%	23%	54%	38%	15%	23%	0%
Using email	8%	38%	23%	31%	38%	31%	31%	0%
Using Google drive	0%	8%	15%	58%	38%	25%	46%	8%
Accessing and using Google docs	0%	23%	0%	38%	62%	31%	38%	8%
Using Google docs to create documents	0%	15%	0%	46%	54%	38%	46%	0%
Using camera and mic	0%	8%	0%	54%	77%	38%	23%	0%
Using video conferencing	0%	0%	8%	58%	62%	25%	31%	17%
Avoiding internet scams	0%	31%	23%	62%	77%	0%	0%	8%

Participant feedback

Besides the scaled questions above, we asked participants about lectures, course materials, and satisfaction. We also asked open-ended questions about most and least liked and how the course could be improved.

Regarding both lectures and written handouts, 9 out of 13 graduates said they were very useful while 4 said they were pretty useful. Only 5 of 13 found online materials very useful. Eleven said they were very satisfied with the class, and one said they were sort of satisfied.

When asked in open-ended questions what they liked most, graduates mentioned:

- Working with everyone, the group.
- Teachers. They were patient, respectful, positive, friendly and had a good sense of humor.
- Relaxed atmosphere.
- Having someone there to help and explain to you, questions always answered
- Helped improve my basic computer skills, learning new things, practicing.

Least liked aspects:

Note: Most were satisfied or had nothing they liked least.

- Occasional interruptions when people were totally lost, talked too much, or needed one on one help.
- The technology was difficult to understand.
- Too short, needed more time

Suggestions for how to improve:

- Seven students wanted more time.
- Two students wanted more help.

Discussion

Like prior WDA classes, this was an interesting and gratifying class for both instructors and participants. The diversity was remarkable, and there was promise for strong learning given the education levels of students. The Pre/Post data show that participants certainly learned a lot, and the great majority will be able to find valuable uses for their computers like browsing the internet, using email and video conferencing. But in many areas of knowledge and skill, there were three to five students who still did not know much by the end of the course. The majority want more class time. In prior years we have offered two well-received follow-up courses in which graduates can return to refresh their skills, and there will be another this year.

Instructors provided some explanations for the difficulties some of the students have had with learning. One item is language. All but one reported speaking some English, but in practice some had difficulties following along with lessons, possibly due to low literacy and/or memory issues. Other challenges included shaky hands, not remembering lessons from the last class, losing passwords, and poor eyesight. Exploring the nature and extent of these and other challenges we have heard in prior classes would require another study.