



SHOP TALK# 36: DISTANCE LEARNING: Extending Reach, Improving Productivity, Keeping Learners Involved

Adult education in Texas began its distance learning initiative in 2006 with the support of Project IDEAL, a national consortium of states supporting distance education delivery for adult learners. Briefly, distance learning is defined as formal learning activities for which learners and instructors are separated by geography, time or both for the majority of the instructional experience. It can include print, audio recordings, videotape or DVD, broadcasts, computer software, web-based programs, and other online technology.

So what can a program do when learners are too far away from the adult learning center; transportation is not available; there is no childcare; work schedules conflict with class schedules; or a student has a physical disability? How does a program assist students in participating in instruction, increasing their time on task, and meeting their educational objectives?

One adult education program that has experienced exciting success with its distance learning initiative is Midland College. Lynda Webb, Dean of Adult and Developmental Education at Midland College, recommends thinking big but starting small when venturing into distance learning. She stresses the importance of knowing the targeted audience in terms of computer skill level, language proficiencies, skills being targeted, access to free internet and computer technology, and a workable means of communication with each student. In addition, she identifies tools a program needs to get started:

- a web page with viable information
- software purchased with the user in mind
- the identification of one person to “track” students
- a bilingual computer literacy technical assistant
- a means of communicating actively with students

Lynda acknowledges the strengths as well as the challenges to distance learning:

Strengths	Challenges
Student assignments can be clearly defined and personalized	Faculty acceptance and faculty training are key
Instructional materials can be matched to the learning context	A program must purchase the learning software
Specialized programs are easy to develop with online software	Maintaining connections with servers, help lines, businesses, students is critical

Naturally, a program must put in place processes for registering students, progress testing, tracking and motivating students, building computer savvy, and addressing learners' language barriers. This process is facilitated by the program provider completing DL 101, a

pre-requisite for first time distance learning providers. Distance learning doesn't totally eliminate the need for paper. Student handouts as well as printed information about the dedicated website still have a place in distance learning. Lynda also suggests scheduling a session to teach students how to utilize the software program(s) and to ensure that they know how to use the computer for learning purposes (texting ability on a cell phone does not equal computer literacy!)

Midland College has had success in serving custodial/bus driving staff in a local school district and oil field workers with its distance learning initiatives. Access to computers in the school district was easy, but a lack of English language proficiency limited student understanding. In the case of the truck drivers in the oil fields, they had access to lap top computers in their trucks during long intervals, and progress testing and communication were facilitated via regular safety meetings. In both cases, regular communication with students was critical.

Distance learning offers three very obvious benefits to learners: the opportunity to master a course of study, to do so around the learner's schedule, and to be able to access almost anywhere. But the benefits don't stop here – there are many valuable “extras” that accompany distance learning. These extend into all areas of life and can dramatically increase the overall value of a distance learning experience. For example:

- writing skills are continuously used through assignments, emails, discussions, teamwork, and chat;
- collaboration skills are developed by the need to work effectively and cooperatively with others from a distance;
- time management is up to the student and results in better ownership, less stress, and increased focus on what's required to succeed;
- self-motivation is demanded and must be developed by the learner;
- organizational skills are polished – attention to time on task, discussion, projects, and due dates spill over to other facets of life and learning;
- tech savvy develops, whatever the learner's level of computer expertise, through regular exposure to the skills and subtleties of the digital world; and
- networking opportunities can have lasting value for academics, business, and life strategies.

Determining which curriculum to use for distance learning is a challenging decision. While good curriculum is important in all educational settings, it plays an even important role in distance education where students spend far more time interacting directly with the curriculum than they do with the teacher and other students. A distance curriculum must convey content, provide instruction, help motivate students and maintain their interest, and be both readily accessible and user friendly. Midland College has had success using the Aztec Software in its distance learning initiatives.

John Stevenson is Texas LEARNS' contact person for this initiative. Detailed information can be found on the TCALL website (www-tcall.tamu.edu) by clicking on State Initiatives and then Distance Learning. To date, fifteen curricula have been approved for distance education in adult education programs in Texas. For more information, contact John at jstevenson@hcde-texas.org.