



Effective distance education for ABE and ESL learners

Highlights of the 12th Annual Distance Education Workshop

August 19-22, 2013

Eleven states attended this year's workshop: Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Texas.

Perspective

The Changing Role of DE in Adult Education

Project IDEAL began in 2002 as a consortium of states interested in exploring whether distance education is a viable tool for ABE and ESL students. By 2006 we had accumulated enough evidence that we could say with confidence that distance learners could do as well as classroom students on the outcomes measured on the NRS. In the same year distance education was approved by OVAE as a modality for instruction and states were encouraged to report separately on the performance of those students the state defined as "pure" distance education students—in most states defined as students whose accumulated PCH at the end of the program year comprise more than 50% of their total contact hours.

In these early years distance education was seen as a separate modality, designed for students who could not attend the preferred modality of face-to-face instruction. States experimented with different ways to deliver distance education. Initially, DE was an alternative in agencies that wanted to provide DE. Teachers within the agency were trained to deliver quality DE. Recognizing that not every good classroom teacher makes a good distance education teacher, states began to experiment with hub models (Ohio, Massachusetts) and centralized models (Pennsylvania, Missouri). In the hub model one agency is a distance education provider for all of the agencies in a region. If an agency has students that want to study at a distance the agency does the intake and orientation but then passes the student to a distance instructor at the hub. The centralized model is the same as the hub, except that a single agency provides all of the distance instruction for an entire state. Regardless of the model, the focus in the mid

2000s was on providing distance instruction as an alternative to classroom instruction.

In 2009 Texas was wrestling with ways to increase the amount of time that adult students were studying. Average hours in classroom programs were too little for students to learn the skills needed to improve their performance on tests of basic skills. Texas saw an opportunity to increase intensity using a "hybrid" of classroom and distance modalities. They enrolled students in two classes – one face-to-face and one distance – that had a similar goal – for example preparation for the GED. In three years of experimentation Texas has shown that students with combined enrollments accumulate more contact

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hours and perform better on standardized tests than either pure classroom students or pure distance learners. The success of the Texas experiment has led a number of states to follow suit. Some of the states are beginning to examine the requirement that these be two separate courses, wondering if the classroom and distance activities couldn't be part of the same course.

Around 2010 the target for ABE/ASE instruction expanded from simply helping students attain a GED to providing students with the skills to make a successful transition to postsecondary education or to the workforce. Among these skills were more advanced mathematical reasoning, more complex

forms of writing, and computer and online skills associated with finding information and performing online transactions—applying for a job, registering for a college class. At the same time ideas of the "flipped classroom" attracted the attention of adult educators. This is the idea that students learn basic concepts outside of class using online curricula, videos or other resources and use face-to-face time to practice applying the skills in ways that online curriculum cannot do. Arizona just completed an experiment called TETT (Transforming Education through Technology) in which students who had been spending six hours in the classroom, reduced their classroom time to two hours. Four hours a week they studied at home using PLATO to master basic skills. The two hours in the classroom was spent learning core academic skills such as how to search for and evaluate information online. This Fall Arizona is implementing the flipped classroom concept in all of its adult education programs.

These three ideas – hubs and centralized delivery, hybrid learning, and flipped classrooms – were all explored separately at this year's Distance Education Workshop. In a review session on the last day of the workshop participants came to an interesting conclusion. Perhaps the preferred model of instruction for all ASE students should be a flipped classroom where a teacher provides classroom instruction focused on college and career transition skills, but also supports the students as they work on their basic skills at a distance. Since distance teaching is thought to require a special set of skills not familiar to classroom teachers, all classroom teachers would need additional training in the special skills of supporting learners at a distance.

A move to this flipped model would reduce the reliance on hub and centralized teachers to provide distance education, since a distance component would be part of every classroom course. That said, there will always be some need for teachers to support students studying entirely at a distance. But most states such have large sections of their states where learners live too far from a classroom program to attend regularly, even if for just a few hours per week. Pure distance education is their only hope for reaching their educational goals.

DE Enrollment and Level Gains Up in 2013

In the 11 Project IDEAL states attending the workshop enrollment in distance classes was up from 2012. Texas was tops with 5,716 adults enrolled in

distance courses (1% of all adult ABE students, and an increase of 18% over last year), followed by Missouri with 2,386 enrolled (7% of the total ABE, and an increase of 14%). The remaining states had 200-400 students enrolled in distance classes. For the 11 states taken together, the numbers enrolled in distance classes averaged 3% of all ABE students in the state. Distance is clearly providing increased access for adult students in these states.

Level gains were up this year. In four of the states gains for students who had both pre- and posttests ranged from 75% - 85% – as high or higher than the average for classroom students. Gains in another four states ranged from 51%-57%. Participants searched for best practices to increase level gains for distance students. Several states with high gains attributed their success to frequent monitoring of program performance, implementing a managed enrollment system, increasing the number taking posttests, and – in one case – switching to a performance-based funding model. All of these possibilities are worth looking into more as we seek to find best practices in DE.

Innovations in the States

Arizona is pushing a "hybrid/flipped model" in all its education sites for ABE/ASE students. This is where students work on learning basic skills at home using PLATO. They come to class to apply those skills and learn from the teacher other skills needed to make the transition to postsecondary or the workplace. Arizona has developed a detailed two-year PD plan to ensure that all teachers and administrators understand how to use the state's recommended curriculum, PLATO.

Illinois has its own online learning platform, *i-Pathways*, used throughout the state for both in-school and distance education with adult learners. They noticed a big jump in usage in schools as teachers recognized the importance of computer skills to be successful on GED2014. The state is getting ready to release another online curriculum—Career & Academic Readiness System (CARS). It is a free online educational system designed to help adults needing more than GED prep. It provides many of the developmental courses that adults need to qualify for entry into postsecondary.

For several years **Massachusetts** has been experimenting with centralized delivery of distance education for both ABE and ESOL. While they allow some agencies to offer DE to their own

Curriculum Innovations

We had two reports on curriculum innovations designed to increase students' technology skills and independent study skills to better prepare them for college and career transition. Arizona just completed an 18-month experiment called *Transforming Education Through Technology (TETT)* involving several hundred students. This experiment tested out the "flipped classroom" model. All the students had been coming to class six hours a week to prepare for taking their GED or to learn English. In TETT students did their GED prep work or their ESL work at home using PLATO or USA Learns for at least four hours per week. They came to class 2-3 hours per week and the time was spent working on independent study skills such as how to do online searches. Students were given a laptop computer to use during their time in the program.

Several years ago Minnesota created an online computer literacy curriculum called the *Minnesota Northstar Digital Literacy Project*. Students can learn basic digital literacy skills and obtain a certificate attesting to their achievement. Minnesota ABE is starting an experiment with the state's Reemployment Assistance office to use this resource to help their clients acquire the required computer skills. Results will be available in Spring 2014.

New Tests in 2014

Most of the states at the workshop expect to utilize the new GED test beginning in January 2014. But three states are committed to reexamining this decision during 2014. Massachusetts is undecided about the test they will use and Missouri is switching to the HiSET.

Curriculum Changes to Prepare Students for the New Tests and Standards

The major publishers of GED prep curricula were asked to indicate their plans for updating their curricula to reflect changes in the GED. Most of them announced plans to either update existing curricula but keep the same name or come out with a completely new curriculum. A few notables: GED Academy will become Essential Skills; GED Connection (KET) will give way to Fast Forward; and GED Online (McGraw-Hill) will become Common Core Achieve. Aztec, iPathways, PLATO, and SkillsTutor are simply modifying their existing curricula to incorporate materials for the new GED, TASC, and HiSET and respond to calls for a new common core.



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