Chapter 5 | Instruction

Getting Started
Introduction

Online teaching in adult education, whether it happens in class or at a distance, is ever evolving. These changes are due to more widespread availability of free and licensed edtech tools and curriculum products, along with increased access to learning made possible by mobile technologies. This evolution accelerated dramatically in response to the need to rapidly shift to distance learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the United States, providers of professional development and practitioners have come together in webinars and communities of practice to share innovative strategies and resources. Much innovation has been hatched in IDEAL Consortium states, buoyed in part by their past efforts to implement distance education. The lessons learned by these teachers have shown that many of the major functions of a distance teacher may mirror those of a classroom teacher, yet the tools and methods for accomplishing these teaching activities need to be different. This chapter introduces an approach to distance and blended learning instruction that encompasses both what we have learned from these teachers and the opportunities made possible by new technologies.

The most important lesson of the past is that, in distance learning, even though learners work independently and possibly primarily through an online curriculum, teachers play a vital role in providing instruction, feedback, and support. Since many adult education learners may not have had previous distance or blended learning experience, teachers must endeavor to guide them, assign supplemental instructional activities as needed, and provide encouragement as they work toward their goals. We call this approach involved instruction, where teachers are actively engaged in their students’ learning.
Involved Instruction

Some of the first research on online distance education in adult education shows that effective distance learning requires more than passing out login information to an online curriculum. Rather, it must include:

A continuum of instruction, ranging from high engagement in social interaction to individual independent learning opportunities that may include some minimal electronically mediated instructor to learner and one to one learner interactions" (Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003, p. 67).

In another early and important study, Zhao et al. (2005) found that the amount of instructor involvement positively impacted the quality of the student experience; increased involvement meant increased success. They defined involvement as the “extent to which the instructor is involved in actual delivery of content and available for interactions with the students” (p. 1846).
Minimally, this means a teacher assigns appropriate content and then periodically monitors learner work in an online curriculum and provides feedback or encouragement through email, an app like WhatsApp, or the curriculum’s communication features. This scenario, where a learner receives ample instruction from the curriculum itself, is useful; however, ideally, some measure of responsive teacher-student interaction should be a regular aspect of the learning experience. More teacher involvement could include periodic in-person or virtual face-to-face meetings via telephone or videoconferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx) along with the assignment of supplemental activities to support learning. Involvement and interaction could be fostered even further by creating teacher-facilitated opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction online. (See Appendix B for a list of key activities required to monitor and support learners at a distance.)
I set up small WhatsApp groups to give students a space to ask each other questions or build community. Many already had WhatsApp, so it was easy to get started. —A teacher in Texas, explaining how she established communication with her students after school closures in response to COVID-19.

Such interaction is possible today because of improvements in technology, which allow for a great variety of instructional activities and communication formats. These technologies make both students and teachers more comfortable working online and increase student motivation and outcomes. As early as 2005, Richmond, Thacher, and Porter documented use of such interaction integrated into instruction of adult English language learners. Interaction occurred in two ways: (1) writing practice completed in an online discussion and (2) face-to-face interaction in class. The interactive activities fostered the development of community, in which members supported each other with both academic content and technical aspects of the online work. Most social media tools are great for this purpose. Integrating some social media into your instruction encourages collaboration and supports peer learning. Prior research shows that students posting and responding to each other leads to rich interactive learning experiences because, through that communication, learners establish social presence. They are seen. This is beneficial even for students with beginning levels of print literacy (Bigelow et al., 2017; Vanek et al., 2018).
Benefits of Involved Instruction

Involved instruction is an important element for successful online instruction and learner persistence. In this approach, an instructor takes on the role of a facilitator, and the online curriculum and supplemental materials become a resource, not just the sole means of instruction. As a facilitator, an instructor mediates between the learner and the online content, personalizing learning. This implies that a significant level of teacher involvement is needed to support learner persistence. Essentially, because an instructor is more present, they can better provide support and learning activities that best suit a learner’s needs. An excellent example of this is found in the work of Delgado Community College in Louisiana. Instructors at Delgado have created an online curriculum that is used by teachers across the state as a basis for instruction. Using Google Classroom, Slides, and Docs, teachers are able to personalize learning using targeted responses to learners’ work and assigning supplemental resources as needed. A student developing proficiency with online learning in this supportive approach can build the confidence and computer skills they need to succeed in online learning (Sharma et al., 2019).

Components of Involved Instruction

What does involved instruction look like? In 2013, a Project IDEAL instructional strategies study group convened under the leadership of Dr. Jere Johnston to explore the state of adult education distance education instruction and to describe the practices used by teachers identified as “successful” by their states’ distance education leadership. The study group members interviewed these teachers and noticed similarities in their work that illustrate how to provide involved instruction. Common practices of these innovative teachers included the following:
• Used blended learning, even if you need to work completely remotely from learners
• Focused on using one primary curriculum
• Provided supplemental learning activities and resources when learners required more instruction
• Organized online learning using a digital homeroom, a website hosting links to all learning activities
• Adopted technology tools to suit instructional and content needs
• Made use of computer labs where they were teaching
• Continued to learn themselves

The full report from the group is called New Models for Distance Classes in Adult Education. The following strategies and models were elucidated in the study, and combined with more recent research, can help you become a practitioner who provides involved instruction.

**Strategy One: Use a Blended Learning Approach**

Sometimes called “hybrid,” these learning opportunities blend classroom (or remote face-to-face) and online instruction. This approach to instruction is highly effective. For example, in Arizona, level gains for the state’s adult learners participating in blended learning moved from 6 percent above those made by learners participating in traditional in-person classes in 2014 to 16 percent above in 2015 (Vanek et al., 2018). Why? Blended learning extends the amount of time spent learning and allows teachers to intensify learning by differentiating instruction, providing activities at a variety of levels to suit the knowledge and skills of different learners. Additionally, when done in the classroom, learners benefit from ongoing support from the classroom teacher as they learn how to learn online. Even if the face-to-face component of blended learning occurs remotely, with the teacher present to guide learners through
problems, misconceptions, and application of newly acquired computer skills, adult learners can move through learning material more efficiently and develop skills needed to continue their education independently online. For learners who find they may have more time, it also may enable them to accelerate their learning by adding more study time outside of class, especially if the online component is well integrated with the face-to-face curriculum.

Peer-to-peer interaction is another benefit of blended learning. In class, conversation and support can prepare learners for online work. Face-to-face conversation and support creates opportunities for socially constructed knowledge, where classmates learn from and through interacting with each other. A blended learning teacher could extend this in-class interaction to an online space by periodically requiring learners to work in groups using cloud-based applications like Google Docs; email; or asynchronous discussion in blogs, WhatsApp, Remind, or Facebook groups, all of which are accessible on mobile devices. The impact of this interaction is not only the
learning of content, but also developing the autonomy required for persistence and motivation in distance learning courses (Furnborough, 2012).

Most of the recent research defining blended learning, and examining models for its implementation, has been conducted in K-12 and postsecondary settings. The Clayton Christensen Institute has created useful models describing how different modes of instruction might be implemented in different blended learning scenarios. They define blended learning as:

a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.([https://edtechbooks.org/-UPw](https://edtechbooks.org/-UPw))

**Blended Learning Models**

This integrated learning experience takes shape in several models, depicted in the graph shown here from the [Christensen Institute](https://www.christenseninstitute.org/).
These definitions were constructed in the years before the pandemic. It is true that this reality has introduced additional considerations that impact their implementation; however, understanding these different models can make ideas that feel very abstract seem more concrete when you are in the planning process.

Consider these definitions with enough flexibility to understand that though students might not be together with other students in a classroom, the benefits of blended or hybrid can be leveraged to support completely remote approaches that mix synchronous cohort classes held via videoconference with independent or small group asynchronous learning activities coordinated via group messaging/texting tools.
Rotation models: Students rotate through different stations on a fixed schedule. At least one station is an online learning station. In the flipped model, this “station” happens at home, where students engage in essential instruction through video and other media. This “flipped” instruction allows face-to-face instructional time to go beyond just traditional lectures. Because of intentional sequencing, instruction happens at home, often prior to class, so students come prepared to engage in face-to-face instruction beyond just traditional lectures.

**Flex Model**

Students use different learning resources fluidly, as needed. Most of the resources are online, and teachers provide instruction as needed to supplement online work.

**A La Carte Model**

Students take a course online with an online teacher, as well as other courses in-person, to give maximum flexibility in student schedules. In ABE programs in the United States, this is sometimes called dual-enrollment or hybrid learning (per Murphy et al., 2017).

**Enriched Virtual Model**

This model is what many ABE programs may consider supported DL, where a student completes most work online and outside of school, and periodically checks in for face-to-face instruction with a teacher.

In their rigorous study of the use of online curricula, Murphy et al. (2017) found three modes of use that were spelled out as blended, hybrid, and supplemental. (See Chapter 1.) An important observation from their work is that for an instructional model to be considered blended, a teacher must employ online tools, in-class activities, and instruction as part of a collective whole, where learner work in each setting impacts what a teacher does in the other. More recently, Rosen and Vanek (2020) present descriptions of different blended
learning models and offer examples showing why they are employed to meet particular programmatic goals and how they are implemented. This guide is important reading for any adult education practitioner hoping to start using a blended learning model.

Rosen and Stewart (2015) highlight these important steps for getting started with blended learning.

1. **Know why you are using blended learning.**

   Decide on the overall goals for use of blended learning. Perhaps you want to move away from traditional, teacher-centered classroom instruction, moving it to videos and activities accessed online and using class time for collaboration and project work; this model of blended learning follows a flipped sequence. Perhaps you want to leverage rich online resources to move to competency-based learning or support your organization’s efforts to integrate development of College and Career Readiness Standards. According to Rosen and Stewart (2015), each of these goals is well-served by blended models; we suggest being intentional in your work and being able to articulate the goals you have for embracing blending learning before you select technologies.

2. **Find out about student access to devices and the internet.**

   Explore your students’ access to computers and the Internet both in and out of your organization. Rosen and Stewart (2015, p. 32) provide a table that might be completed by doing an informal survey of your learners and considering your own knowledge about access to computers on-site. See Table 1 (included with permission).
Rosen and Stewart also include a link to a survey on student Internet access and computer skills, which can be used as-is or adapted. Information gleaned from these information-gathering activities will help you make decisions about what technologies, including mobile options, you can use for your blended learning course.


Acquaint yourself with the range of learning technologies that you might integrate into your blended learning course. The report from the IDEAL instructional strategies study group includes a glossary of several popular tools. Rosen and Stewart (2015) also describe useful resources in their book. (See Blended Learning for the Adult Education Classroom, pp. 10-30.) Additionally, there are useful online repositories that link to promising educational technologies. CrowdED Learning’s Teacher Tools page lists tools for communicating, finding content, and organizing and managing learning. The EdTech Center’s WorkforceEdTech.org offers similar resources and includes short case studies showing many of them in use.
4. Choose a learning platform.

Often, the decision about curriculum is made for the teacher, but if not, decide whether a licensed online curriculum will suit your needs or whether you need to build your own online resources. Rosen and Stewart (2015) provide a logic model to help you determine which would be most suitable for your program. The exercise requires consideration of the following issues:

- Leeway given to teacher for making such choice (i.e., whether your state has a required online curriculum)
- Teacher preference
- Development time available, deadline
- Cost of licenses

(See Blended Learning for the Adult Education Classroom, pp. 43–45, for the complete logic model.)

Whether you choose a turnkey or teacher-created curriculum, be sure it includes features required for your chosen instructional model, including a way to organize content, a means by which to monitor learner work (e.g., teacher access to learner activities and/or reports of progress), accessibility affordances that meet your learners’ needs (e.g., options for deaf or vision-impaired students), a place for learner collaboration, and mechanisms for ample teacher-to-student communication.

5. Decide on communication strategies and tools.

Establishing consistent, sustainable communication protocols with learners is the best way to support persistence. Reflect on how you will communicate with your learners online.

Do consider integrating texting as a strategy. Learners and teachers alike feel comfortable using texting to support teaching and learning.
Pew Center research suggests that 97% of smartphone users text (Smith, 2015). Sharma et al. (2019) found that when teachers or service providers used texting apps to nudge learners to complete assignments or attend appointments, the students responded with higher levels of engagement. In this way, texting can help learners stay on track.

Vanek and Webber (2019) noted that learners working independently using Cell-Ed, which relies heavily on texting, found even the automated texts encouraging.

Many of the texts sent by coaches were automated reminders encouraging them to persist. Learners noted appreciating and feeling encouraged by these reminders, even if they didn’t reply to the coaches directly. The learners loved the “stickers,” which are emojis, and the positive comments from coaches—both automated and live. They cited examples they especially liked such as “excellent, fabulous, well done, wonderful” and even “hmmmmm,” the response one coach sent when one person got something wrong. They also noted that the coaches never say “this is bad,” but instead are always supportive (Vanek & Webber, 2019, p. 7).

Consider using a mobile messaging tool like WhatsApp, Remind, or TalkingPoints for easy outreach and frequent nudging. WhatsApp and Remind also interface with web browsers, making it easy for teachers to manage student communications. TalkingPoints automatically translates texts between sender and recipient based on the language they’ve set on the platform. There are several useful examples of using WhatsApp in this Google Doc resource created from posts on the LINCS Integrating technology community forum.
6. Prepare students.

Allow ample class time, or videoconferencing time, to introduce students to any new technology and give them a chance to practice with your support. For example, while it is important to help students log in and navigate through features of a tool, it is equally important to make certain they can successfully initially reach it on their own. Give them at least one opportunity to go through the process of logging in and initiating an activity to demonstrate they can complete work independently.

Another idea is to show students the web page you might be using to coordinate instruction and communication. (See Use a Digital Homeroom section below.) You might build activities into in-person or remote face-to-face meetings each week that require students to use the website, for example, to find and complete an assignment or to post to a blog. In both examples, you are using in-person meetings to ensure that students can make best use of the digital communication tool that you have decided to use.

Strategy Two: Start with One Core Distance Learning Curriculum
Whether you are teaching in a blended or distance model, make use of a core online curriculum. This can be teacher created or a licensed product (e.g., Burlington English, Essential Education’s GED Academy, Voxy, Learning Upgrade, or USA Learns). Having ready-made content available in a core curriculum has several benefits:

1. Students can become familiar with the technology demands of the online environment and, through actively using it, build skills and confidence using web-based resources.
2. A comprehensive curriculum follows a consistent, repeated lesson format.
3. Teachers can become local experts on the curriculum, deepening both their knowledge of it and their skill tying it to classroom instruction in a blended model. They can then support other teachers within the organization who wish to integrate the core online curriculum into blended learning.
4. Student work within the core online curriculum provides a means by which teachers can formatively assess learners’ needs for additional instruction and practice activities. Many online curricula provide robust reporting to make it easier to monitor learner progress and identify areas for remediation.
In a blended or hybrid learning scenario, this online curriculum can be assigned to complement in-class instruction. For distance education, it may be the first means of instruction. Being an involved instructor means knowing the content your learners are accessing online, so once you know which curriculum you will be using, you need to thoroughly explore it by examining content, assignment modes, and its viability as an independent learning tool for your students. This requires an investment of time, but time spent will pay off when you are able to confidently direct your learners through the content and navigation required and assist them with basic troubleshooting. Taking on more than one core curriculum may not be possible; decide whether or not you have the time to adequately learn two curricula.

Workforce EdTech offers descriptions of many popular curricula. Additionally, it offers this expansive list of tool evaluation criteria to help structure your evaluation of promising options if you are planning to adopt a comprehensive curriculum.

**Strategy Three: Use Supplemental Learning Activities**

There are times when even the most thoroughly developed teacher curriculum or robust licensed comprehensive curriculum cannot cover all of the learning needs of a learner or classroom of learners, or you might notice that content required to address required standards is missing, so you will need to find and evaluate supplemental resources. Why? Though most creators of online learning produce quality resources, what your organization or state purchases for use may not meet the academic, language, or computer skill needs of all learners or be culturally relevant (Smith & Ayers, 2006; Hannon & D’Netto, 2007). Also, an online curriculum may not fully address the key shifts and standards outlined in the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS). Programs may find that
students need additional practice reading complex text, citing evidence, and building knowledge. Teachers may also want to provide additional opportunities for rigorous math activities that focus with equal intensity on conceptual understanding, procedural skills, and fluency.

One way to address these issues is to integrate supplemental resources using additional materials or websites. Content developed or self-selected by practitioners allows for more customization and alignment with standards and is generally more learner-centered. There are plentiful resources available on the web, which are particularly useful in blended learning scenarios, where programs may lack resources to purchase licenses for online curricula relevant for a broad range of learners.

**Open Educational Resources (OERs)**
One place to look for complementary resources is to search for Open Educational Resources (OERs). An image, eBook, podcast, video, fully developed online course (e.g., EdReady.org), or interactive learning activity could all be considered OERs. Officially, OERs are licensed very openly through a Creative Commons license; teachers can use them either as-is or adapt them to better suit their learners. Because they are free and often adaptable, they are ideal supplemental resources for either blended or fully distance instruction.

You can find OERs by doing an Internet search. If you use Google, select the advanced search option setting “usage rights” to show only resources that can be freely used or shared. More instructions for finding OERs are included on an OER support website funded by the U.S. Department of Labor for programs with learners in community and technical college programs. Also check out OER Commons, which
includes links to fully developed lesson plans and learning activities. Consider the following guidance when selecting an OER.

Select standards-aligned content or content vetted by teachers.

Make sure that the OER aligns with the standards that define your curriculum or academic program. One way to do this is to find content already vetted by teachers who understand those standards or who teach a course covering similar content. CrowdED Learning offers SkillBlox, which allows instructors to search for math skills they wish to teach based on the CCRS. Instructors can then find resources that align to that standard from a variety of OER sources and then share them with, or assign them to, learners in a variety of ways.

Choose a variety of resources.

Not all OERs will work for your class. Not only must you think about OER as resources or materials that will support the learning objectives of a curriculum or even a lesson plan; you also need to consider the media or technology through which they are conveyed. Be sure that your learners have access to the technology resources and possess the computer skills to make use of them.

Ensure content is appropriate for your learners and the existing system.

Once you find a few that look promising, you need to evaluate how an OER will work for your learners in your particular context. Achieve.org has made available online a rubric that teachers might use to evaluate the utility and suitability of an OER. You can adapt the rubric to best suit your instructional context. Check out this example of an adapted rubric from the EdTech Center @ World Education you might use. Because OERs are plentiful, you will likely find resources that align with a wide variety of learners, learning styles, and technical requirements or limitations.
Strategy Four: Use a Digital Homeroom

Use of a digital homeroom, often a simple website or a tool like Wakelet or Padlet, is essential for organizing instructional resources and activities. Wakelet is a free, flexible tool that allows anyone to create “collections” of online resources. Here’s one example of a collection that provides teachers a number of great, free online resources that can support blended learning, along with guidance on how to use those resources with learners.

Weebly and Google Sites are free popular website-building tools that teachers might use for creating a digital homeroom. It’s also possible to accomplish this using a simple Google slide. A Minnesota instructor created this virtual classroom space using linked media on a Google Slide, which she shared as a PDF with her learners. Each object in the PDF slide is a link to an online resource. Try clicking on the images in the picture to see what happens.
Learners can make regular use of a digital homeroom to access all learning resources (e.g., links to the core online curriculum and key complementary online resources) and support documents (e.g., instructions for logging in, program information, and teacher contact info). Teachers interviewed in the Instructional Strategies study suggested that they were more likely to provide differentiated instruction to meet individual learning needs of their students when they had a website. Once a teacher had found and evaluated a resource, he or she could post it to a central location, rather than keep track of bookmarked web pages and emails to students. This strategy also puts the teacher squarely in the role of active facilitator, a critical characteristic of involved instruction.

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**Why We Chose Our LMS**

One of our main goals for using an LMS is for teachers to be able to share resources. I think we are coming to the conclusion that each LMS has its own pros and cons. In my agency, we chose one to use program-wide. Our decision is based on one teacher having deep knowledge of that particular tool and content already available. It is also free and we feel it is very friendly for low-level ESL Learners.

- An administrator in Rhode Island

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A more sophisticated approach to a digital homeroom, a learning
management system (LMS), allows a teacher not only to organize content but also to create assignments and monitor learner progress. This is essentially a digital homeroom with reporting options and features to monitor and manage learner interaction with the content, the teacher, and other learners. Several popular LMSs are widely used in K–12 and postsecondary systems that also serve adult education: Canvas, Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Edmodo, Moodle, and Schoology. Canvas, Google Classroom, and Edmodo offer free, limited versions to any teacher. (While Moodle is free, it requires uploading to a server and initial configuration and updating.)

The benefit of using LMSs is that most of them offer the following useful affordances (and more):

- Organize content into lesson- or unit-based modules
- Embed external content into lessons
- Build assessments that can be automatically scored
- Track learner progress, including completion of learning
- Integrate discussion threads into lessons to foster collaboration
- Communicate direction with individual learners or groups of learners

This list is not exhaustive and will likely change each time you do a web search for “LMS.” Such dynamic and constantly evolving learning technology is exciting to understand, but be careful to not go overboard! Strike a balance between looking for the next new thing and deepening your skills using just one LMS.

In terms of selecting an LMS, check with postsecondary institutions in your region where students who are on a postsecondary track are likely to matriculate—what LMS is used there? Some IDEAL member states have leveraged using an LMS as their means for delivering professional development. An unexpected result was that as teachers experienced using the LMS as a “student,” they began seeing the benefits of using that LMS with their own students.
Perhaps focus on how to use one well in your organization for an extended amount of time, and support each other as you build your own courses. This has obvious benefits for you as a teacher; you can share resources and knowledge rather than working alone. The benefit for learners is important to consider, too. As learners become used to learning in any one web environment, subsequent learning opportunities or courses in that environment will likely be easier to navigate.

**Strategy Five: Adopt Technology to Suit Instructional and Content Needs**

Successful teachers thoughtfully use technology to fit learner needs
and content requirements. Rather than just leaping into new resources or technologies because they are novel, involved instructors need to balance encouraging learners to use new technology and using technology authentically to support or enhance the type of instruction and the demands of the content being taught. This is especially important in a blended learning scenario, where teachers need to decide which content is best covered in class or online.

A framework can provide guidance for sorting this out and can help you choose the technologies that fit the learning goals you have for your students. The Triple E Framework, developed by Liz Kolb (2017), is a useful model that addresses the degree to which a technology resource helps learners meet learning goals. The Triple E Framework is a useful extension of previous technology integration frameworks like SAMR (Puentedura, 2012) and TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which focus on how teachers should design learning. The Triple E Framework, rather, focuses on what students do with technology to help them learn. The framework ensures that technology use helps focus student engagement, and then, while engaged, their learning is enhanced and extended by technology. Gaer and Reyes (2020) offer examples of what this might look like in an ABE classroom.

Strategy Six: Use an On-site Computer Lab

Many organizations provide on-site computer labs where learners can use the computers to complete online activities required in a blended learning scenario or even complete fully distance learning work. Making use of an on-site lab allows learners to become proficient with online learning with the support of teachers or lab volunteers. The support helps learners develop computer skills while they are working on their academic content. Many organizations staff labs with volunteers from local colleges who already have the digital literacy
skills and some personal experience with online learning.

Keeping Up with the Pace of Change

At the heart of the sustainable change is developing and helping people to build up an “inner resilience” that guards them from experiencing every change that comes their way as disruptive. Instead, this resilience ensures that they learn to cope with these changes...recognizing patterns in one situation and making sense of them and applying them in another. (Kop et al, 2011) [i]

Strategy Seven: Be a Lifelong Learner

The final important characteristic of effective educators is that they see themselves as lifelong learners. In the instructional strategies study group, the teachers interviewed revealed that they themselves embrace opportunities to grow as learners and are open to continuous experimentation with technology. This embrace of continuous learning not only increases your knowledge of useful instructional resources, it
also helps you build the persistence and resilience needed to face whatever technological innovation comes next.

Other Considerations

Start with Mobile Learning

While use of mobile technologies for learning was not explicitly named in the instructional strategies study, we are adding it to this list. A goal of implementing distance or blended learning into adult education programming is to extend the time and space where teaching and learning can occur. This goal suggests that success will be boosted if learners are able to access learning materials on mobile devices, particularly for learners who live in rural areas and can only access online content that can be accessed offline, through apps.

A recent Pew Research Center study shows that the number of Americans who use a smartphone to access the Internet at home is on the rise. Ninety-six percent of adults in the United States have a mobile device, and all but 15 percent of them are smartphones. Additionally, the demographics of adults who are smartphone dependent—meaning they can only access the internet on their smartphone—are minority and/or are living in households that earn less than $30,000 per year (Mobile Fact Sheet, 2019). This aligns with the demographics of learners who are typically enrolled in adult basic skills programs.

Cell-Ed is an example of content developed specifically for use on standard cell phones. Their course catalog offers a range of learning content that could be used either as a stand-alone distance class or as a complement to classroom learning in English language learning, literacy, citizenship, or Spanish literacy. USA Learns is available as an app providing a full curriculum for English language learners and applications like the vocabulary builder. Quizlet can be used to
integrate mobile options into a learner’s experience. For example, a teacher might use Quizlet as part of a blended learning course by uploading vocabulary images supporting a class reading to Quizlet Plus flash cards to accelerate mastery of vocabulary while out of class.

Though many major online curricula developers are working toward becoming more mobile friendly, you cannot assume that all websites and online resources developed for educational purposes will work on a tablet or smartphone. Watch out for resources that were made using the software Flash, since they will not play on most mobile devices, and most major browsers will discontinue supporting Flash assets by 2021. In addition, as you consider platforms for delivering content, be sure to search for an LMS or Course Management System (CMS) that was either developed for deployment on mobile, or is at least mobile compatible (e.g., Schoology).

In addition to finding appropriate educational mobile resources and platforms, you can use apps developed to support facilitation of instructional activities in mobile learning, for example, WhatsApp. This mobile messaging app does not require a student to have a telephone and texting plan. Because it works on Wi-Fi accessed in a public place, students need only have a mobile device. Teachers can create groups to coordinate cohort learning and send media-rich messages including images, video, and audio.

Ultimately, in order to take advantage of the technology literally in the palm of a learner’s hand, it takes careful planning to leverage the strengths of the device and compatible resources. It may take some time and experimentation to develop an awareness of where and how to do this. Several promising strategies and resources can be found on the EdTech Center’s mLearning website, contributed by adult educators who use cell phones (both basic and smart) and other mobile devices to provide access to education to their adult learners, improve learning in classes, and develop self-directed lifelong learners. You might also consider taking our short self-paced course.
called Introduction to Mobile Learning or exploring the EdTech Center’s mLearning technical support site for useful resources and strategies.

Documenting Progress

Whether you are engaging learners in a blended model or in supported distance learning, you will need to keep track of learner progress toward the goals they set in your orientation session. Some adult education programs rely heavily on the reports available in their core curriculum, which often report things like student progress, percentage of correct responses on quizzes and activities, percentage of assignments done, time spent on tasks, and login/logout times. The reports are a great way to measure progress with the learning activities included in the curriculum. These same reports are also available if a teacher has designed a course using an LMS like Moodle, Canvas, or Schoology.

There are other important markers of progress that need to be attended to that are likely not reportable in a core curriculum or LMS, such as the following:

- NRS testing dates and results
- Date and amount of time spent doing in-person instruction
- When and how communication has occurred
- Learner work in supplemental online activities
- Enrollment in classroom learning
- Proxy hours earned
Using a Database to Track Learner Progress

Before we started using FileMaker Pro, we had no idea how much time each teacher was spending with distance learners. Now we have several years' worth of data and better understand how to adequately staff our distance program and which support and communication strategies tend to lead to completion of activities.

- A teacher in Minnesota

Information like this shows how much teacher time is required to support each learner and the impact of that time spent, both in terms of learner progress and in proxy hour accumulation. IDEAL member states have different ways of accomplishing this. For smaller programs, a simple Google document or Excel spreadsheet could be used. If you work in a program with several collaborating teachers supporting distance education, you might consider using a Google spreadsheet that you work on together. Large programs tend to rely on more robust data applications, like FileMaker Pro, Microsoft Access, or custom-developed databases that link to or are a part of the state’s NRS database. No matter the tool or structure of your tracking, be sure to figure out a way to make progress visible to the learner. Such awareness can support further persistence and engagement.
Digital Badges

One way to mark learner progress is through using digital badging. These online micro-credentials are a way to display and document skills learned both in and out of the classroom. Once a task is completed, a learner is awarded a digital badge, which can be included in a student portfolio to show mastery or a skill to employers or postsecondary education institutions. When issuers include clear information about what the learner completed or mastered in order to earn the badge, employers or postsecondary education institutions have more clarity as to the skill levels and accomplishments of the learner. Not only do badges provide a clear way to designate learner accomplishments, establishing a clearly sequenced badging system can also serve to establish tangible goals for learners (Finkelstein, 2013; Wilson, 2019).

There are several ways that distance teachers have been using digital badges. Websites such as Credly, Badgr, and Bloomboard allow
teachers to design digital badges and “issue” them to students. Once a task is completed, a learner is awarded a badge, which is then stored in his or her secure account and displayed on a web page that serves as a transportable badge portfolio to be shared with employers or other stakeholders who need to know a learner’s skills and experience.

Many LMSs, like Canvas and Moodle, have integrated badging systems. Note that some adult basic skills organizations have invested in licensed badging and portfolio systems to provide insights on learner pathways, milestones, and progress toward their learning goals, like ForAllSystems and Badgr Pathways.

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**Acknowledging Accomplishments Using Digital Badges**

"I started using digital badges as a way to reward outstanding performances by my students. I've been surprised by how much they appreciate something that takes me about 5 minutes to do! I now also use them to celebrate things like mastering fractions or reading so many hours of study."

— A teacher in Pennsylvania
Concluding Thoughts

This is likely the longest and most significant chapter in this Handbook. We have tried to summarize some key characteristics of successful instruction in distance and blended learning. If you feel like you have more to learn, you are in good company! There are entire books and courses on the topics covered here. In fact, in our study group IDEAL 102, we go further into instructional issues. To get the most from what you have read here, go back and try to read some of the reports linked in the chapter. Watch the videos. Do your own research! To avoid feeling completely overwhelmed, choose the instructional characteristic that seems most doable in your teaching context and experiment. Learn by doing. Use the activities below to help you get started.

Activity 5.1 Teaching Tasks

Reflect and document how you will structure your instruction.

Describe your plans for achieving different teaching tasks in distance and/or blended learning. Consider including the following information: activities supporting teacher involvement, learning content and technology required, and strategies for communication with your students.
Activity 5.2 Monitoring Learning in Online Curricula

Decide how you will monitor learner progress in your chosen curricula.

Find resources at your organization, through an online search, or from the curriculum publisher to see how student progress is reported. If student data is available to you within the online curriculum, how would you use it to respond to student progress (or lack of progress)? What feedback would you provide the student? What might indicate a student’s need for additional instruction?

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.

References


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