
*Improving Distance Education for Adult Learners*

*Handbook of*

# Distance Education

## *for Adult Learners*

Third Edition • September, 2004

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**Project IDEAL Support Center • Institute for Social Research • University of Michigan**

## Acknowledgements

Many of the insights in the first edition of this Handbook were derived from working with teachers and administrators in Pennsylvania as they experimented with teaching *Workplace Essential Skills* (WES) at a distance. The second edition incorporates insights gained from teachers in 13 Project IDEAL states using curricula such as *Crossroads Café*, *GED Connection, PLATO, SkillsTutor*, and WES during the 2002–2003 school year. The current edition extends that knowledge to reflect new insights provided by these teachers and by teachers in new member states. We thank these teachers and administrators for sharing their wisdom with us. We also want to thank state staff members who talked with us as we prepared other Project IDEAL reports and those who attended the Project IDEAL Workshop in August 2004 for their insights into distance learning in their states. Their experience and knowledge provided valuable guidance in revising this Handbook.

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# Introduction

States are continually exploring ways to expand the educational services they offer to reach a greater proportion of adult learners in need of services. Distance education affords adult educators the opportunity to both extend their educational offerings and attract new populations. But what is distance education? The terms distance education and distance learning have been in wide use for several decades, terms were coined at a time when the technological possibilities for distance instruction were more limited. Distance education originally involved the traditional, paper-based correspondence course where students worked independently, submitted assignments via mail, and then waited for written feedback from a teacher. Over time, as new technologies emerged, distance educators developed new educational models. Early use of educational television included broadcasts of class lectures. Students could watch the lectures and then complete assignments for submission.

Today, distance education has expanded to include a variety of educational models and media. Newer curricula take advantage of these media in delivering a wide variety of instruction. It is these media that help to facilitate distance learning for the adult learner. Learners have the option of accessing educational materials in traditional print forms (e.g., workbooks), via television broadcasts or videotapes, or through online access. The World Wide Web in particular has made possible a host of new distribution and communication possibilities. These new uses of media bring new possibilities to learning at a distance, but they make delivery by educators and consumption by learners a more complicated process.

Project IDEAL takes a broad view of what comprises distance education, preferring the term "non-classroom based learning." By moving beyond the confines of the classroom, we expand the potential of adult educators to reach new learners and increase the array of educational options from which potential students may choose. From this perspective, it is possible to envision a continuum of distance learning options including:

- *Pure or Total Distance.* Students working primarily at a distance using video, print, and/or online materials.
- *Partial, Blended or Hybrid Distance.* Students primarily working independently but meeting on a regular basis with a teacher and/or others studying the same curriculum.
- *Classroom Supplement.* Students working regularly in a classroom program, but supplementing classroom activity with an additional course or program that provides additional instruction.

As can be seen from even this limited list, distance education is not a unitary construct. Distance concepts can—and should be—adapted to best meet the needs of the populations served by individual agencies and states. Our understanding of what constitutes distance learning for adult learners will continue to evolve as various ways of employing distance modalities are explored.

This Handbook is intended to help teachers and administrators design and deliver distance education programs for adult basic learners using a variety of instructional delivery models and curricula.

Distance education is an emerging field. As a result, the Handbook itself is a work in progress. It identifies key issues and offers guidance on what is currently known from the field. This is the third edition of this Handbook. Much of what was presented in the first edition was drawn from two years of experimentation teaching *Workplace Essential Skills* (WES) to adult learners at a distance in Pennsylvania. The second edition augmented that knowledge with the experience of teachers in 13 new Project IDEAL states where experimentation was underway with such curricula as *Crossroads Café*, *GED Connection* (GEDC), *PLATO, SkillsTutor,* and WES. The present edition builds on insights and knowledge from new and veteran states. In earlier versions of this Handbook, we likened this text to an early map of the United States with only the outlines of the states and a few key features in each state. As the early maps changed to reflect explorers' new discoveries, so too has this Handbook. We have learned much over the last three years and hope this latest version of our "map" helps teachers and administrators in their distance teaching efforts.

The Handbook is organized into five topics:

- **Recruiting students:** identifying and recruiting appropriate students
- **Developing orientation programs:** designing an orientation that provides the teacher with information about students and students with the necessary information and skills for successful participation
- **Teaching at a distance:** providing instruction, understanding the changed teacher role, providing feedback on students' work, and motivating and supporting students at a distance
- **Assessing participation and performance:** understanding the different purposes assessment serves and exploring ways to gauge learner progress
- **Administering distance learning programs:** examining issues faced by administrators in implementing and sustaining distance learning programs as part of their agency's educational offerings

Each of the first four chapters begins with an overview of the subject followed by implementation recommendations and activities designed to help teachers and administrators plan their programs. These chapters serve as a companion piece to the Project IDEAL online course, Distance Learning 101: Recruiting and Teaching Adult Learners at a Distance (DL101). The activities in each chapter are available electronically through the course. Chapter 5 discusses pragmatic administrative issues.

The Handbook is based upon the premise that distance learning is so different from classroom teaching that it amounts to "re-inventing the school." Thus, readers will be challenged to think about adapting or modifying their classroom teaching approaches in ways that are appropriate and effective for distance learning students. The ultimate goal of this text is to help guide teachers and administrators in their efforts to adopt and adapt distance learning strategies that best meet the needs of their students.

The third edition has several new features:

- Additional ideas about recruitment, orientation and teaching based upon the experiences of teachers in Project IDEAL states.
- Expanded information on teaching with different instructional programs.
- Information on successful distance teachers and supporting distance teachers.
- Additional appendices including a moderator's guide for conference calls and an updated list of useful websites for distance teachers.

This Handbook was designed to provide you with an understanding of the key elements involved in implementing and maintaining a distance education program for adult learners. We hope you come away from it with an appreciation for how distance learning might serve your students and how you might develop a program to meet those needs. While the field is relatively new, the experience of the Project IDEAL states in experimenting with distance education suggests that this approach may indeed increase options for adult learners and remove some of the barriers that may have prevented adults from entering classroom programs. That same experience, however, indicates that implementing successful distance learning programs presents many challenges; this Handbook was designed to guide you through them.

Distance education provides an additional service that can be offered to students in your agency and state. Clearly, however, it is *not* the right option for every adult learner, teacher, or agency. The issues laid out in this Handbook can help you determine if distance is an option you want to offer. If you choose to provide distance courses for your students, recognize and plan for the challenges involved in undertaking this new venture. Bear in mind that implementing an effective distance learning program and developing the skills to become an effective distance education teacher are endeavors that require time and hard work. One state director involved in Project IDEAL put it best when she cautioned against wanting "instant gratification," and instead urged those new

to distance education to realize that they need to nurture the fledgling efforts and allow time for growth.

That said, if you feel that distance education is something of interest, we welcome you to join us in this exploration. More than that, we encourage you to become a champion for distance learning. Perhaps the most significant insight we have learned from the state experiments is that it is the *people* who make the difference. We hear many stories about the one teacher, program administrator, trainer or state director whose excitement and passion for providing new ways to serve students inspired others to get involved, to get "out of the box" and explore, to innovate and excel. We invite you to continue in that tradition and create new paths for others to follow and explore with you.

# Chapter 1: Recruitment

This chapter guides teachers through a process of determining *who* to recruit and *how* to reach them. Some key questions to consider in planning for recruitment include:

- What audience does the agency hope to serve?
- What instructional content will be delivered?
- What skills are required for students to be successful with this distance course?
- What recruitment strategies are most likely to reach the target audience?

Agencies adding distance education to the menu of existing educational programs need to consider what specific role distance will play. Will distance courses offer new areas of instruction or teach content parallel to classroom-based programs? Will distance courses be aimed at students already being served by the agency or will the agency attempt to reach new audiences? These decisions should be made in the context of the agency's goals and missions, based on perceived needs of the agency's clientele, and prior to the start of the recruitment process.

Each program must determine how distance education will fit the needs of its target audience. For example, an agency whose primary educational mission is to prepare students to take the GED might select distance education options for the GED because it knows that many adults in the community who need a GED work on job shifts that prevent them from attending classroom programs. Thus, the first step in thinking about recruitment involves developing an understanding the needs of the target audience.

The next step involves selecting instructional materials for use in the distance program. Many educational products are available that have been or are being adapted for use in distance settings.[1] Agencies need to explore these curricula, examining content, delivery systems, and viability as independent learning tools for their students. In choosing curricula, agencies should decide whether they want a product that is tailored to a particular group of students (e.g., GED students) or one that serves a variety of learners with different educational needs. Some curricula target a particular audience. For example, WES is designed to teach students how to obtain and retain employment. All instruction focuses on work-related skills learners need to succeed on the job. An agency planning to serve displaced workers, adults in welfare-to-work programs or entry-level employees seeking to upgrade their skills might choose this curriculum. A computer-

[1] A description of some of the curriculum options available can be found in "Online Distance Products for Adult Education" in Askov, Johnston, Petty, and Young, 2003, pp. 81-96.

assisted instructional (CAI) curriculum like *PLATO,* on the other hand, offers lessons for students functioning at different educational levels with different instructional needs. A CAI, skills-based curricula like this might be suitable for an agency planning to serve whatever students self-select into its distance program. Performing a needs assessment that includes identifying the target audience and determining potential distance students' educational requirements followed by an examination of the curricular products that might best meet those needs will ensure distance learners are well served.

## What Skills Are Required for a Student to Be Successful?

It is important to understand the demands that the selected curriculum places upon students. In designing instructional content, curriculum developers must make assumptions about the skills, abilities, and knowledge that learners need to be successful with their materials. Without the foundational skills and abilities associated with a certain curriculum, students are unlikely to benefit from the instruction provided in that curriculum. For example, a student reading at the fifth-grade level would likely not succeed in GED-level science. While this mismatch is an obvious one, it highlights the importance of ensuring a good match between students' educational abilities and the curricula they are assigned to study. This match is even more important in distance education in that distance students typically receive less direct social or academic support than their classroom-based counterparts.

What characteristics improve an individual's chances of success as a distance student? Successful distance students are likely to be self-motivated, are able to work independently, and possess strong study and organizational skills. Some programs have suggested that the skills needed to succeed vary depending upon the model of distance education used. Students with higher academic skills, such as those studying for their GED test, may be comfortable with a pure distance approach. However, lower-level students, or those who need more support, may fare better in a blended program that combines distance education with some face-to-face interaction. In addition, studying at a distance often requires that the student have access to various forms of technology (e.g., VCR, computer, etc.). Thus, in dealing with distance learning programs there are at least three categories of skills and access that must be addressed: course-specific requirements (discussed above), materials and technology issues, and learner characteristics.

### *Materials and technology access*

In a classroom setting, educational materials and technology are generally made available to the students. Agencies possess technology (e.g., computer labs, televisions, VCRs) that is available for teacher and student use. Agencies are also likely to employ someone who is knowledgeable in those technologies and so can help teachers and students

**The Voice of Experience**

*In a classroom program, there are pre-requisite skills necessary to be placed in a traditional class setting. For WES, an adult learner must be computer literate, or willing to learn. In addition, a computer with Internet access is required. An adult learner must therefore have the ability or resources to 1) become computer literate, 2) access a computer with Internet. Consequently, we cannot recruit low-level adult learners or those who have serious computer access problems.*

--A Pennsylvania Distance Teacher

best utilize that technology. Distance students may not have access to the same breadth of technology and support. While most are likely to have easy access to a television and VCR, computer access is less likely. Agencies must problem-solve ways to provide students with access to all of the materials and technologies they will need to get the most from their distance studies.

Some agencies have solved technology and distribution problems by arranging with local libraries to allow computer usage and to serve as distribution/pickup points for videotapes and workbooks. Other agencies have negotiated the use of middle or high school computer labs in the evenings and computer labs at One-Stops as a way for their students to have free computer access.

### *Learner characteristics*

One of the major differences between traditional classroom instruction and distance education is the amount of face-to-face contact students have with their teacher and other students. Learning is a social process, and the support of teachers and classmates can be an important element of the learning that occurs. Most distance learning teachers may meet with their students only once or twice over an entire course, with the remainder of the communication occurring by phone, mail, email or through online learning communities. Most distance students have little or no face-to-face contact with other students taking the same course. This means distance students need to possess the kinds of characteristics (e.g., independence, self-motivation, organization and study skills, etc.) that enable them to succeed without the extra support a classroom environment typically provides. There are many ways to assess these characteristics, ranging from questionnaires (e.g., "Is Online Learning for Me?" in the Appendix) to informal interviews with potential students.

### *Students who find a distance education program on their own*

Some programs may find that they do not need to actively recruit students, but rather that students find their distance learning programs online (as is the case for students who go to the LiteracyLink website for GEDC and WES and request a teacher) or through a statewide system (such as Kentucky's Virtual Adult Education, GED Illinois or Missouri GED Online). These students are clearly interested and have at least sufficient mastery of the technology to indicate that interest. But there are other issues that need to be addressed with these students, including effective ways to pre-test, orient and track progress. Some agencies (or states) may require that students who "find" them come in for a face-to-face intake, an orientation process, or a formal assessment, while others may find ways to handle these matters at a distance. Regardless of how these matters are handled, teacher needs to determine if distance education is an appropriate match for each potential student's educational goals and abilities.

## Analyzing Your Distance Curriculum

Throughout the Handbook you will find exercises designed to help you prepare for your own distance program. Activity 1.1 asks you to think about what students will need to be successful in your distance education program. The Employment strand of WES is used as an example. Use the chart to fill in details for the distance course you will be teaching. In Column A, list course-specific requirements, in Column B describe the material and technology access issues for your program, and in Column C identify the characteristics students need to possess to be successful. The more specific you are in detailing what you think the student will need, the more focused you can be in your recruitment. (If you are taking the online course that accompanies the Handbook, the activity charts for all activities in the Handbook are available as templates on the course website.)

### Activity 1.1: What's Needed for Students to Be Successful?

**Course Title/Program**: Workplace Essential Skills Employment strand

| ***Column A*** **Course-Specific Requirements** | ***Column B*** **Materials & Tech Access** | ***Column C*** **Learner Characteristics** |
|---|---|---|
| ***Example:***<br>-Reading at the 7th grade level or higher<br>-Basic computer skills (typing, using mouse, scrolling through text, etc.)<br>-Able to use computer to access Internet | ***Example:***<br>-Access to TV and VCR to play videotapes<br>-Need to arrange to pick up & return videotapes on regular basis (need transportation to central location)<br>-Access to computer (does not need to be at home) with Internet capabilities | ***Example:***<br>-Able to work independently<br>-Able to deal with minor computer glitches with some support<br>-Able to organize time<br>-Self-motivated and a self-starter; does not need to be directed each step of the way<br>-Reliable/responsible: will return borrowed videotapes |

**Course Title/Program**: _____

| ***Column A*** **Course-Specific Requirements** | ***Column B*** **Materials & Tech Access** | ***Column C*** **Learner Characteristics** |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

## Narrowing the Target

Obviously, not all students are suited for all programs; in distance learning, one size definitely *does not* fit all. The information generated through Activity 1.1 should help teachers and administrators think in more depth about which students belong in their agency's distance program. Once again, the more specific an agency's description is of its desired distance population, the more useful it will be. While a general statement such as "Our target audience is any adult who needs additional job skills" is inclusive, open and inviting, it does little to help shape appropriate recruiting strategies. For example, an agency that determined it wanted to offer an employment skills program to its distance students might begin by recruiting employed individuals or individuals who are looking for a job. Some possible approaches to recruiting might be through career transition programs, working with local businesses or building ties with local unions. If the curriculum requires an online component, agencies might look to students who are taking basic computer skills classes: those students would be developing the skills needed to handle the computer component of the course and might be looking for a job to use these new skills.

Recruiting strategies for a distance program that uses videotapes to teach English language skills to non-native English speakers would look quite different. In this instance, students' employment status and computer abilities would be less important than the level of their English skills. Pairing with churches in immigrant communities and/or social service agencies handling new immigrants might help agencies locate their target audience for distance study. By taking into account the content of the course and the skills students will need, it is possible to focus recruitment efforts on populations that are more likely to succeed in a particular program.

## Recruitment Strategies

Recruiting students for classroom-based adult education programs can be challenging; distance programs are no different. While some potential students are attracted by the flexibility that distance learning offers, others are hesitant to try something different. Some things to keep in mind:

- Expect recruiting to be difficult, particularly until the distance program is established.
- Use multiple recruiting strategies to increase the likelihood of success.
- Recruit from non-traditional adult education sources as well as from established adult education programs and agencies to reach a wider audience. Traditional adult education programs typically reach only a small portion of adults who need educational services.
- Form partnerships with other agencies, local businesses and local unions whenever possible. Work with these agencies to discover the mutual benefits of collaborating. These partnerships will take

time to build and nurture, but have the potential to greatly increase the number of potential distance recruits.

- Be creative: think of novel ways to advertise and market the distance program. Develop eye-catching flyers, posters and other materials to spread the word about. Make certain the agency's message is advertised where the target population will see it.

It may be helpful to look at recruiting strategies from two different perspectives: (1) identifying organizations and agencies with which to form partnerships, and, (2) promoting a distance program directly to potential students.

### *Working with other agencies, organizations, and businesses*

One goal for distance learning programs is to reach students who might not enroll in existing classroom-based programs. Yet how can an agency reach these students? One possible way is to work with other community agencies, organizations or businesses. This requires that the distance agency take the initiative to build connections with groups that are outside of the traditional adult education community. This process takes time and effort, but it is likely to provide access to a group of adults the agency might not otherwise reach.

**The Voice of Experience**

*My reply to this question* (In your community, where do you think you might find the type of learner who could study in a distance setting?) *keeps changing and redeveloping as I continue to work with distance learners. I had thought the really rural area students would be the distance learners to identify, but I am finding out that our economy (students, unemployed or selective employers) has a lot to do with a learner's determination to work on his or her own as a distance learner.*

--An Idaho Distance Education Teacher

When approaching another agency, it is helpful to encourage the other agency to see that the relationship has benefits for both sides. Working with another agency allows access to a larger pool of potential students and allows the other agency to offer their clients an additional service. The initial arrangements to work with another agency need to be made with someone who can authorize the relationship. Once the agreement to work together has been reached, it is often most effective to deal directly with people who interact on a first-hand basis with the people who might become distance learners.

Building partnerships with local businesses is another effective technique. Businesses should be encouraged to see this as a "win-win" situation where the agency gains new students and the employer gains better-skilled employees. Working in conjunction with local workforce development agencies can help educate both the employers and the employees about the value of a skilled and educated workforce. A key to success in this arena is being able to match the distance program to the needs of a partner business. For example, if the company has many immigrants for whom English is a second language, they may find a distance program offering English language instruction of more immediate value than one that prepares employees for the GED test. It pays to learn about the needs and concerns of the business and help them understand how a particular distance program fits those needs.

Partnerships with community organizations and/or churches may be a particularly effective way to reach ESL learners. Going into the immigrant community and working with organizations and groups that have earned their trust may help an agency connect with these learners. Unless an agency is fortunate enough to have what one experienced ESL teacher terms a "cultural informant," (someone working at an agency who is part of the community and who can provide guidance), it will be necessary first to learn about the community.

The range of businesses and agencies with which to explore relationships is limited only by the scope of the recruiter's imagination. Some places that have been explored by organizations running distance programs include:

- Local businesses, particularly those with large numbers of employees who either lack a high school diploma or for whom English is not a first language
- Housing authorities and housing projects
- Veterans' organizations
- Unions
- One-stop career and job training centers
- Head Start and Even Start programs
- Church organizations
- Social service agencies
- Homeless shelters
- Local libraries
- Senior citizens' centers

### *Working with a Local Business: A WES Partnership in Pennsylvania*

*One of the pilot sites in Pennsylvania built a partnership with a local business to meet the specific needs of that business. The business needed their employees to be able to produce grammatically correct communications. Although workers completed a 15-hour program on Effective Oral and Written Communications, the company felt there was still a need to address the workers' writing skills that could not be handled in the group context. WES at a distance provided a way to help learners build the needed written communication skills. The employees had access to computers through their workplace and all had basic computer skills. The company provided an incentive for workers to study WES at a distance: workers were paid $250 for each strand of WES they completed. Nine employees participated in the program; five of them completed three WES strands. One student even asked her WES teacher for a letter of recommendation to a university so she could continue her education!*

### *Using PLATO in Arkansas: A Partnership with a Workforce Development Program*

*The Arkansas Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy™ (WAGE) program is a statewide work-based education program. Adult education centers are partnered with community employers to teach basic educational needs to meet the community's workforce needs. Participants earn a certificate upon completion of one of the WAGE programs. In a pilot distance education program, an agency offered learners the opportunity to earn a WAGE Employability Certificate by studying PLATO at a distance. Students attended a face-to-face orientation and completed pre- and post testing on site. Students completed the assigned PLATO modules at home or at another location where they had access to a computer. Of the 15 students enrolled, 12 students completed more than the 12 hours needed to be considered enrolled; the average seat time for students was 57 hours of study. Seven of the students received their Employability certificates. New students have been enrolled in the program and it is continuing to operate.*

### *ESL at a Distance: A Library Partnership Using Crossroads Café in North Carolina*

*North Carolina was actively striving to meet the demands for ESL services. A community college with a large ESL program established a partnership with two local libraries in an effort to extend the number of ESL students they could serve. These libraries offer English instruction via Crossroads Café. Students register for the program, attend an orientation on site and are pre-tested using a standardized test. Then they check out individual packets containing a chapter and the corresponding Crossroads Café video for study at home. Students are encouraged, but not required, to return to the library for scheduled tutorial sessions during which they can interact with other students, practice their speaking skills and get direct instruction from the teacher. Students are post-tested and awarded a certificate of completion after they have studied thirteen episodes. The combination of individual study and group interaction provides both flexibility and the opportunity for students to build a support system for their learning.*

## Identifying Your Audience

Activity 1.2 asks you to think about the target audience for your program and how you might be able to recruit them. In Column A, identify at least three possible audiences for this program in your area. Keep in mind the course content and the demands the course will place upon the students. In Column B, list at least two ways you might be able to reach each of the populations you listed in Column A. An example is shown below.

**Activity 1.2 Example: Identifying and Recruiting a Target Audience**

**Course Title/Program**: Workplace Essential Skills Employment Strand

| ***Column A*** **Possible Audiences** | ***Column B*** ***Possible Ways to Recruit Each Audience*** |
|---|---|
| Displaced workers | 1. Agencies provide counseling for displaced workers.<br>2. Work with local plant's human resources director to provide information to all laid-off workers. |
| Welfare-to-work clients | 1. Provide information to clients at their training sessions.<br>2. Get information to clients through their caseworkers. |
| Students taking basic computer skills classes | 1. Computer training classes held at our agency.<br>2. Basic computer classes taught by community education. |
| Union members in unskilled or semi-skilled positions | 1. Local autoworker's union.<br>2. Hotel worker's union at large downtown hotel. |
| Women re-entering the workforce after long absences | 1. Mothers of children attending the local middle school.<br>2. Women coming into our agency for career counseling. |

**Activity 1.2: Identifying and Recruiting a Target Audience**

**Course Title/Program**: _____

| ***Column A*** **Possible Audiences** | ***Column B*** ***Possible Ways to Recruit Each Audience*** |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |

### *Recruiting within an agency*

Many agencies view distance education as a way to reach learners they do not currently serve, thus necessitating new recruiting approaches. But some agencies present their distance education program as one of the options available to all learners needing services and integrate recruitment for distance education into their agency's enrollment/intake process. In this approach to recruitment, the entire agency supports the distance education classes so they are accepted as a part of the educational program rather than seen as competition for students.

Some agencies find that distance learning provides a way to keep classroom students involved in their education if their life circumstances change. For example, students in an isolated mountain area may have difficulty getting to class when snows close the roads; distance learning provides a way for them to continue their education until the weather conditions allow for a return to regular classes. Similarly, a mother with young children may need to drop out of classes because of a lack of child care, but could continue to study at home via a distance education program. Thus, recruiting within an agency is not likely to "steal" students from other programs. Instead, distance provides an additional option to keep students engaged. To succeed, this approach requires that intake and counseling staff be knowledgeable about the distance education offerings in order to effectively guide students into the appropriate courses.

Distance education may provide a way to re-engage students who have dropped out of traditional classes. In cases where people have had to leave classroom programs due to logistical issues (e.g., work schedule changes, child care demands), distance education may provide an alternative means for them to continue their education. Still other agencies have presented distance education as an option to students on their waiting lists for classroom programs.

### *Advertising the program*

Distance learning programs can be promoted in many places, using many different media. The goal should be simple: to reach as many people in the target audience as possible and to provide the information in a way that interests and excites them. Again, the only limits are imagination and (unfortunately) budget. Organizations that have offered distance programs have used a variety of promotional approaches, including the following:

- Promotional flyers
- Mailers
- Ads in newspapers
- Local radio and television spots
- Information on the paper placemats used at fast food restaurants

**The Voice of Experience**

*We have sent out 225 letters to this year's students and students from last year who did not attain their GED. Posters have been sent to area libraries, license bureaus, military recruiting offices, post offices, and courts. Posters are being hung in local grocery stores. Ads are being run on cable TV. A news article has been written and released about (our agency's) Project IDEAL program. It has been sent to area papers including the weekly papers.*

--An Ohio Distance Teacher

- Posters in grocery stores, malls, churches, social service agencies, recreation centers, unemployment offices, schools, housing projects, homeless shelters, etc.
- Information in church newsletters
- Flyers sent home with children attending public elementary schools and Head Start programs
- Websites with information about agency offerings

Flyers, posters and other promotional materials should be attractively designed; where possible, color and graphics add visual appeal. The text needs to be simple and direct, without getting bogged down in too many details. Some agencies offering ESL programs provide materials in several languages in addition to English. Be certain that all promotional materials include the agency's name, phone number, email address and a contact person's name (if appropriate).

### *The Voice of Experience*

*In the past 18 months we have located segments of the local population that have previously been blocked from access to classes because of numerous barriers. Now that the inroads to reaching these learners have been created and continue to evolve, we would be abandoning these groups if distance education did not continue in some form. In such a rural setting as ours, many residents are very isolated, geographically and psychologically. Distance education can break through these barriers and begin to expand the learners' world so that they can become better equipped to overcome the factors that limit their opportunities in the world. We have established a continuously evolving network with other agencies that will enable us to reach a significant number of learners. The nature of the project has led to new collaborative endeavors with partners in the community that provide more comprehensive services to the client.*

--A Pennsylvania Distance Teacher

# Chapter 2: Orientation

As Project IDEAL teachers have discovered, orientation is a critical component of a distance program. Many distance educators assert that orientation is a key component of retention. A carefully planned orientation can address a wide range of issues and better prepare learners for a successful and positive experience. During the orientation, students are introduced to the curriculum materials and to the concept of working at a distance. In addition, orientation allows the teacher to determine if a particular program is a good match for students' interests and abilities and to determine if students have the requisite skills to succeed. Orientation can also be a time during which the teacher can help students set goals for participating in the program and clarify expectations for course participants. Study skills, strategies for working at a distance and computer skills (for programs with an online component) are other topics that can be addressed. Teachers can also use the orientation process to build rapport with their students. Finally, orientation provides a way for teachers to take care of "housekeeping" details, such as collecting contact information (e.g., a home telephone number or e-mail address). Whenever possible, face-to-face orientations are recommended. In fact, some states that initially allowed students access to online distance education programs directly have changed their approach and now require students to attend an orientation at a local adult education agency.

Some elements of orientation for distance learners are similar to what typically occurs in a classroom. Teachers and students are introduced, students learn how to use the curricular materials, and other course requirements are discussed. Orientation must also include establishing realistic expectations for distance study and provide students with a sense of how their distance learning experience will proceed. This is particularly important because, although students have an idea of what is likely to happen when they step into a classroom, they do not bring a similar history to distance education.

How long should an orientation be? This depends on what an individual agency determines it needs to include. Some agencies may decide their students will be prepared after a one-time orientation. Others may decide that students need a more comprehensive, multi-part orientation. A few agencies have created extensive orientation programs lasting 12 hours (at which point the students can be officially enrolled). Each agency should determine how to structure its orientation to best prepare students.

Agencies have offered both group and individual orientations for distance students. Group orientations are more efficient for the teacher and allow the student to meet others who will be working at a distance. This provides the opportunity to encourage students to develop social support systems for their independent work. On the other hand,

individual orientations may be more comfortable for students who select distance learning because they do not like the social aspects of classroom learning.

This chapter explores the following issues: how to set and monitor learner goals; methods for accessing and exchanging materials and technology; determining the content of product-specific and technology training; assessing student competencies; helping students develop independent planning, organization, and study skills; setting expectations for course participation; and, handling orientation at a distance.

## Identifying and Assessing Learner Goals

Orientation can be used to help learners identify their goals for participating in the distance education program. This information is not only useful to the student, but assists the teacher in meeting the student's needs. Understanding the student's goals is also helpful in determining if the distance program is a good fit for that particular student.

Most agencies already ask questions about goals as part of their intake process. This same process can be used at an orientation with prospective distance students. Distance educators should look carefully at ways in which they can use goal setting to help guide their instructional planning. This means going beyond information required by the NRS (e.g., obtain a job, earn a GED, improve literacy skills). These goals are a good starting point to guide students into the appropriate type of program (e.g., basic literacy, GED, workforce training). However, to use goal setting as a basis for instructional planning, the goals needs to be at a much more specific level—similar to what many educators call "objectives." This involves breaking up the larger goal (e.g., get a GED) into smaller steps that the student can accomplish in a realistic time frame (e.g., learn the algebra required on the GED test during the next semester). These more specific goals or objectives provide the teacher with direction in planning a distance education program to meet the students' needs. They can help the teacher select the appropriate materials for students and provide a yardstick against which to monitor students' progress. Additionally, it may be helpful for the teacher to periodically revisit the goals with students. This allows the teacher and students to assess progress, adjust the instructional plan if needed, and refine the goals to reflect the students' growth. Used in this way, goal setting is not simply something required by reporting forms, but a valuable component of students' educational plans. (See Project IDEAL Working Paper 3, *Using Assessment to Guide Instructional Planning for Distance Learners* for more about this topic.)

### *The Voice of Experience*

*We are planning to give the Locator and TABE Surveys to determine the strengths and weaknesses of our incoming students. There will be explanations and demonstrations on how to use the videotapes and work books. An explanation on receiving and returning the workbook modules will be given. We are planning to demonstrate how to get on the Internet, sign up for PBS LiteracyLink and navigate this web site. Then the students will be given the opportunity to do the same. This will enable the teacher to assess the students' ability to navigate the Internet. We will discuss goal setting and have the students determine their particular goals.*

--An Ohio Distance Education Teacher, discussing her agency's orientation plans for "GEDC at a Distance"

### Materials and Technology Access

New students need to know how to obtain materials (videotapes, workbooks, etc.) and how and where they can access a computer if the curriculum has an online component. It may be helpful to provide students with a "quick reference" sheet listing pertinent information (e.g., a list of places at which they can pick up and drop off videotapes, step-by-step instructions on accessing the online component of a curriculum, etc.) for later reference. Some agencies provide students with a business card that contains information on how to get in contact with their teacher and how they can obtain the course materials.

### Curriculum-Specific Training

A well-designed orientation provides the opportunity to train students in the skills they need to be successful. Clearly, students need to understand the program and how and when to use various components. For example, you may decide that you want the students to use the three WES components (online, video and workbook) in a specific fashion. You may want them to read the "Before You Watch" section prior to viewing the videotape, view the entire video and then return to the workbook for "After You Watch." This involves familiarizing students with the various parts of the workbook and teaching them the recommended sequence. If students are using *PLATO,* you may decide to train them to access their lessons on the computer, but decide that the rest is self-explanatory. ESL students working with Crossroads Café may need instruction in coordinating the videotape with the worktext, as well as understanding the multi-level character of the worktexts.

### Product Training Activity

Activity 2.1 asks you to examine the need for product-specific training. Identify the features of the curriculum for which students will need training (Column A) and explain how you will provide this training during your orientation session (Column B). You will have several features of your product for which training will help your students succeed.

Activity 2.1: Product-Specific Training Needs

| ***Column A***<br>**Features for which training is needed** | ***Column B***<br>**How training will be provided** |
|---|---|
| ***Example*** *(for Workplace Essential Skills): Navigating the WES website* | *Computers will be available for all orientations. We will walk student through the website at orientation, answering any question they have. We will also have handouts with step-by-step directions.* |
| ***Example****: (for Crossroads Café): Understanding how to use the multi-level work texts* | *We will explain the system to students and recommend the appropriate level for them to begin their studies. Students will work through a sample of the different levels during the orientation session.* |
| | |
| | |
| | |

## Assessment of Existing Competencies

It is important to determine if the student has the requisite skills (e.g., reading abilities, computer competencies) needed to participate in the distance program; orientation provides the teacher with an opportunity to do this. Examining the students' skills can be done with a formal assessment tool (e.g., TABE, CASAS, BEST) and/or by informal means (e.g., watching their computer skills as they register on the *GED Connection* website, observing the ease with which they read materials about the program, listening to their oral English skills as they talk to the teacher, etc.). For students to succeed in a distance program, they must have the academic skills needed to handle the work. Assessing students prior to instruction helps ensure

### *The Voice of Experience*

*Keep the on-site and one-on-one orientations to allow us to get to know the students and collect more information. Feedback and communication need to be stressed at the orientation. Even those skilled in computer use have problems. Orientations usually lasted from 20 minutes to one hour, but orientation length, focus and intensity need to be determined by a learner's background, experience with computers, computer access and lifestyle*

--The revised plans of a PA literacy center that taught "WES at a Distance" for 8 months

the program is a good fit for students' needs and abilities.

Most agencies already have a system in place for evaluating new students, and it may be possible to expand that to include distance students. Some agencies require a particular assessment tool. However, it is important to make sure that the assessment measure is appropriate for the content being studied. For example, using a TABE test of reading ability may not be useful for students entering a distance learning program aimed at improving their oral English skills; using a test specifically designed to assess English language proficiency such as the BEST would be more likely to yield useful information. The more closely assessments match the curricular content, the more useful the process will be. (For more information about assessment and adult education distance learners, see the Project IDEAL Working Paper 1, *Assessment and Accountability Issues in Distance Education for Adult Learners.)*

Consider the following issues in determining what type of initial student diagnostics to use at orientation:

- Does the agency require use of a particular assessment tool for all students, regardless of the program in which they are enrolled?
- Should a formal assessment tool be used? If yes:
  - What are the skills that need to be assessed?
  - What tool(s) will assess those skills? How well do they match the curricular content?
  - When should the assessment be administered?
  - Who should administer the assessment?
  - What criteria should be used to determine whether a student is a good candidate for the program?
  - What are next steps for students who do not meet the criteria?
    - Provide additional training prior to admitting student to course
    - Refer student to a more appropriate class
    - Allow the student to enter class, but provide additional support as needed
- Should students' skills be assessed on an informal basis? If yes:
  - What skills should be assessed?
  - What are the conditions or situation in which the student will be asked to demonstrate these skills?
  - What criteria should be used for determining if this student is a good candidate?

- What are next steps for students who don't meet the criteria?
    - Provide additional training prior to admitting student to course
    - Refer student to a more appropriate class
    - Allow the student to enter class but provide additional support as needed

## Skills Training

If a student does not have all of the requisite skills, additional training may be required before allowing the student to study at a distance. This is more likely to be a concern for programs with a computer component than for those that rely on workbooks and videos. Basic computer skills are a necessity for students studying online at a distance because conventions for print on the computer differ from conventions for print on the printed page. For example, while students know to turn the page of a book to find what comes next, they might not know that they need to scroll down on a Web page to see all of the information. Computer knowledge needed to study online includes such rudimentary skills as:

- Using the mouse to navigate on the screen and to click on appropriate items.
- Using a keyboard to enter text. While touch-typing is not essential, the student needs to have a level of comfort using the keyboard to enter responses and complete assignments.
- Being able to connect—and stay connected—to the Internet.
- Understanding how a Web page is set up, including using the back button.

Some sites have opted to observe students' computer use at an orientation as an informal assessment of their computer skills. One Project IDEAL teacher responds to students who express interest in her distance education program with an email containing an attachment that students must open, fill out and return to her. Students who can successfully do this usually have the needed computer skills to take her distance course. It may be helpful to develop a quick checklist to assess students' computer skills. An example is included in the Appendix.

One Project IDEAL state has designed its distance learning orientation to include an extended period of time for the student to explore the online curriculum. This allows the teacher and students an opportunity to determine if students have the requisite skills to use the online program. It also gives students a chance to decide if they are comfortable with this educational approach.

For students who need additional skills prior to beginning the distance education program, the agency may choose to provide training (for example, running a one- or two-session class on basic computer skills) or refer the student to an existing program (e.g., a regularly scheduled basic computer class). Teachers should be familiar with the

resources available at their agency designed to help the students build the necessary skills to participate in the distance education program.

## Independent Study: Planning, Organization and Study Skills

Distance learning requires that students be able to organize their time, work independently and have good study skills. Students who lack these skills are apt to flounder in a distance program. Unfortunately, there is no surefire way to determine whether students possess the necessary skills. Thus, the orientation should provide a component on independent study skills and time usage.

One way to get a rough idea of how well-suited a student is for distance learning is to use the 10-item questionnaire provided on the Kentucky Virtual High School website (www.kvhs.org, click on "Is online learning for me?" A printed copy of this questionnaire is included in the Appendix). This questionnaire asks students about their need for teacher support, ability to work independently, ability to organize their time, etc. Based upon the student's answers, the Web version provides a recommendation about how well suited the student appears to be to study at a distance. GED Illinois directs students to a similar quiz on the OASIS website (www.gedillinois.org/instruction/studentoasis/gateway.html) and Washington offers a self-assessment tool at www.waol.org/getStarted/IsOnline4Me.asp. Questionnaires of this type provide another method for determining the most appropriate educational plan for students. Concrete information about time usage, study skills and the ability to organize are a valuable component of orientation for distance learning students.

### *The Voice of Experience*

*We use an independent study skills and a computer skills survey to assess readiness for the distance learning environment; however, these surveys are not used as the sole means for assessment. During orientation, we get a good idea how a student will fare in the distance learning environment when we work on setting goals and study schedules. Because we use a variety of mixed media to accommodate our students, those who work in the online environment, for instance, will be assessed differently (as far as computer skills) than those who work from textbooks and videos. The most successful students have self-knowledge concerning learning preferences and the environment in which they learn best. Most often, successful students have supportive family and friends, and work environments, which is another area discussed. Of course, students also need to be assessed as far as reading levels, etc.*

--A Massachusetts Distance Education Teacher

## Setting Expectations for the Class

Orientation is the ideal time to set the expectations for the distance learning class, including what the student is expected to do and what the student should expect from the teacher. This is the time to spell out, in detail, course requirements, which may vary widely. For example, some agencies use distance learning classes as a less formal educational opportunity and choose not to impose many requirements, while others view the distance learning class as a structured (but non-classroom based) learning experience. Whatever the expectations, they need to be communicated to the students. The questions below are designed to guide teachers in setting expectations for students.

- Are there specific assignments, or is the student free to explore the material on his/her own? Are there due dates for turning in student work? Does this vary depending upon the medium being used (e.g., online vs. workbook)?
  - If students are working in workbooks, are they required to submit them to the teacher for review? How often? By mail, at a drop off point, or in person?
- What type of feedback will students receive on their work?
  - How does the teacher return work to students?
  - How quickly should students expect teacher feedback on their work?
  - What should students do if they have questions?
- Are students required to take progress tests? If so, how and where will this be done? Does the agency require both pre- and post-testing of students for accountability purposes? How will testing be handled?
- Will the student receive a certificate or any documentation of completion at the end of the course? What are the requirements in order to receive this recognition?
- How will the student and teacher communicate?
  - Email? Make certain that both the student and teacher have each other's email address. Make sure the student knows how to access an email system. If a learner does not have an email account, be ready with a current list of free email providers. (On the Web search for "free e-mail.")
  - Telephone? Specify the times the teacher is available for calls.
  - Drop-in office times? Identify when and where these will be held.
  - Virtual office hours? If teachers and students are comfortable with the technology, this could be a regularly scheduled time during which the teacher is available online for communication with an instant messenger program, such as those offered by AOL or Yahoo.

Some Project IDEAL programs are experimenting with having the student and teacher develop a contract that details the responsibilities and expectations for both. By spelling out the specifics and having the student sign the contract, they are hoping to both help keep the student focused and increase the likelihood of staying engaged in the distance

education program. Programs using this approach may find it necessary to re-negotiate the contract at various points in the distance learning process.

Another approach some programs use requires students to provide a nominal deposit for borrowing video and print materials; this fee is returned when the student returns the borrowed materials. (In some states it may not be legal to charge a fee, or request a deposit). Agencies currently using this approach note that students feel there is more value and therefore have made a greater commitment to a program that requires a modest financial investment on their part.

The more clearly expectations for all parties involved are presented before the start of the class, the more smoothly things will operate throughout the class period. Be as specific as possible.

## Orientation at a Distance

Most of this chapter has discussed orientation from the perspective of distance programs that conduct face-to-face orientations. However, some programs have no face-to-face contact with some, or all, of their students; the students either find them online, through a statewide referral service or through another referral source. These students may be unwilling or unable to come to a central location for a face-to-face orientation and may need an orientation conducted at a distance. Although it is possible to orient students at a distance, the experience in the Project IDEAL states argues against doing this for both logistical and pedagogical reasons.

Orientation at a distance should accomplish many of the same goals as a face-to-face orientation: the teacher should work with the student to set goals, detail the expectations for students taking the course, explain how the various elements of the course should be used and establish ways to communicate with the student. From a strictly logistical perspective, however, there are some elements of a face-to-face orientation that are more difficult to accomplish at a distance. It is more difficult to assess a student's skill level at a distance, although email and other written communications should allow the teacher to determine if the student has the requisite reading and writing skills for the course. It is also not possible at the present time to conduct formal assessments at a distance; thus, for those states that require a pre-test to count students, a totally distance orientation will not be an option. Some states have discussed making arrangements with local libraries to provide proctored assessments of students in locations closer to their homes. The need for formal assessments and the difficulty of conducting those assessments at a distance may lead some programs to include only "informal" students who are looking for educational enrichment, rather than for those seeking certification or a degree. It may also be more challenging to orient a student at a distance to the various components of the instructional program. One option might be for the teacher to email the student an explanation (possibly including screen shots) of how to navigate the online course; another option would be to have a telephone conversation with the student while the student is seated at a computer.

Even when the logistical issues can be resolved, many Project IDEAL states have found that there are strong pedagogical reasons to orient students in a face-to-face setting. States have suggested that face-to-face orientation is invaluable in establishing expectations for the class, getting a sense of the student's goals and abilities, and creating a positive learning environment. For example, while Missouri originally used on online version of the TABE test to determine a student's readiness to study at a distance, it has since moved to requiring students to attend an onsite orientation, which includes this testing. Missouri found that onsite testing and orientation lead to better communication between not only teachers and students but also between distance and onsite teachers, increasing the support available for the students. Face-to-face orientations are consistent with the growing preference for using a blended model of distance education to serve adult learners.

## Developing Your Own Orientation Plan

In Activity 2.2, you will design an orientation plan for your distance program. You will list the components you want to include and describe how you will implement them. Your plan should be geared toward the specific distance education curriculum you will be teaching. The goal of this activity is to have a plan you can put into action with your students, yet allow you to remain flexible enough to meet the needs of individual students.

## Activity 2.2: An Orientation Plan

| ***Component*** | ***How it will be implemented (leave blank if you will not include this component in your orientation)*** |
|---|---|
| Learner Goal Assessment | |
| Materials and technology access | |
| Baseline assessment of existing competencies and for assessing learning | |
| Product-specific training | |
| Skill training (e.g., computer use) | |
| Preparation for independent study | |
| Setting expectations for distance learning class (e.g., schedule for completing & submitting assignments) | |
| Specifying communication methods and contact information | |
| Other component (specify) | |

# Chapter 3: Teaching at a Distance

Teaching is at the heart of a distance learning course. Although most of the student's work will be at a distance rather than in a classroom setting, the teacher still needs to structure the learning experience, make assignments, provide feedback on student work and provide encouragement and motivation. But how do you do this at a distance? This chapter explores ways of accomplishing key teaching activities and tasks when teaching students in a non-classroom setting.

## Developing Learning Plans

In a classroom, teachers typically design a lesson plan for the entire group. While a few programs do have distance learners move through a curriculum as a cohort, most agencies offer distance learning as an individualized program. In this approach, students are likely to be working at their own pace and an individual learning plan may be needed. To a large degree, how teachers approach developing the plan is a function of how informal or structured the individual's distance learning program is. For informal programs where students work on what they choose at their own pace, a learning plan is less critical. In this situation, the teacher may simply guide the student through the materials in a fashion that best meets his or her individual needs rather than actively directing the student's work. When a distance education program is more formal and structured, the teacher needs to have thought out the objectives for the student and the steps a learner needs to take to meet those objectives. Issues to consider in developing learning plans for these students include:

- *Making use of the existing distance learning curricular materials.* Most distance learning curricula have extensive support materials for students that facilitate independent learning. These materials, together with teacher direction and support, form the basis for a learning plan.
- *Supplementing existing curricula materials with other materials*. Teachers may use the existing distance learning curricular materials as the foundation for the learning plans and supplement these materials with handouts, practice materials, additional readings and referrals to related websites. This may be useful in providing additional skills practice for students and expanding the lessons beyond what is covered in the curriculum. Some of the websites listed in the Appendix provide useful sources of supplemental materials to use with distance students.

- *Planning for individual students vs. planning for a group of students.* One of the strengths of distance learning is its individualized nature. However, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to generate a different learning plan for each individual student. One possibility is for the teacher to have a general outline of the content, activities and sequence they want students to follow, which they can vary as needed for individual students.

All of these require that the teacher have an intimate familiarity with the content and materials in the distance course.

In some of the distance learning curricula (e.g., *PLATO* and *SkillsTutor)* the teacher does not need to develop lesson plans, as the programs provide the primary instruction for students. For these teachers, the issue is one of monitoring students' progress to determine what additional instruction or materials (if any) are needed for the students to master the content. Teachers may also suggest additional or alternative units for the student to study.

## Providing Direct Instruction for Learners

Providing direct instruction is a particularly challenging task for distance teachers. In a classroom, the teacher is often the primary source of information for the student. In distance courses, the primary source of information is more apt to be the curricular materials. This requires a dramatic switch in how teachers view their roles. In many cases, the teacher's role is less of an "expert" presenting the information and more of a "guide" leading the student through the content available in the learning materials.

This does not mean that the teacher is not needed to present, clarify or expand on content. The teacher is critical in helping the student fully understand and apply the information in the distance learning products. In Pennsylvania and Ohio, teachers used several methods to present the content information covered in WES and GEDC to students, including:

- Supplementing the WES/GEDC content with referrals to other materials (this was particularly important for the math strand of these curricula, as teachers felt students needed more opportunities to practice the skills presented).
- Directing students to complete only specified portions of the online activities (particularly for GEDC).
- Referring students to related websites (for those working online).

### *The Voice of Experience*

*…You must provide many more visual/mental examples. An instructor can't just hold up an example or show a picture. You must provide these online or through print medium with accompanying text for explanation. Lessons must include, in writing, each step that you might normally do verbally in a regular classroom setting. But in doing so, instructors need to be careful not to bog down students with a lot of text-heavy material.*

--A Pennsylvania Distance Teacher

- Using regular mail, email, phone calls and occasional drop-in sessions to provide additional information and clarify areas of confusion for students.
- Including as much content as possible when providing feedback on the student's work.

North Carolina created a unique tool to help their teachers using *Crossroads Café* at a distance. In conjunction with INTELECOM (the producers of *Crossroads*), they developed "wrap-around segments" to precede and follow each video episode. These acted as a surrogate teacher, setting up the students to attend to the relevant information presented in the video and reviewing the material at the end of the video. (For more information, contact INTLECOM at www.intelecom.org.) In addition, students studying *Crossroads Café* at a distance in North Carolina had the option to attend regularly scheduled sessions to practice their language skills.

Teachers working with *PLATO* and *SkillsTutor* students are less likely to need to present content information. However, they may need to guide the students through the material, clarifying and extending information as needed. Regardless of the curriculum, it is not enough for students to have access to the distance learning material on their own. They need to interact with a teacher who can reinforce and expand on the content to maximize the potential for learning. Thus, although the teacher's role as the provider of content information may shift, it remains crucial to the learning process.

### *The Voice of Experience*

*Teaching at a distance will be challenging and can be an exciting experience for both the staff and learner. The trial and error experience will be in operation here. We can definitely use our knowledge of the traditional classroom learner as a guide, but without face-to-face contact it will leave a gap in the nonverbal clues the learner may be sending. The teacher will need to really sharpen listening and communication skills. The teacher may need to develop a list of questions to ask the learner when problems are suspected. I think the first step in avoiding potential problems in the areas of concern is to be very clear and precise as to what is to be expected (an orientation that is well developed and planned can help keep potential problems minimal), keeping the learner motivated (positive feedback and encouragement as much as possible), and frequent and quick response contact with the learner.*

--An Ohio Distance Education Teacher

## Assigning Work to Students

The way in which teachers assign work to students will also be influenced by how formal or informal the distance learning program is. In an informal program, a student may select those areas in which he or she wants to work, with the teacher providing feedback and support. In a more structured distance program, however, teachers are likely to make specific assignments to their students. As discussed earlier, these expectations for student work should be clearly defined during the orientation. Teachers will need to determine the appropriate time frame in which to expect students to complete work. They will need to instruct students on how to submit work for evaluation and when and via what mechanism(s) they will receive feedback. In addition, teachers must decide if they expect all students to complete the same assignments, in the same time frame, or if they are going to develop individual learning plans for each of their students.

The manner in which a teacher assigns work to a student will also vary depending upon which curriculum the student is studying. Teachers whose students are studying *PLATO* or *SkillsTutor* are not likely to need to assign work, as the program moves the students through a sequence of lessons. In contrast, students studying WES, GEDC or *Crossroads Café* will need the teacher's guidance to structure a coherent instructional plan using the available materials.

## Motivating and Encouraging Students

A critical issue for any adult education program is the ability to keep students involved. This is difficult in a traditional classroom setting, but becomes even more challenging when dealing with students working at a distance. Students rely on teacher feedback on their work and support from both the teacher and other students to help them succeed. In a classroom setting, this is usually accomplished as part of the ongoing face-to-face interaction between teacher and student and between student and student. How can this be accomplished when teaching at a distance? Is it possible to orchestrate online learning in a way that allows students to support each other?

Ironically, some of the difficulties in supporting and motivating students in distance education programs may stem from the same attributes of distance learning that are attractive to students. Distance education appeals to many students because it removes some of the barriers that impede their attending a traditional classroom program at a regularly scheduled time. They may lack transportation to the class, have erratic work schedules or problems with childcare that make attendance on a regular basis difficult, if not impossible. Distance education allows them to have a greater degree of control over the time and place in which they can further their education. However, it does so at a cost: it frequently removes many of the social supports that a classroom teacher and other students provide, while simultaneously requiring them to structure their time and work independently. Thus, teachers need to develop new ways to motivate and support their online students.

### *Teacher support strategies*

Experience in several Project IDEAL states provides some insight into this issue. Many teachers reported that it was more difficult to support and motivate their students in a distance program than in a traditional classroom program, largely due to less frequent contact with the students and their inability to read the student's non-verbal communications and body language. In addition, many teachers felt it was more difficult to build a personal rapport with a student they rarely, if ever, saw in person; they felt that this lack of a personal relationship made it more challenging for them to find the best ways to motivate and support students. Some teachers, however, noted that their successful distance learners were highly self-motivated and focused on meeting their goals. Teachers found many effective ways to support their students, including:

- Sending e-cards encouraging students and praising accomplishments

- Sending individual, rather than group emails to students, to make the messages more personal
- Emailing encouragement to students on a regular basis
- Sending emails that ask questions and prompt students to think about their goals
- Offering assistance to students in finding information or sites on the Internet that could help their studies
- Telephoning students to have a synchronous conversation and learn more about students' goals and concerns
- Establishing telephone "office hours" during which the teacher is available to take students' calls
- Telephoning students who had not been active for a period of time to encourage them to stay with the program
- Providing completion certificates for pre-determined units of work
- Offering drop-in times for students who wanted in-person assistance from a teacher
- Using praise and positive feedback on students' work
- Offering constructive criticism
- Helping students see how the content they are studying could be applied to situations they encounter in their daily lives
- Providing Instant Messaging (IM) "office hours" as an option for students who prefer to communicate that way
- Setting up a telephone "help line" where students call in and leave a message that a teacher responds to on a daily basis

Teachers in several states are interested in using incentives to encourage students to stick with a distance education program and/or come back for posttesting. Certificates, as mentioned above, are one incentive that appears to have appeal to both distance education students and employers working in partnership with adult education agencies to deliver distance education programs. In a more tangible vein, one business in Pennsylvania offered its employees cash incentives for each WES strand they completed; this program was quite successful. Agencies have suggested a variety of incentives, including bus passes, T-shirts, gift certificates and helping students prepare a professional resume.

### *Student-to-student support*

The methods listed above offer a variety of ways teachers can support students. But, student-to-student support is also an important aspect of learning for many adult students. Little is known at this time about the most effective ways to create systems to allow distance students to support one another. Possibilities include:

- Encouraging students to meet on a regular basis at a convenient location (e.g., coffee shop) in the community
- Establishing chat rooms online
- Establishing asynchronous communication online
- Encouraging students to study at a distance with a partner
- Conducting conference calls with small groups of students to allow them to interact with the teacher and each other
- Helping students create Instant Message "buddy lists" with other distance students
- Encouraging students to study with a family member or friend

Peer support may be particularly important for ESL students studying at a distance, as it can provide a way for them to practice the language skills they are learning. A hybrid model, combining distance study with group meetings may provide a strong framework for ESL students. The distance component allows them to work at their own pace and on their own schedule and taps into their motivation to learn English, while the group sessions provide the opportunity for instruction combined with conversation with other learners. One program in North Carolina found that when family members or friends studied together—even if their English proficiency varied—it was beneficial to all members of the group. The more advanced student benefited from being in the position of expert, while the lower-level student was able to build skills in a supportive and familiar context.

Given what is known about the social component of learning, the issue of student-to-student support for distance learning students is one that needs much more attention in the future. It is likely that different models of distance education and different curricula lend themselves to different ways of thinking about peer support.

## Providing Feedback on Student Work

Providing feedback on student work is one of the most important tasks for distance teachers. Commenting on and correcting the student's work not only provides the student with the relevant corrective feedback but also allows the teacher to build a relationship with the student. Methods of providing feedback to distance learning students may vary depending upon student preferences, the design of the distance learning curriculum, and which combination of media the curriculum uses to provide instruction (online, video, and/or workbook).

### *Courses with an online component*

Students taking online classes will receive most feedback from their teacher online. This may be through a system that is a part of the course (e.g., the online management systems offered by programs that contain an online component) or via a separate email account. While the built-in systems have the advantage of being an integral part of the distance curriculum, they often have limitations that prevent the teacher from offering the type of

feedback he or she would like to provide. For example, the online management system in WES allows a teacher to indicate if work has been *completed* (e.g., done to the teacher's satisfaction) or *attempted* (e.g., the student has done some work, but there is room for improvement), but does not provide a way for teachers to provide more detailed feedback. Many teachers in the Pennsylvania pilot study felt this was inadequate and created their own ways providing feedback. Some worked within the LiteracyLink online system and provided feedback by inserting their comments—in capital letters—within students' texts in their portfolio entry. Others moved outside of the online management system and sent separate emails in which they responded to students' work. It is often useful to set up separate email accounts (using one of the free email services) to provide an alternative way to interact with students.

**The Voice of Experience**

*I emailed encouragement, asked questions and prompted goal-setting and feedback. They emailed me their progress in workbooks or comments about the videos. I corrected the spelling and grammar of only those students who would not be threatened by critique of their work, and sent back to them highlighted or underlined portions of their essays or resumes through the other email systems. If they only had the WES [email] system, then I capitalized what needed to be corrected.*

--A Pennsylvania Distance Teacher

The timing of teacher feedback is important for students working online. Once they send their work, they expect rapid turnaround. Most teachers attempted to respond to students' work within 48 hours—at least to let the student know that they had received the work and would respond shortly. Receiving prompt responses to their online work seemed to help keep students motivated and working online. Teachers should specify during orientation how quickly they plan to respond to student work.

Because students do not have the ability to immediately question the teacher if they are confused by the feedback they receive, any online feedback on students' work needs to be concise, clear and easy to understand. Teacher comments should be precise and leave little room for interpretation. It is also helpful if the feedback is personalized to the individual student.

### *Courses with a workbook component*

The workbook is often the primary instructional tool for many students using multi-media programs. However, providing feedback on workbook assignments is challenging because of the difficulties involved in providing the teacher with access to the student's workbook. One of the attractions of distance education is that the student does not need transportation to attend class. Thus, finding ways for students to provide their completed workbook units to teachers presents many of the same logistical issues of transportation and accessibility. In addition, many students appear reluctant to give an entire workbook to their teacher; they may be concerned that this will leave them without something to study or they may feel a strong sense of ownership of the workbook. Whatever the reason, it is often difficult for distance teachers to have access to students' workbooks. This has been an area of frustration for teachers in Project IDEAL states. Again, clearly setting expectations during orientation for how often work will be turned in, where it will be turned in, and how it will be returned may alleviate some of these difficulties.

Without these expectations, it becomes very difficult for teachers to have access to completed student work. Some possible ways to accomplish this include:

- Establishing central drop-off points at which students can leave workbooks (or workbook pages) for teachers to review and where they can pick up their corrected workbooks. These can include adult education agencies, libraries, public schools, One-Stop Centers, etc.
- Cutting the bindings off of the workbooks, punching the pages with a 3-hole punch and placing them in a 3-ring binder. This will allow the student to continue working in the workbook and send completed pages to the teacher.
- Distributing the workbook in sections and requiring the student to return completed work to receive the next set of materials.
- Providing the student with stamped, self-addressed envelopes in which to return workbooks or workbook pages to the teacher.
- Scheduling on-site reviews or practice sessions to which students bring their workbooks for teacher feedback.

Providing feedback to students working at a distance in programs that do not have an online component is can be challenging. However, it can be done, as is evidenced by New York's well-established distance learning program in which students are supported via either mail or telephone. This program has clearly specified expectations for both students and teachers that are built into the state formulas for reimbursing agencies for distance teaching. For example, in the phone support model, students are expected to complete six hours of independent work per week, and teachers are expected to spend one-half hour on the phone with each student; the mail-support model has well-defined expectations for student work time, teacher contact time and the frequency with which materials are exchanged. Although other states do not have these state-mandated guidelines in place for distance learning, they may find that this approach of setting clear expectations and providing mechanisms for work to be reviewed is useful in working with students who are not studying online.

### *CAI programs*

CAI programs such as *MHC GED Online, SkillsTutor,* and *PLATO* provide their own feedback on performance to the student. This allows students to monitor their own progress, but makes it difficult for the teacher to assume an active role in supporting students in mastering the content. The teacher, however, is likely to have an important role in motivating and encouraging students. Some form of ongoing support using an independent communication system (email or phone) will probably be required to help learners stay focused on their goal. CAI programs can also provide teachers with statistics on usage and performance that can be included in the communication.

Some teachers working with CAI programs have seen a need to provide additional ways to support their students. A few have developed websites for their distance learning classes so that students studying these CAI programs have a chance to share ideas and interact with other students; one teacher has found that www.nicenet.org provides a useful free tool for creating virtual classrooms.

## Managing Your Teaching Tasks and Activities

Activity 3.1 asks you to think about how you will handle these teaching tasks when teaching at a distance. For each task, describe how you plan to do this with your distance students.

Activity 3.1: Teaching Tasks and Activities

| ***Teaching Task or Activity*** | ***How will you do this with your distance students?*** |
|---|---|
| Develop study plans | |
| Present content knowledge to students | |
| Assign work to students | |
| Motivate and encourage students | |
| Provide feedback on student work | |

## Online Communication with Students

Communicating with students online is different from communicating with them in a face-to-face situation. Neither teachers nor students have the advantages of eye contact, body language or tone of voice to help clarify what is said. As a result, it is imperative that online communications be clear, concise and not open to misinterpretation while being friendly and supportive. Teachers, therefore, need to develop their conversational writing, a skill that is distinct from the more formal writing most educators typically do. Conversational writing involves allowing your voice, personality and connection to the student to come across in your message. In the Appendix, Deb Walker—an experienced online teacher from North Carolina—provides a few useful tips.

## Program-Specific Strategies

There are common principles that are useful to any distance teacher. However, since each distance program is unique, each also makes certain demands upon the teacher. We are just beginning to have some insight into the specific teaching needs of the various products being used by Project IDEAL states. This section will provide some suggestions for using WES, GEDC, *Crossroads Café* and *SkillsTutor* based upon the experiences of the states that have used them at a distance. While this provides a starting point, Project IDEAL states are still actively investigating how to most effectively use these products at a distance. As a result, this section is aimed at helping teachers think about the issues specific to a product, but does not provide comprehensive guidance; more experience with the products is needed to provide that.

### *Workplace Essential Skills*

Pennsylvania has used WES at a distance in its distance learning experiments for the past few years. Massachusetts and New York have also used WES in some of their distance learning sites.

- Many students who study WES at a distance chose to study only selected components (or even chapters), rather than studying the complete curriculum. As a result, many students who study WES are less formal students: they may not want the structure of scheduled assignments. Teachers must therefore be able to help students identify the elements they will need to study to meet their goals.
- Some of the WES materials (particularly in mathematics) are designed to be a review and do not provide enough opportunity for the student to learn the concepts or skills if they have not done so previously. The teacher will need to provide supplemental materials (either in print or on other websites).
- The videotapes are designed to stimulate discussion rather than present the curricular content. The teacher will need to help the

student use the videos effectively. This may include presenting them with information or guidance before they view (including referring the student to the "Before You View" section of the workbook), questions to consider as they view and activities following viewing. The teacher may also find it helpful to ask questions (either online or over the phone) to determine if the student grasped the concepts presented in the videos.

- Because WES students do not all fit into one standard category (e.g., ABE, GED) it may be difficult classifying and testing them for accountability purposes. In addition, WES learners frequently do not study for a long enough period that they would be likely to show educational gains on a standardized assessment. States may want to consider alternative ways of classifying these learners, so that they can be counted as learners served by an agency, while not being required to show educational gains.

### *GED Connection*

Arkansas, Ohio, Missouri, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania used GEDC at a distance in 2003–2004.

- Students may not need to study all of the content areas available in GEDC. Teachers should direct students to the appropriate portions of GEDC to meet their needs.
- The online component of GEDC can be overwhelming to students and teachers alike. The teacher needs to be sufficiently familiar with this component of GEDC to help direct the students to the resources they need. This will require that the teacher spend some time exploring the site before sending students to it. The Learning Modules, in particular, are quite involved. Teachers may want to assign the Internet Activities first and add the Learning Modules later where appropriate for individual students.
- Teachers may need to provide supplemental materials to help students master content needed for the GED tests, especially in math.
- Students should be encouraged to use the practice tests available through GEDC. Students desiring more practice may find it helpful to visit other websites such as www.4tests.com, which offer free GED practice tests.
- Some teachers report that the videos do not meet student expectations, particularly if the student is expecting them to provide direct instruction. Teachers can explain to their students the role that the videos play in presenting basic skills in real life contexts and portraying adults working towards their GED. If teachers determine that the video is of value to their students, they

must guide the students in its effective use, and help the student integrate the information presented in the video with the information presented in the workbook and online.

### *Crossroads Café*

North Carolina has used *Crossroads Café* extensively at a distance for the past few years. Massachusetts has also used *Crossroads Café* in some of its distance learning sites.

- North Carolina provided a very structured format for students studying *Crossroads Café* at a distance. To help keep students focused, the spines were cut off the books and students were given one chapter at a time. Additional organizational materials, including student folders (to collect paperwork and store assessments) and student notebooks (created by using three-ring binders with the pocket cover and by inserting the original book cover that had been cut off the spine of the book as the front cover of the notebook) were created. The NC teachers suggest that these organizational efforts help the students approach the learning experience seriously.
- Students paid a materials deposit to borrow the workbook chapters and videos. This helped ensure that the materials would be returned and also indicated to the students that this was a serious endeavor.
- Language learning requires opportunities to converse. Thus, hybrid programs, in which distance study of the *Crossroads* materials was combined with group meetings or instruction, are likely to be the most effective. In addition, one program encouraged students to study with family members or friends allowing more opportunity for language practice as well as social support for learning.

### *SkillsTutor*

Rhode Island and Idaho used *SkillsTutor* in their distance learning projects in 2003–2004. Some of what these teachers learned in using this curriculum is likely to be applicable to other CAI curricula because such instructional products are designed for independent student use with little teacher intervention.

- With *SkillsTutor*, teachers primarily provide support, motivation and educational counseling rather than direct instruction. This requires that teachers have great familiarity with all modules so they can make appropriate recommendations to help students reach their goals.
- Because of the role that teachers assume when using *SkillsTutor*, orientation takes on added importance. Face-to-face orientations set the stage for creating a supportive learning environment and a

key piece to success for students. It is particularly helpful to teach the students strategies at orientation that they can use later when they use *SkillsTutor* on their own. For example, teachers can show students what to do when they don't know an answer. Rhode Island teachers recommend giving the prospective student at least an hour of practice with *SkillsTutor* at orientation to help them decide if they are comfortable with this educational approach.

- Mail or email follow-up with students within one week after orientation to address any concerns and help build rapport with the student.
- A key feature of distance learning in ABE is that the teacher must connect with students despite the distance. The teacher must be able to project her/his personality and empathy and knowledge about individual students must come through. Teachers may want to establish other ways, including class websites, to communicate with their students.
- *SkillsTutor* works better with students who are self-directed and self-motivated and who can work well independently. These factors should be assessed during orientation.

## Planning Your Support Strategies

Teachers taking Distance Learning 101 will be assigned a number of activities tailored to the curriculum they will be teaching. The activities are designed to help teachers develop support strategies that will work at a distance.

# Chapter 4: Assessment

Assessment is an important part of education. It can help a teacher determine an appropriate placement for a student before instruction begins, it can help a teacher gauge learner progress in the course of an instructional sequence, and it can help a teacher or program administrator gauge how well a program of instruction is working. This chapter explores these three types of assessment in a distance context.

## Assessment for Placement Purposes

Using assessment—either formal or informal—to determine if the distance education course is appropriate for potential students was discussed in the chapter on Orientation. If students are to have a strong likelihood of success as distance learners, it is crucial that they have the requisite skills to handle the course requirements. In addition, this preliminary assessment provides the teacher with a starting point for instructional planning.

## Assessment to Gauge Student Progress

Agencies need tailored systems in place to monitor distance students' progress. This is true for distance learning students as much as it is for students in classroom programs. The logistics of doing this at a distance, however, are more challenging to teachers. What is used as the basis for assessment? Can this be based solely on students' work in the course, or are more formal means of gauging progress (i.e., teacher evaluations, tests, quizzes, etc.) needed? These are decisions that will need to be made on a state-by-state basis, reflecting each state's requirements for adult education programs.

Assessing student work on a regular basis provides both the teacher and the student with a sense of the student's progress, indicates strengths and areas for improvement and helps the teacher plan appropriately to meet the student's needs. This type of assessment is valuable for students, as it provides a mechanism through which they can gauge their progress toward meeting goals. For distance teachers, it provides guidance for instructional planning. It is something classroom teachers do as part of their teaching approach and classroom students expect to occur. However, this is likely to be more difficult for the distance teacher than for the classroom teacher. Classroom teachers have a variety of methods they can use to provide formal and informal assessment of students' performance: homework and class assignments, discussions with students, the questions a student raises in class, students' body language, quizzes and tests, etc. A distance teacher may have only a subset of these options available. Thus, one of the key tasks for distance teachers is to develop ways of obtaining the information they need to conduct assessment of student progress on a regular basis.

Clearly, one way for teachers to assess student progress is to regularly review the work the student completes and provide feedback to the student on that work; this was discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. Another option would be using tests and quizzes to assess distance students; this may make distance assessment more parallel to classroom-based assessment. It may be possible to have students take pencil and paper quizzes at a designated location; if that is not possible, students might be able to take the quizzes at home and mail them back to their teachers. Another possibility would be to make online quizzes available for students who are studying online. Since the primary focus of these quizzes is to gain information to help the teacher in instructional planning, issues about secure testing sites, that are a concern for accountability purposes, are less relevant. Teachers must assume students are acting independently to complete assessments. They can also help students by explaining that they can best help students only when they know students' full capabilities. When a student receives help during an assessment, his/her true skills are not measured. Therefore, the teacher does not know how to address the skill needs instructionally.

The majority of curricula being used by Project IDEAL member states offer some form of tailored assessment (e.g., diagnostic instruments, unit quizzes or tests, etc.) designed to help teachers and students gauge student progress. Forms of testing as well as the instructional medium vary depending on the type of delivery system used by the product developer. For example, interactive instructional software programs (e.g., *MHC GED Online, PLATO, SkillsTutor,* etc.) include both diagnostic assessments and interim progress measures all of which are available online. The multimedia products GEDC and WES, offer paper-based "Skills Preview" and "Skills Review" in each workbook. GEDC also offers two tailored, online GED practice tests in each content area and work is underway to make the WES paper-based quizzes available online as well. While these product-tailored assessment measures are usually not accepted for accountability purposes, they can be valuable tools in monitoring student progress.

Maintaining portfolios of student work is another way for teachers to track and demonstrate growth. Students using the online components of WES and GEDC maintain an online portfolio of their work; teachers may want to supplement this with a portfolio of selected workbook assignments. Teachers using other curricula may want to consider having their students compile either paper or online portfolios as a way to track their progress and reflect on their growth.

Project IDEAL states have suggested several possibilities for ongoing or interim assessment of student progress, including:

- Performance-based products, such as a resume or performance in a mock interview (particularly for students studying WES)
- GED practice tests
- Passing individual sections of the GED exam
- Comparing the pre- and posttest scores generated by CAI programs
- "Mid-terms" sent to the student either via regular mail or email

- Requiring students to return to the agency either to have work reviewed or to take a quiz
- Online tests (either those associated with the curriculum or those created by the teacher or by a third party site)
- Phone consultations during which teachers can review student work and ask students questions to assess their understanding of concepts

## Measuring Learner Participation

One measure often used in classroom-based programs is that of "seat time," the amount of time a student spends in orientation, the classroom, the lab, etc. This figure determines when a learner becomes an official student (at 12 hours) and when assessment of educational functioning level should be administered (frequently at 40 or 50 hours).

Classroom students receive seat time credit simply for being present, regardless of what they learn while in class. Yet this approach to assigning time credits is not possible in a distance program, So, how should programs measure "seat time" for distance learners working independently? One possibility is to develop standards for a *minimum* amount of time a student would need to spend to complete a particular segment of a distance course. Any student who completed that segment (based on an examination of his/her work) would be credited with that number of hours, regardless of the actual time it took him or her to complete the work. For example, Project IDEAL worked with GEDC and WES classroom and distance teachers to estimate how long, on average, it should take a student to complete each of the components (workbook, video, online) in a given instructional unit. These times, while estimates, provide teachers and agencies with information upon which to determine whether students should be enrolled and when to recommend post-testing for accountability purposes.

### *The Voice of Experience*

*Tying in the students' online presence with the [Pennsylvania Department of Education] requirements of assessment and hours presents a challenge… The real challenge, if we are working with 'real' distance learners in a non-traditional manner, is not to create barriers that discourage those we are trying to reach.*

-- Administrator of a Pennsylvania literacy center that experimented with offering "WES at a Distance"

Another possibility is to assign "seat time" based upon meeting specific performance criteria. North Carolina uses this approach with their distance learning experiments. Students take a test after they complete each chapter of *Crossroads Café*; if they score 70% or higher, they are given a specified number of seat-time hours. This approach differs somewhat from the classroom concept of seat time, as it draws a direct connection between student performance and the time credit.

A third approach to assigning seat time is available only from CAI programs. These online programs track actual time on task while students work within the program. Unlike programs such as WES or GEDC, where a student could be logged into the system for hours and yet not be working on the online activities, the CAI programs have

pre-set inactivity log-out functions. Thus, if a student stops working for more than a certain number of minutes, the system logs out the student. This time-tracking feature ensures time data collected reflect student efforts.

## Identifying Your Assessment Strategies

Activity 4.1 asks you to think about how you will handle assessment for your distance students. First, you need to determine if your state and/or local program have an assessment policy or plan and describe what it is. That information should be used as a basis for completing the rest of the activity; in other words, your decisions must be in line with existing policies. For each item listed, decide if you will require this for your distance students. For each item you will require, describe your plans for implementing the assessment strategy.

Activity 4.1: Identifying Assessment Strategies

| Strategy | Will You Require? | Description of implementation plan |
|---|---|---|
| Require students to come to a central location to take a **pretest** prior to taking a distance learning class | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No | |
| Require students to come to a central location to take quizzes **or interim assessments** while taking a distance learning class | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No | |
| Require students to come to a central location to take a **posttest** in order to get credit for completing distance learning class | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No | |
| Teacher maintains a **portfolio** of each distance student's work to use in assessing progress | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No | |
| For programs with an **online** or CD component: require students to successfully complete a specified number of assignments to get class credit | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |
| For distance programs with a **workbook** component: require that students submit work to teacher on a regular basis | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |
| For programs with a **workbook** component: require that students successfully complete a specified number of workbook pages to get class credit | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |

| Strategy | Will You Require? | Description of implementation plan |
|---|---|---|
| For programs with a **video** component, require students to view a specified amount of the videos to get class credit | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |
| Estimate "**seat time**" using Project IDEAL template | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |
| For programs with a "built–in" evaluation component: require students to complete all **evaluation activities** | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |
| Require student to take teacher designed and administered **tests and quizzes** | ❑ Yes<br>❑ No<br>❑ Not relevant | |
| Other assessment activity (Specify) | | |
| Other assessment activity (Specify) | | |

# Chapter 5: Administrative Issues in Distance Learning

Experiments in Project IDEAL states have revealed a number of key issues related to the implementation of distance education programs for adult learners. These provide both new opportunities and new challenges for administrators at adult education agencies. In surveys, administrators report that, in general, the benefits of distance learning outweigh the drawbacks and challenges of implementation. This chapter discusses issues administrators should consider as they embark on adding a distance education component to their agency's continuum of services. These include:

- Distance learning as a pilot activity
- Creating an environment that encourages experimentation
- Choosing a model, curriculum and technology
- Planning for distance education
- New roles and responsibilities for teachers
- Successful distance teachers
- Supporting teachers
- Assessment of distance learners
- Data collection for experimental programs
- Distance learning as organizational change

## Distance Learning as a Pilot Activity

Project IDEAL encourages states to consider their first attempts at implementing distance learning programs for adult basic education students as a pilot activity. What is a pilot activity? Pilot activities are experimental in nature and allow an agency the opportunity to explore a new approach on a small scale. They leave room for trial and error and encourage people to move in new directions. Pilot activities are distinct from the more established programs offered by an agency; although if they succeed, they may become incorporated into the agency's regular course offerings. As noted earlier in this Handbook, teaching at a distance is dramatically different from teaching in a classroom. Agencies will need to experiment to learn what works best for their staff and students.

A key thing to remember is to start small. Figure out what works and what doesn't. Start by figuring out how your agency can expand services to one group of adult learners through use of one curriculum at a distance. Pilot activities should help agencies determine both *whether* distance education is a viable option for targeted learners and, if so, *how* agencies can best facilitate their distance education program. Distance education

may work better for some agencies than for others, just as distance learning is better suited for some learners than for others.

## Creating an Environment that Encourages Experimentation

Pilot programs are most effective if the participants—that is, the agencies, administrators and teachers implementing them—perceive themselves to be innovators and experimenters. This is particularly true when attempting to implement programs in a field that is as new as distance education is for adult basic education. To do this, participants must be willing to try new approaches, take risks and think creatively. For many educators, this involves developing a new mindset and acting outside the established norms of the field, which can be challenging in today's accountability-driven climate. The administrator at each agency, in conjunction with people at the state and federal levels, must create an environment in which distance educators are comfortable with the risk-taking and creative thinking that accompanies all innovations. Some possible ways to create this environment include:

- Remind participants, *over and over again*, of the experimental nature of the project. This is a novel idea for many participants and it may take time for them to accept the message.
- Stress that the goal of the project is to accumulate knowledge about both what *does* work and what *does not* work. Help participants understand that in pilot projects, as much is learned from apparent failures as from apparent successes. Encourage participants to try new and creative ideas rather than limiting themselves to strategies they already know.
- In the initial phase of a project, do not define success in terms of serving a set number of students or other quantifiable measure. Define success as learning more about the approaches that worked as well as those that were problematic.
- Expect that it will take time for participants to accept that an administrator is serious about the experimental nature of this project. In the initial pilot project in Pennsylvania, it took 3-4 months before pilot sites were willing to share with others problems or approaches that did not work; it took time for experimenters to fully grasp that the focus was on accumulating knowledge and that their efforts to try new things were among the most highly valued components of the project.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to interact with others to share ideas, problem-solve, and support each other's efforts. This might be accomplished through regular meetings, conference calls or electronic conferencing. Information about conducting conference calls is included in the Appendix.

## Choosing a Model, Curriculum and Technology

Each agency must chose a distance learning model, a curriculum and the technology to deliver distance education that will best meet the needs of its learners. As noted earlier in this Handbook, there are a variety of distance education implementation models, including programs in which students work totally at a distance with no face-to-face instruction, hybrid programs combining distance study with some classroom learning, and regular classroom programs that use distance as a supplement. Each agency will need to determine which of these models is best suited to the needs of its learners. The agency will then need to determine how teachers can instruct and support students working in this fashion.

A second decision involves selecting a curriculum. As mentioned previously, it is recommended an agency start by piloting just one curriculum. Like good classroom teachers who pick and choose from a variety of resources to meet the diverse learning goals of their students, distance teachers will quickly want to have similar choices. But it is easier at the beginning to figure out how to teach and support learners at a distance if the agency is able to focus on a single product.

An example of this kind of experimentation and subsequent expansion is found in Pennsylvania's three-year pilot program. Pennsylvania began its distance education experiments with 12 sites using WES at a distance; they added another eight sites the following year. In the third year of their pilot program, they added two new curricula: eleven sites experimented with using GEDC at a distance and six sites explored the potential of TV411 in a classroom setting as a preparatory course for students before they began to study at a distance. The pilot program moved from a curricular focus (e.g., teaching WES at a distance) to a programmatic focus (i.e., offering a variety of distance education options to meet individual students' needs). Other Project IDEAL states have followed a similar trajectory, adding distance learning curricula to address a wider range of student learning needs once teachers and agencies were convinced they could effectively deliver educational services at a distance.

A third consideration involves exploring the ways technology can support the expansion of services and what type of technology to use. Technology can be used to reach more learners as well as to motivate them, provide greater instructional flexibility and increase resources for teaching and learning. Pennsylvania's *Blueprint for Change* (2002) notes the following:

- Participation increases when learners have opportunities to learn that circumvent childcare, work conflicts and transportation problems.
- Computer and Internet activities individualize instruction.
- Learner motivation often increases when technology is used.
- Computer software and the Internet offer a wealth of resources for both teaching and learning.

When choosing technology, a word of caution is in order. While for some educators, distance learning is rapidly becoming synonymous with Internet instruction, many Project IDEAL pilot sites report that their students are more comfortable with, and therefore, likely to use, older technologies. Videotapes and workbooks can be mailed to distance learners or arrangements can be made for students to pick up and drop off videos, workbooks and assignments. If the Internet is used, where and how students will access it is a primary logistical consideration. The goal of distance education is to provide access, not have the technology of choice become a barrier to access.

## Planning for Distance Education

Once a model has been selected and curriculum and technology decisions have been made, planning should be completed in the four areas discussed throughout this Handbook: (1) recruitment of an appropriate population, (2) orientation for learners, (3) teaching at a distance, and (4) assessment of distance learners. In the final activity in the online course, Distance Learning 101, each agency completes a Program Planner for its distance learning pilot project. It is strongly recommended that a staff team complete it. The team should include the administrator and at least one teacher. Developing this plan as a team has several advantages:

- All parties involved in the distance education pilot programs have the opportunity to participate in the design and development of the experimental program. This not only brings a broader range of expertise to bear on program development, it also helps all participants feel a sense of ownership for the project.
- Team planning provides administrators with a fuller understanding of what the teachers in their agencies will be doing and the types of supports they will need.
- Developing the plan as a team helps create a cohesive, experimental mindset.

## New Roles and Responsibilities for Teachers

Administrators need to understand and be prepared to support the additional responsibilities that teachers will assume as well as prepare teachers for the new roles they will fill when teaching at a distance. Data from teacher time studies in several states indicate that, at the start of a distance education pilot program, only about half of teachers' time is spent actually teaching; the other half is devoted to the activities necessary to recruit learners, develop partnerships with other agencies, orient new distance students, and plan for new ways of interacting with and motivating learners. Many of these activities—particularly recruitment—are not typically a part of a classroom teacher's job, but they tend to fall to the distance teachers in pilot programs.

In addition, teachers in pilot programs assume a dual role: they are teachers but they are also researchers collecting data about the pilot program. Teachers are often required to complete forms, keep records and collect data to provide insight into program implementation and effectiveness. Teachers need to understand the reasons for the data

collection, feel confident using the data collection tools, and appreciate the importance of their role as experimenters. This data collection can be time consuming and needs to be figured into teachers' time allocations. If both teachers and administrators are aware of these additional roles, it will help all participants appreciate the time demands the program places upon staff.

It is also important that teachers be knowledgeable about the technology needed to teach at a distance. Because many distance programs have an online or computer-based component, distance teachers need to be technologically savvy. They must not only understand how to use the delivery modality of their curriculum but also be able act as technology support person to help students resolve their technical problems. Recognizing this need, Ohio included a survey of teacher technology competencies and agency technology capabilities as part of the selection process for pilot sites (see the Appendix).

## Successful Distance Teachers

Teaching at a distance requires teaching skills that are different from classroom teaching skills. Some excellent classroom teachers make the transition well, while others are not comfortable in this new environment. Successful distance teachers are innovative, creative and flexible. They are open to new experiences, are willing to explore multiple pathways to reach an end point, and bring new ideas of how to meet students' needs to their work. Successful distance teachers need to be technologically adept, knowledgeable about the curriculum, and able to establish rapport with their students at a distance. It also helps if teachers are excited about the opportunity for professional growth and about what distance learning can offer their students. Teachers often find themselves working with independent, individual learners and need to adopt a "learner-centered" approach to teaching—if that is not already their preferred teaching style.

Thus, just as distance learning is not for every student, distance teaching is not for every teacher. Whenever possible, teachers should be asked to volunteer or be allowed to self-select to try distance teaching; this increases the likelihood that the teachers will bring the constellation of characteristics described above. A teacher with no distance experience and little interest in innovative educational practices is not likely to be successful. Because distance and classroom teaching are so different, distance teachers need additional training and an openness to new educational approaches if they are to be successful.

## Supporting Teachers

Good teaching is at the heart of effective distance education for adult learners, and distance teachers need a variety of support mechanisms as they make the transition from classroom teaching to distance. Providing teachers with professional development, recognition for their efforts, financial compensation, and the opportunity to interact with peers teaching at a distance are among the many ways agencies can make this transition easier for teachers. Project IDEAL states recommend:

- *Providing professional development opportunities for teachers preparing to teach at a distance.* This Handbook provides an introduction to the main concerns and is a good starting point, particularly when used in conjunction with Project IDEAL's online course, DL101. Some states have developed their own training protocols for distance education, and commercial resources are available as well. Project IDEAL also has developed DL102, an online course for experienced distance teachers in which they address pedagogical issues and problem solve with their peers. Regardless of the training approach and tools used, teachers will need additional training if they are to be as effective teaching at a distance as they are in the classroom.
- *Recognizing that making the change from classroom teaching to distance teaching is a major transition for teachers.* Create an institutional climate that supports them in making this transition. Provide supports, such as conference calls, online chats, and websites for teachers where they can ask questions to help them think through the many issues they will encounter.
- *Understanding that to teach effectively, teachers must be intimately familiar with the curriculum.* Because educational programs are individualized, students can enter the curriculum at any number of points. Thus, the teacher can't simply stay "one day ahead" of his/her class and be able to meet the students' needs. Give teachers the product training to familiarize them with the curriculum and sufficient time to get immersed in the details.
- *Providing financial compensation and/or release time from other duties for teachers working with experimental distance education programs.* Consider providing flexible working hours for distance teachers and compensation for the non-traditional hours they are likely to work. It is unreasonable to expect teachers to assume a task of this magnitude during the normal working day or on top of a full workload and be able to flourish as distance teachers.

## Assessment of Distance Learners

Administrators will have to plan for assessment of distance learners, as discussed earlier in this Handbook. In addition to assessment to determine placement and student progress, administrators will also need to deal with the issues of assessment for accountability purposes. Agency administrators will need to follow the requirements of their states in determining appropriate and realistic assessment protocols for use with their distance students. In an ideal situation, states would release agencies from their customary accountability requirements for the first phase of any new pilot program; this is not always possible. Given the differences between distance and classroom education, states may need to look for different accountability protocols for their distance programs. If possible, pilot programs should aim to provide guidance to the state on shaping policy

on appropriate standards for distance learners, based on their experience with distance learning programs.

## Data Collection for Experimental Programs

In distance education pilot programs, data play a critical role. Data provide information on how those programs were implemented and how effectively they serve students. Each state will determine the specific types of data it needs collected. The Project IDEAL Support Center has several forms and templates available to assist agencies in data collection. While the decisions about what data to collect will be made at the state level, agency administrators play several key roles. They have the responsibility for ensuring their agency collects the required data accurately and in a timely fashion. They need to understand what data is to be collected, by whom and in what form. They need to make sure their teachers understand the reasons for data collection and support teachers in their dual roles as teachers and researchers. Without the support of administrators at individual agencies, the experimental element of a pilot program will have difficulty succeeding.

## Distance Learning as Organizational Change

Changes in the delivery of education are not going to be easy or swift. A popular misconception about distance education is that it can be implemented with little change in the way education in an agency is organized, the way teachers teach, or the way learners learn (Moore, 1993). Research on K-12 curriculum innovations, for example, suggests that, even with all the right conditions in place, it may take three to four years for teachers to adopt, adapt and reinvent how they teach (Hall & Hord, 1987; Askov, Johnston, Petty & Young, 2003). Therefore, adding distance education to an agency's spectrum of services should be viewed as an "organizational change" effort. First and foremost, adding distance education as a delivery mode must be based on the educational principles and issues that form the foundation of any organizational decision (Moore, 2002). Such principles and issues are "timeless" and involve the culture and core values of the agency (Bunn, 2001). Whether and how to include distance education is such a decision program administrators must make. Basing that decision on organizational values and philosophy will ensure that the decision is rooted in the mission of the organization and therefore will help make its addition to the organization a smoother transition that is more likely to succeed.

Experience in the Project IDEAL states suggests that the some of the following approaches may be useful to agencies moving from an experimental to a programmatic implementation of distance education:

- Capture the lessons learned during the pilot phase and use these as a basis for future planning. Keep the practices that worked well and drop those that did not.
- Write down procedures that have evolved. This helps formalize the process and ensures that all participants have a shared understanding of the agency's approach to distance education.

- Create an action plan with strategies to help participants move from the idea stage to the implementation stage.
- Write job descriptions for the key players. This may include teachers, agency administrators, technical support people, recruiters and others involved in making the agency's distance project a reality. Keep in mind that the nature of distance education may require some flexibility in job roles and in assignments.
- Get involved with people at the state level interested in distance education and make policy recommendations based upon participants' experience.

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# Appendix

On the following pages are a number of resources to assist you in developing your plans for recruiting and teaching adults at a distance.

- Is Online Learning for Me?
- Computer Skills Assessment:  Technology Assessment
- Tips for Teaching at a Distance
- Web Sites of Interest to Distance Educators
- Using Conference Calls in Distance Learning Experiments

## Is Online Learning for Me?

This quiz appears on the Kentucky Virtual High School website (www.kvhs.org). Students interested in studying online can fill it out to assess whether they are good candidates for distance learning.

1. My need to take this course is
   - ❑ high- I need it immediately to graduate, to fulfill a credit requirement, or other important reason.
   - ❑ moderate- I could take it at my local high school later or substitute another course.
   - ❑ low- it is a personal interest that could be postponed.
2. Having face-to-face interaction is
   - ❑ not particularly important to me.
   - ❑ somewhat important to me.
   - ❑ very important to me.
3. I would classify myself as someone who
   - ❑ often gets things done ahead of time.
   - ❑ needs reminding to get things done on time.
   - ❑ puts things off until the last minute.
4. Classroom discussion is
   - ❑ rarely helpful to me.
   - ❑ sometimes helpful to me.
   - ❑ almost always helpful to me.
5. When an instructor hands out directions for an assignment, I prefer
   - ❑ figuring out the instructions myself.
   - ❑ trying to follow the directions on my own, then asking for help as needed.
   - ❑ having the instructions explained to me
6. I need my teachers to constantly remind me of due dates and assignments
   - ❑ rarely.
   - ❑ sometimes.
   - ❑ often.
7. Considering my academic, extracurricular, family and personal schedule, the amount of time I have to work on an online course is
   - ❑ more than for my high school face-to-face course.
   - ❑ the same as for a class at school.
   - ❑ less than for a class at school.
8. When I am asked to use email, computers, or other new technologies presented to me
   - ❑ I look forward to learning new skills.
   - ❑ I feel scared, but try anyway.
   - ❑ I put it off or try to avoid it.
9. As a reader, I would classify myself as
   - ❑ good- I usually understand the text without help.
   - ❑ average- I sometimes need help to understand the text.
   - ❑ below average- I often need help to understand the text.
10. If I have to go to a school to take exams or complete work
    - ❑ I have difficulty getting to school, even in the evenings and on weekends.
    - ❑ I may miss some lab assignments or exam deadlines if school is not open evenings and weekends.
    - ❑ I can go to school anytime.

## Computer Skills Assessment

Kimberly McCoy (Technology Projects Coordinator, Ohio Literacy Resource Center, Kent State University) developed this computer skills self-rating form. It is comprehensive and suitable for use to help teachers determine their own computer competencies as well as the skills of their students. You may want to use the items here as a guide to develop your own checklist that focuses on the skills required by the particular distance education program you are offering.

To be completed by each designated Project IDEAL instructor

1. Do you have a computer at your local program? ❑ Yes ❑ No
2. Does the computer at your program have Internet access? ❑ Yes ❑ No
3. Please indicate your knowledge level of each of the computer skills/tasks listed below. If additional training is needed, indicate that as well.

| Computer Skill | Self Sufficient | Limited Knowledge | No Knowledge | Need raining |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Open & close Windows (Minimize & Maximize) | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Work with the Taskbar | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Save a file to disk | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Create new folders | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Cut/copy and paste | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Insert clipart | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Create tables and graphs | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Create or format a document | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Create a spreadsheet | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Send and receive email messages | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Use Electronic list/Mailing list | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Downloading items from the Internet | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Attach documents to an email message | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Create an email address book | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Create an MS Power-point presentation | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Managing Bookmarks and/or Favorites | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Creating a Website/page | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Search the Web using directories & engines | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Chat rooms | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Instant Messenger (AOL, ICQ, Yahoo, etc.) | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Start up and shut down a computer | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Navigation on the Internet | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Microsoft Internet Explorer Browser | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Netscape Communicator/Navigator | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Keyboarding | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |
| Basic mouse navigation (clicking, right clicking & dragging etc.) | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ | ❑ |

## Tips for Teaching at a Distance

Deb Walker (spearmint100@yahoo.com) is an experienced distance education teacher in North Carolina. Below she offers some tips on working at a distance with adult learners.


1. **Preparing yourself**
   - Know your materials
   - Study the online procedures as a student – register and learn!
   - Prepare a method of recording information about your interactions with students.

2. **Preparing your students—Be patient, firm, and forgiving**

   Students will need to learn the following things, all at once, all on-line!

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| · Typing | · Math | · Spelling | · History | · Communicating |
| · Navigating | · Reading | · Testing | · Websites | · Organization |
| · Internet | · Grammar | · Email | · Science | · Self-motivation |

3. **Try to really understand the reasons why the learner is studying online**

4. **Don't judge a person by his [email] paragraph**

5. **Online persona**
   - Personality: matching their speed, expectations and rhythm
   - Sense of Humor: You say tomãto…I say tomâto
   - Sixth Sense: What do they mean by that?
   - Educational Presence: You get what you pay for

6. **Respond quickly and frequently**
   - Response time: 3-Day Rule
   - Form letters
   - Form answers to frequent questions, site problems

7. **Respond appropriately**
   - Watch terms and expressions
   - Never promise something you cannot deliver
   - Protect anonymity
   - Don't take it personal
   - Keep responses non-political, non-religious, and non-judgmental

**8. Collecting necessary information**

- Send a warm welcome letter immediately, asking about their current situation, educational background, goals, email address, and computer experience
- Friday Progress Reports that they can just check and email back
- Use the multiple mail system with discretion. Students prefer their anonymity Send each email separately unless they know they are part of a class
- Keep a file of individual email correspondence for quick reference

**9. Motivation and encouragement**

- Offer certificates for completed sections
- Praise, e-cards, congratulations
- Ask opinions
- Ask for help
- Stay on top of regional happenings for correspondence

**10. Handling duplicate responses**

- Create a website, community or Word/e-mail document for posting/sending websites, references, duplicate questions, problems on site affecting everyone

**11. Educational expectations**

- Response Time: 3 Day Rule
- Work in grammar and spelling gradually
- Continually challenge
- Take them to other sites
- Ask about classes in their area and offer to find an agency near them
- Remind them often why they are doing this

**12. Keeping yourself motivated, energized and enthused!**

Deb Walker has prepared a more detailed version of these tips. It is available online. Ask your state trainer for the URL.

# Websites of Interest to Distance Educators

The following is an eclectic list of websites of interest to distance educators. It includes IDEAL state sites and vendor sites for the distance curricula being used by member states. Other websites were recommended by Project IDEAL teachers and administrators, including teachers in the Distance Learning 102 Study Groups.

| Web address | Brief Description |
|---|---|
| **General Interest** | |
| projectideal.org/ | Project IDEAL. |
| www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall/ | National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. |
| www.literacy.org | National Center on Adult Literacy and International Literacy Institute website with links to Tech 21, ESL/Civics Link and Project Connect ESL Instruction. |
| www.nifl.gov | National Institute for Literacy. |
| www.nacol.org | North American Council for Online Learning for K-12 educators—some resources will be of interest to adult distance educators too. |
| www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/index.html | Office of Vocational and Adult Education. |
| academic.uofs.edu/department/atc/tips.html | Tips about online learning including the characteristics of a successful online student. |
| alt.uno.edu/stud_tips.html | From the University of New Orleans, tips for skills needed to succeed in studying at a distance. |
| www.uidaho.edu/eo/dist8.html | University of Idaho tips for successful distance learning. Includes profile of a distance student. |
| eduscapes.com/distance | Teaching tips for teaching at a distance. |
| www.learningtimes.net | Website of online communities and online conferences including some of interest to distance educators. |
| **Curricula for Distance Learning** | |
| litlink.ket.org | Portal to the LiteracyLink curricula, *GED Connection, Pre-GED Connection* and *Workplace Essential Skills*. |
| www.intelecom.org | Portal to INTELECOM's resources for teaching ESL/ESOL (including *Crossroads Café*), family literacy and pre-GED. |
| www.plato.com/ | Website for *PLATO* learning products. |
| www.skillstutor.com/ | Website for *Skills Tutor* learning products. |
| www.mhcontemporary.com | Portal to McGraw-Hill/Contemporary resources for pre-GED, GED and ESL including *GED Integrated Online Solution* that combines Contemporary's GED preparation software with Internet technology. |
| www.myefa.org | The *English for All* free website to help adults learn English. |

| **State Websites** | |
|---|---|
| www.gedillinois.org | GED Illinois homepage with links to Teacher Resources and Online Instruction including access to Sample Lessons. |
| www.kyvae.org | Kentucky's Virtual Adult Education website including links to Kentucky Virtual High School and Kentucky Virtual University. |
| www.gedonlineclass.com | Missouri's GED Online website offering different options to study for the GED test. |
| literacy.kent.edu/ideal/ | Project IDEAL in Ohio website with links to publications, resources and reports. |
| www.padistancelearning.org | Pennsylvania's ABLE-TIU Distance Learning Project website with links to training, field notes and additional web resources. |
| www.scpdcweb.org/online_learning.htm | PowerPoint presentation "How to Get the Most from Online Learning" by Sara Plantz Brennen, Pennsylvania DLC and distance teacher. |
| www.cdlponline.org/ | California Distance Learning Project website. |
| www.adultedteachers.org | Resources and links for adult educators from California's Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN). |
| www.ged-online.net | Florida Adult & Technical Distance Education Consortium website with link to GED online instruction. |
| **Distance Learning "Aptitude Tests" for Students** | |
| www.pbs.org/campus/003_Advice/003-06.html | PBS's quiz to determine if online learning is appropriate for student. |
| www.ilcco.net/GED | The online readiness survey, developed by Online Assessment System for Internet Students (OASIS), assesses student readiness for using the GED Illinois Online instruction. |
| www.waol.org/getStarted/IsOnline4Me.asp | Washington Online's quiz to determine if student is ready to take online classes. |
| www.mnvu.org/mnvu/5102.jsp | From Minnesota Virtual University, a 10 item quiz to help students determine if DL is appropriate for them. |
| www.venturacollege.edu/distancelearning/onlinecourses/orientation.htm | Ventura College's online orientation for students including an "Are You a Good Candidate for DL?" online quiz. |
| **ABE, GED & ESL/ESOL Resources** | |
| www.acenet.edu/clll/ged/sampleQ-TT.cfm | Sample GED test questions from the test developers themselves, the GED Testing Service. |
| www.gedpractice.com | Free online GED practice tests provided by Steck Vaughn. |
| www.4tests.com | Free online practice test site for GED and other exams. |
| www.alri.org/literacylist.html | A collection of free Adult Basic Education and ESL/ESOL websites, electronic lists and other Internet resources for adult basic skills learners and teachers. |

| | |
|---|---|
| www.english-online.org.uk/index.html | "English for Everybody" is a British site that offers free English language courses, free reading practice and free English language online games. |
| www.sagrelto.com/sagrelto/elandh/home.htm | Internet directory of literacy and adult education resources. |
| www.thestudyplace.org | Resources for students and teachers for learning English, practicing reading, studying math and learning job skills including free online lessons. |
| www.learner.org | The Annenberg/CPB teacher education website has a diverse list of video series, many of which can be viewed on demand for free with high-speed Internet access. |
| **Math Resources** | |
| www.curiousmath.com | This website collects all the little tricks good teachers use to help their students learn math concepts. |
| www.purplemath.com | Practical Algebra lessons that give tips, hints, examples and point out common mistakes. |
| www.math.com | The "World of Math Online" website is full of examples for students studying a variety of math concepts, from fractions to square roots. |
| www.iit.edu/~smile/mathinde.html | Nearly 200 free math reinforcement activities for GED instructors. |
| www.mvaea.com/casio.html | Award-winning lessons and test exercises for teaching use of the Casio fx-260 calculator. |
| klingon.cs.iupui.edu/~aharris/chis/chis.html | This "Chisenbop" tutorial site is great for those who have trouble learning math in the traditional way. |
| **Reading & Writing Resources** | |
| www.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/ | This grammar website has links to interactive quizzes and PowerPoint presentations. |
| owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/owl/factsheet.html | Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) website has over 200 free handouts as well as organized links to useful information on writing. |
| www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/adult.html | Website for NIFL's "Partnership for Reading" project. |
| **Technology Resources** | |
| nicenet.org | Free "Internet Classroom Assistant" allows any classroom, even those with modest resources, access to electronic tools such as those for setting up "chats" for students. |
| www.alri.org/harness.html | Information about using computers, television, audio, video, and other electronic technology in education. |
| www.health.ufl.edu/itcenter/training/handouts.shtml | University of Florida has free handouts for teaching computer skills. |
| www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-technology/technology_literacy.html | Website for NIFL's Technology & Literacy moderated discussion lists. |

## Using Conference Calls in Distance Learning Experiments

Conducting regular conference calls with each of the distance learning sites is a valuable element of distance learning experiments. These calls can fill a variety of roles including:

- Provide ongoing updates about the process of implementing the distance education programs, including recruiting and orienting students, teaching at a distance, and working with the various curricula.
- Provide a forum in which teachers and administrators at the sites can share information and provide support for each other's efforts.
- Explore larger issues related to the goal of integrating distance education into a wider choice of adult education offerings.

For calls to serve these functions effectively, they need to be carefully planned and moderated. Structuring the calls allows the moderator to keep the group "on task" and allows the participants to address all issues of concern. Two tools that are useful in providing this structure are sending participants agendas, and asking them to respond with a short informational summary, using a template provided as part of the agenda, prior to the call. This template requires that the respondent provide a very limited amount of information in a straightforward format. It serves several purposes:

- It allows the moderator to be informed about the status of the sites and their concerns before the call. This allows the moderator to modify the agenda, if needed, and guides the moderator in thinking about how to structure the call.
- It encourages sites to reflect on their progress and the issues they face in implementing and maintaining their distance learning projects.
- It provides the foundation for a brief opening statement from each site on the conference call.

The template for information should be short, simple and reflect the issues to be covered in a particular call. There is likely to be a considerable amount of repetition in the templates used over time (for example, most templates will ask sites to report on the number of students served, and many topics, such as recruitment methods, may be covered in multiple calls). Examples of some templates requesting information are provided below.

## Examples of Conference Call Templates

The following conference call templates were used for a series of four, monthly calls conducted for a group of sites just beginning their distance program.

### *Site summaries*

A week before the call, each site was sent an email with a template to complete and return to the person who would be moderating the call.

**Month 1:** As of (date) we had __ students in the program. To orient students to WES and to being a distance learning student we… The major strategies we are using to provide regular support to these learners are… We would characterize our overall progress as…. We are trying to figure out how to solve these problems…

**Month 2:** As of (date), we had __ students in the program. The major strategies we are using to provide regular support to these learners are… We would characterize student retention in the program as…. We are defining "drop outs" as students who… The biggest issues for our site are…

**Month 3:** As of (date), we had ___ students enrolled in the program. We consider ___ to be active WES students. The major strategies we are using to provide regular support to these learners are… The two most difficult problems we are trying to solve are…

**Month 4:** In the final call of this phase of the project, we will look back at the project thus far. To help get the process started, please respond briefly to the following questions before the call:

- In what ways did this program work well for your target population?

What changes would you make for next year's project, and why?

## Sample of Moderator Guides for Conference Calls

### *Call No. 1*

- Welcome, introductions of all on the call.
- Set out topics for discussion: recruitment (primary focus of call), orientation, student access to Internet, distributing print materials to students. Any others important to participants?
- Recruitment
  - Ask each person to give a brief (1 min.) overview of what their site is doing to recruit students
  - Look for common threads/concerns

  - How are you working with CareerLinks and other agencies?
  - Talk about successes: what seems to be working in terms of recruiting
  - Brainstorming on how to handle problems (if any) encountered at sites
- Orientation:
  - What are sites doing to orient students to both the on-line component and the idea of independent learning?
  - Most of you have indicated you plan to have some on-site component to your orientation; a few sites plan to rely on distance methods for orientation. Have you started this yet? How is it working?
- Share ideas about how sites are getting Internet access to students.
- Share ideas about how sites are distributing print and video materials to students.
- Other concerns raised by participants.
- Reminder of next scheduled call

*Call No. 2*

- Set out topics for discussion: orientation, materials distribution, student support and feedback, what is and is not working for programs.
  - One person from each site gives a **brief** (1 min.) overview of the current status of their site (# of students enrolled, method of orientation, method of student support, overall sense of progress). Look for common threads/concerns
- Orientation:
  - What are sites doing to orient students to both the on-line component and the idea of independent learning? Does what you're doing differ from what you anticipated? If so, what prompted you to make changes?
- Materials Distribution:
  - Any problems getting print and/or video to students? How are students accessing the on-line component? Any problems—either with getting access or with technical issues? If so, how are these being addressed?

- Student support and feedback:
  - How are you providing feedback and support to students? Does this differ from what you anticipated? If so, why were the changes necessary? How comfortable are you with the on-line management system?
- Other concerns raised by participants.

*Call No. 3*

- Set out topics for discussion: student support and feedback, retention, definition of "drop out," issues sites are trying to resolve
  - One person from each site gives a **brief** (1 min.) overview of the current status of their site (# of students enrolled, method(s) of student support, concerns about retention, overall sense of progress). Look for common threads/concerns
- Student support and feedback:
  - How are you providing feedback and support to students? Does this differ from what you anticipated? If so, why were the changes necessary? What methods – if any – are more effective, and why? Does this differ for different students?
- Student retention:
  - How would you characterize retention of students? Does this differ from your other programs? If so, how? What are you doing to increase student retention? What do you see as the biggest obstacles to retaining students in the program?
- "Drop Outs"
- How is your site defining a "drop out?" How does this differ from your other programs? Do you have any recommendations on dealing with this issue?
- Major issues sites are addressing
- Other concerns raised by participants.

*Call No. 4*

- Set out topics for discussion
  - One person from each site gives a **brief** (1 min.) overview of the current status of their site (# of students enrolled/active, method(s) of student support,

concerns about retention, overall sense of progress). Look for common threads/concerns

- Distribution of materials
  - How are you distributing materials to students? Do you have a different strategy for different groups of students? (for example: video rental store drop off point for individuals living in the xx area; direct mail to individuals in yy area.)
- Student support and feedback:
  - How are you providing feedback and support to students? Does this vary for students in different situations? Do you have a strategy that you feel works well? One that works poorly? (Remember: we're experimenters; not everything should work well. We need to be able to recommend to the next group of distance instructors what to do and NOT do.)
- Student attrition:
  - Have any of your students "dropped" from the program? How do you define a "dropout"? Although your program has only been running for 1-2 months, can you say how the dropout rate compares with your classroom-based programs? In the next month you will need to contact your "dropouts" to find out why they didn't stay with the program. Will it be easy to contact them?
- Planning your final report. How would you rewrite your planning document from January in light of this experience?

### *Call No. 5*

This call will give us an opportunity to explore two major issues as a group:

- How well each of the pilot projects, as they were implemented, worked for your populations, and
- What changes you think should be implemented to make the programs more successful in the next iteration.

We are not hoping to come to conclusions in this call, but rather, our goal will be to point the way for future projects to learn from your experiences. To help get the process started, please respond to the following questions and e-mail them to me before the call.

1. In what ways did this program work well for your target population?
2. What changes would you make for the next project, and why?