Chapter 1 | Setting the Stage

Introduction

This short chapter will provide some context to establish the importance of strong distance education programs and of blended learning in adult education, and how the IDEAL Consortium has been able to support adult education programming in the past. The first two sections will provide language you can draw upon in conversation with adult education stakeholders and funders in your state. We will then set forth some shared terminology to be used throughout the handbook and get you thinking about how to proceed.

Why build a distance education program?

In the United States, adult education programs enrolled 1,280,540 learners during program year 2018–2019 (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education National Reporting System, n.d.). Yet, this is only a fraction of the estimated 36 million adults in the United States who have basic literacy needs or lack a high school diploma (OECD, 2013). Traditional barriers—such as lack of transportation or competing responsibilities from work and family—have prevented these adults from participating in adult education classes. The pandemic exacerbated these issues and added more.

The speed with which adult basic skills programs moved all of their teaching and support services online during the pandemic highlights the need for equitable access to flexible technology-rich adult basic

skills programming. Programs with some expertise and resources in place prior to the pandemic were able to keep more students engaged in learning than those that had not set up distance education. Programs with lending initiatives in place were able to ensure that at least some students had access to laptops and hotspots. Programs that had integrated digital literacy instruction into their academic skills development were able to leverage learners' skills and comfort to keep them engaged in academic learning (Belzer et al., 2020).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic made clear that digital learning was to be a new feature of adult basic skills and in other educational contexts from now on. Recent research on instructional shifts during the pandemic suggests that among both teachers and learners, many expressed a preference for more flexible distance options once they grew comfortable with the technologies employed (What we learned: Adult education's response to emergency remote teaching and learning, 2020). Similarly, Moe & Rajendra (2020) noted that blended models with the flexibility to adjust for future surges in the pandemic would be the new norm. Furthermore, they observed that the record number of people who claimed unemployment benefits during the pandemic has put pressure on public and private organizations to invest in reskilling adults at a scale previously unexperienced.

This heightened imperative demands that adult education programs provide more flexible and technology-rich opportunities for learners to build technology skills while simultaneously building basic academic skills, a strategy proven to support learning (Jacobson, 2012; Newman, Rosbash, & Sarkisian, 2015; Rosin, Vanek, & Webber, 2017). Adding quality blended or distance learning is a fine response to the reality described above.

WIOA and Distance Education

Indeed, distance education is a named and prioritized initiative spelled out in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act

(WIOA), the federal legislation defining allowable programming in federally funded adult education (Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, 2014). The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) fact sheet Integrating Technology in WIOA (2015) shows exactly how:

- States are required to provide technical assistance for integrating technology into programs and federal policy allows for the following activities: "the development and implementation of technology applications, translation technologies, and distance education, including professional development to support the use of instructional technology" (p. 1).
- Recipients of AEFLA funding must be chosen based on, among other things, how well they "effectively use technology, services, and delivery systems, including distance education, in a manner sufficient to increase the amount and quality of learning and how such technology, services, and systems lead to improved performance;" and furthermore, that their "activities are delivered by well-trained instructors, counselors, and administrators...who have access to high-quality professional development, including through electronic means" (p. 1).

Access

Historically, concerns over the digital divide and the inherent equity issues it creates have prevented many organizations from embracing distance education and investing the necessary time and resources to establish formal programming. The term digital divide is not limited to describing access to digital technology, but is also conceptualized as a gap between those who can use available technologies to access information and solve problems those who cannot (Emerging trends and issues: The nature of the digital divide in learning, 2000). There are certainly equity issues regarding access to the devices and

internet. The Pew Research Center reports that only 56 percent of adults in households earning $30,000 a year and 46 percent of adults lacking a diploma have home broadband (Internet/broadband factsheet, 2019).

Furthermore, the Pew Research Center has found that smartphone use is on the rise. For example, 92 percent of adults lacking a diploma have a mobile phone, as illustrated in the Pew Research Center table below (Mobile fact sheet, 2019).

	Any cellphone	Smartphone	Cellphone, but not smartphone
Total	**96%**	**81%**	**15%**
Men	98%	84%	14%
Women	95%	79%	16%
Ages 18–29	99%	96%	4%
30–49	99%	92%	6%
50–64	95%	79%	17%
65+	91%	53%	39%
White	96%	82%	14%
Black	98%	80%	17%
Hispanic	96%	79%	17%
Less than high school graduate	92%	66%	25%
High school graduate	96%	72%	24%
Some college	96%	85%	11%
College graduate	97%	91%	7%
Less than $30,000	95%	71%	23%
$30,000–$49,999	96%	78%	18%
$50,000–$74,999	98%	90%	8%
$75,000+	100%	95%	5%

Urban	97%`	83%	13%
Suburban	96%	83%	13%
Rural	95%	71%`	24%

Source: [Mobile Fact Sheet](). Pew Research Center, 2019. (Survey conducted Jan 8 to Feb 7, 2019.)

However, 32 percent of those who lack a diploma are smartphone dependent, meaning they can only access the internet from their smartphone. These data, as a whole, suggest that there are adult basic skills learners who have access to the internet and devices, but that programs need to make sure that they offer access options for those who do not, and that any technology-enabled instruction needs to be mobile friendly.

Important Terminology

You need to choose an instructional approach that will serve as the foundation for your work as you plan. The approach needs to align with the goals you have for offering technology-rich and flexible programming. Are you trying to address limitations in the content that you currently teach (i.e., extend, remediate, or fill in gaps for what is being taught)? Or, are you trying to address who is taught (i.e., attempting to retain existing learners or reach a new group of learners you previously did not reach)? Different approaches best suit these different goals.

Distance, Blended, Hybrid, and Other Definitions

It helps to have a shared language to describe the work ahead, so we present these definitions for different approaches. Though most of the definitions were constructed in the years before the pandemic, using them as a starting point can make your current plans and ideas more concrete. Consider these definitions with enough flexibility to

understand that, though students might not be together with a teacher in a classroom, the benefits of blended or hybrid learning can be leveraged to support completely remote approaches that mix synchronous cohort classes (remote face-to-face instruction, defined below) held via videoconference with independent or small group and asynchronous learning activities coordinated via group messaging/texting tools.

Distance Education (DE)

Distance education is defined in the NRS Guidelines as follows:

> Formal learning activity where students and instructors are separated by geography, time, or both for the majority of the instructional period. Distance learning materials are delivered through a variety of media, including but not limited to, print, audio recording, videotape, broadcasts, computer software, Web-based programs, and other online technology. Teachers support distance learners through communication via mail, telephone, e-mail, or online technologies and software ([Implementation guidelines](#), 2019, p. 48).

We use the term to refer to programming a bit more broadly. Distance education describes all aspects of programming that allows a learner to continue learning beyond the walls of a classroom. The chapters that follow are in fact organized by these aspects of distance education: recruitment, screening, instruction, assessment, and administration.

Distance Learning (DL)

Many programs use the term distance learning instead of distance education. However, in this Handbook we consider it to describe what

a learner is doing; it is the student's perspective of studying outside a classroom (Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003) or, as suggested by the NRS guidelines, separated by time for the majority of the instructional period.

Blended, Hybrid, and Supplemental Modes of Learning

These approaches integrate a mix of instructional models. Murphy et al. (2017) arrived at useful definitions based on their study of digital learning in adult basic education programs across the country. They explored the use of different online learning curricula in 13 programs by 105 instructors with 1,579 adult learners. Based on their observations on use of the curricula, they came up with the following use models for the online products:

Blended Models

Blended models are characterized by "tight integration" of the instruction delivered online and that which happens in a class (Murphy et al., 2017, p. E-S 5). Instructors consider both in-class and online instruction as part of a collective whole, making adjustments to their face-to-face teaching based on what they see as they monitor student work online and altering online assignments based on what they observe in class. The Clayton Christensen Institute further defines this approach as one that allows learners to control time, place/space, and pace of learning. Using this approach, practitioners carefully design and sequence instruction to incorporate multiple options for learner content engagement: independently with content, with each other, and with the instructor (Christensen Institute, 2016).

Hybrid Models

Hybrid models employ both an online curriculum product and in-class teaching, but though the teacher is checking it, the assigned work that students complete online may not be directly aligned with what happens in the classroom. Note that in Texas and other states, hybrid also refers to programs that offer a period of in-class instruction followed by a period of online learning.

Supplemental Models

Supplemental models make use of online curricula outside regular class time, are not required, and may not even be checked by the instructor. This is extra work that is somewhat aligned to the goals of a course, but it does not require much extra effort on the part of the instructor.

These definitions are more refined than our early conceptualization of blended learning in adult education, characterized simply as regular classroom instruction combined with distance learning, where distance is added to intensify or accelerate instruction (Petty, 2005; Porter & Sturm, 2006). Note also that some states or adult education programs use the term "hybrid" and "blended" interchangeably, and it is ultimately up to local programs and/or state leaders to use the language they think most effective in their context.

> *Note that these models are still evident in a completely remote context—where the "in-class" part of blended learning takes place in a remote, face-to-face setting (e.g., a video conference).*

Over the past decade, we have realized that we need more flexibility in our understanding of what constitutes distance and blended learning because implementation and policy considerations in our member states vary greatly. We recognize that limitations on access to broadband in rural areas make a narrower view of distance education inaccurate. There are many examples of programs, such as some in Texas, that yet use video and even paper packets so that learners living in places without broadband access can continue to learn. Furthermore, rigid conceptualizing around the timing of delivery of different modes of instruction can limit opportunities for learning. With that in mind, we present these definitions with an understanding that they may be attributed to programs that have very different characteristics.

Other Useful Definitions

There are related definitions that are relevant to our work here but are not necessarily useful for planning distance education and blended learning programming.

Remote Face-to-Face Instruction (RFI)

This gained popularity as programs rapidly shifted their in-person, in-class instruction to an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The programs that are fortunate enough to have students who have access to the internet and devices can choose to continue providing face-to-face instruction by using videoconferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Skype. Whole groups of students might choose to meet with a teacher at the same time and, if the conferencing tools allow it, might even break out into small groups during the course of the online video class.

Classroom Technology Integration (CTI)

Equally important in the academic experience, but not to be confused with blended learning, is classroom technology integration. CTI helps teachers work more efficiently and provides the means by which to make learning more engaging. For example, a teacher might make a vocabulary study set or quiz for the classroom using Quizlet or Kahoot. It may be useful to understand that CTI differs from blended learning, which moves the role of technology beyond that of just being a useful tool to support learning in the classroom. In blended learning, technology is an actual mode for instruction or collaborative learning; for example, if you take the results of Quizlets or Kahoots and leverage them to engage in discussion or explanation of reasoning, you are transitioning from CTI to blended learning. This distinction is nicely framed in this video:

Getting Started

Activity 1.1 Survey of Needs and Capacity

Start thinking about how you will define your distance education pilot.

Now that you have a sense of the importance of this work and understand different approaches and the terms we will be using to describe them, let's get started. A great first step is to consider the goals of your program, your resources, learners, state policies, and program goals. You can do so by answering these questions.

1. Who are your learners? What are their goals? What are their tech skills? When can they come to class?
2. What are the characteristics of your geographical location? Is your program hard to get to? Are there learners whose participation in your program is limited or inconsistent who might participate more regularly if offered supported study at a distance? Are you able to meet in person?
3. What technology resources can you share with your learners? What technology resources do they have access to on their own? How about teachers? What access do they have?
4. What are the technology skill levels of your learners? What skills would be required?
5. What are the technology skill levels of your teachers? What is required? What resources are available to strengthen them?
6. What flexibility do you have for establishing instructional content? Are you required to use a curriculum chosen (i.e., "adopted") at the state level? Are you allowed to choose your own or even create your own?
7. What language do you use to describe the models of programming that you (will) provide?

Activity 1.2 Your Initial Plans

Start defining your distance education pilot.

The big goal that you have as you work your way through this Handbook is to create a site implementation plan that will define a pilot. You will have much more success if you narrow the focus of this pilot as you complete the activities at the end of each chapter in this Handbook. Will you move forward with planning distance education or a blended learning option? Who might be ideal learners for the new course? What is the goal of the distance or blended learning program? Why are you doing this work? What do you hope your learners gain from it? How will it benefit your teachers and program more broadly? What resources can you draw on for instruction?

Administrators reading this might want to skip ahead and read Chapter 7, Administrative Issues: Getting Started. The content of that chapter outlines key considerations for implementing an experimental program or pilot. Though these considerations will be critical for you to reflect on closer to the start of your pilot, having an awareness about them now can inform your reading, discussion, and activity completion in the earlier chapters and modules.

Note that in the course, *IDEAL 101: Foundations of Distance Education and Blended Learning,* these prompts are expanded into fully developed collaborative activities for your team to complete together.

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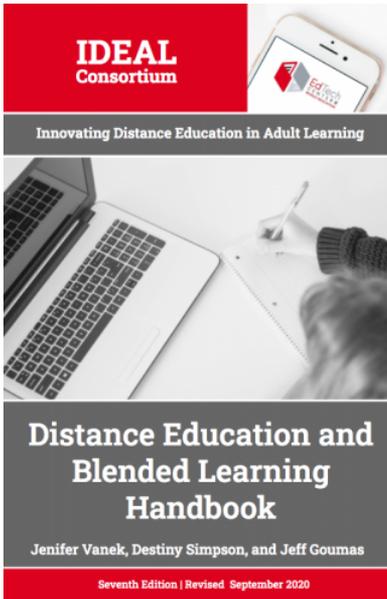
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