

Introduction

As we write this updated edition of the IDEAL Distance Education and Blended Learning Handbook, adult basic skills programs across the United States are regrouping after working tirelessly through the spring of 2020, implementing distance education programs launched virtually overnight because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some instructors found themselves teaching distance education for the first time in programs that had never previously considered offering distance education services. There were challenges at the programmatic level, too, as local administrators worked to recreate outreach, registration, and other intake activities in completely remote formats. Administrators were also taxed with solving technology access issues for teachers and students alike, and getting teachers the rapid and relevant professional development needed for them to know how to teach online. State-level administrators struggled to reinterpret their existing state distance education policies and the National Reporting System's federal guidelines in light of the need for complete social distancing.

Despite these challenges, instructional and programmatic innovation stemming from necessity made it possible for teachers to maintain contact with students, provide effective support and information about essential services, and engage students in online learning and other forms of remote instruction. Our goal in this updated edition is to integrate examples of this innovation into evidence-based strategies that have defined the IDEAL Consortium's approach to distance and blended learning over the years. We see this as an opportunity to enhance your skills as a teacher or administrator engaged in implementing distance education in an adult education organization. Whether you have years of experience as a distance education practitioner or are new to it, this guide can support continuous improvement of your instruction and programming.

What happened for many during the pandemic was the reactive integration of technology to maintain opportunities for learning. This response was aptly named "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020). While useful at the time, and certainly the spark for much innovation, such an approach is enervating and likely not sustainable. This Handbook, the attendant course (IDEAL 101), and the development of the implementation plan that is part of the course provide the opportunity for proactive strategy to enhance learning and expand capacity in a sustainable way. This Handbook addresses both administrative and instructional issues that are at the core of successful blended and distance education. The Handbook is informed by current research and policy guidelines and observations of effective practice documented by IDEAL Consortium members, past and present, and affiliated state leaders. IDEAL has served as a facilitator of collaboration and sharing of effective practice since its inception in 2002. The collective wisdom of past and current members is included here as the foundation for our interpretation of how to best leverage recent technological innovations for the good of adult education learners.

Structure

This seventh edition of the Handbook is the third to be created under the stewardship of the EdTech Center at World Education, Inc. Though its structure mirrors that of the previous editions authored

by Leslie Petty and Jere Johnston (published by Project IDEAL at the University of Michigan), the content within each chapter has been rewritten to reflect the technology and attendant instructional shifts required for effective learning well into the twenty-first century, most notably the importance of blended learning in adult education and how to conduct programming entirely remotely, if necessary.

The organization of the Handbook chapters reflects important programmatic considerations for setting up a distance education program or expanding options for blended learning. The guidance provided and reflection required in each chapter support the development of practical plans for distance and blended education implementation. The end goal for readers of the Handbook is crafting a distance or blended education program planning document.

Chapter 2 | Recruitment: Identifying and Recruiting Students

- Decide who, where, and how to find learners for your program.

Chapter 3 | Screening: Determining What Supports Students Need to Succeed in Distance and Blended Learning

- Identify which learners you can successfully support most readily.
- Identify skills and technology access gaps that you need to support if learners are to succeed.
- Provide completely remote options for intake activities.

Chapter 4 | Orientation: Setting Up Learners for Success

- Design an orientation that provides students with the necessary information and skills for a successful learning experience and a plan for reaching goals.
- Provide completely remote options for orientation.

Chapter 5 | Instruction: Getting Started

- Learn about characteristics of instruction featuring ample teacher involvement and how these characteristics are represented in different education models (e.g., fully distance or blended learning), the teacher role, and how to provide motivating and supportive feedback on students' work.
- Consider how to develop teacher-created curricula that are standards-aligned and make use of Open Educational Resources (OERs).
- Deepen understanding of how to make best use of proprietary online curricula and other educational and communications technologies, including selecting appropriate edtech tools based on instructional goals and context.

Chapter 6 | Assessment: Student Participation and Progress

- Build awareness of the different purposes assessment serves.
- Explore multiple ways to gauge learner progress, including information needed to include distance learners in the National Reporting System (NRS).

Chapter 7 | Administrative Issues: Getting Started

- Learn how a pilot approach and creating a culture of experimentation encourage innovation.

- Examine issues that administrators face in implementing and sustaining distance education programs as part of their organization’s educational offerings.
- Better understand how to monitor data and distance education program performance.
- Learn how distance education is linked to WIOA guidelines and prioritized adult education initiatives.

Each of these chapters will follow a similar format, beginning with an overview of the topic, followed by implementation recommendations, and concluding with a reflective activity designed to help teachers and administrators plan and implement a new distance education program or improve an existing program.

These chapters serve as the foundation for the IDEAL Consortium’s introductory online course, IDEAL 101: Foundations of Distance Education and Blended Learning. Fully developed versions of the reflective activities referred to at the end of each chapter are available electronically in the course for IDEAL Consortium member states. The final chapter, Chapter 7, discusses issues critical for setting up distance education from the perspective of a program administrator.

Together, the chapters provide structure for creating or revising a distance education implementation plan for your adult education program. Now is the time to reflect on your past work in this area (both prior to and/or during COVID) and build strategies for even more effective programming moving forward based on lessons learned.

Using the Handbook as a Springboard for Change

We hope that you will think about developing or improving your distance education program systematically, considering each aspect of distance and blended education programming defined in this Handbook. Whether you are new to these models, are using these materials to reboot an existing program, or are looking to provide more structure around the technology you have been leveraging in recent months, the different topics reflected in the chapters provide guidance. Either way, please keep the following points in mind.

- **Don’t lead with technology.** Do consider all aspects of educational programming, using a holistic approach to program development or improvement. It is not enough to buy a license to an online curriculum and hire a teacher. The experience of the learner needs to be considered from the time they express interest in learning through the time they are assessed.
- **Start small.** As you get started, think about doing this work in small, managed, and highly experimental projects. Start with one targeted group of learners, choosing appropriate learning materials for those learners and choosing technologies and processes that you will use to organize, deliver, and communicate about learning content. Perhaps choose one core curriculum when first beginning. Teachers can then identify or create supplemental activities to fill in gaps and further address skills as they become familiar with the curriculum over time. Consider one primary communication tool (e.g., WhatsApp, Remind, email) and one venue for organizing and delivering content (e.g., Google Sites, Weebly, Canvas, Moodle).
- **Provide adequate training.** Provide the requisite number of staff with the support, training, and time they need to put your plans into practice.
- **Keep reinventing.** Technology is a dynamic beast! Both the technological demands faced by your learners and the learning resources available are constantly changing.

Keep looking to expand quality programming with professional development. If you have an existing

distance education program, use the Handbook with new instructors and administrators. It can help them consider the issues they need to address in order to be able to implement your distance education program.

How to Use This Handbook...

...to create new programs

If you are setting up a brand-new distance education program, you are likely using this handbook as a component of IDEAL 101. If so, here are some tips to make the most of the experience and end up with a useful and implementable distance education site plan to pilot.

- Be sure at least one administrator and one teacher are working together in IDEAL 101. This way, both administrative and instructional considerations will be included in the plan. Administrators, consider reading Chapter 7 first. The information there will help you support your team through this learning and the resulting pilot.
- Read the chapters in order (unless you're an administrator!). The issues covered in each chapter mirror the sequence of a learner's contact with the distance education program. If you go in order, you will be sure to see how support for the learner unfolds.
- Allow time to participate in the IDEAL 101 online discussion daily. IDEAL 101 is a community of practice. Your learning depends on the contributions of others, and vice versa. Don't wait until the last day to post a comment. Do respond to each other frequently.
- After reading and discussing online, allow time for teachers and administrators at your site to work together to complete the accompanying activities. You need not be in the same place to do this—meet once a week on Zoom; work together in Google Drive so that you can collaborate asynchronously and see each other's work.

... within existing programs

We believe that teachers or administrators new to distance or blended learning—but coming into established programs—need to understand the ways that teaching in such models differs from strictly classroom programs. They also need to understand the reasons their organization's distance or blended model program is structured as it is. And, of course, they need to develop skills for teaching in a distance learning environment.

A good first step would be to review the list of teaching and technology skills for distance teachers in Appendix A and Appendix D. The appendices provide the new teacher with both a deeper understanding of what distance (and to some extent blended) teaching entails, and a chance to reflect on the skills they already possess. Discussing these resources with the program administrator provides the starting point for a conversation about what skills the new distance or blended model teacher needs to develop and for generating ways to provide appropriate training and support.

The readings in this Handbook are another useful resource for new teachers. They provide insight into the major areas involved in delivering distance education to adult learners and offer concrete examples from experienced teachers. If enrolled in IDEAL 101, these new teachers should follow the set of activities in the course for existing programs. These activities require the participant to review the distance education plan developed by the original distance teachers and administrators as part of their IDEAL 101 course and then, working with administrators (if they are new teachers), complete

the activities by incorporating any fresh ideas they might bring to distance education programming.

Following this process, an adult education organization can continuously update its distance education implementation plan. It may also be helpful to have the experienced teachers in an organization informally mentor new distance teachers and help them make the transition from classroom to distance or blended teaching. New (and experienced) teachers would also benefit from becoming involved in a community of practice where teachers support each other in their efforts to build and expand their distance and blended teaching skills.

Accept Our Invitation

We hope that as you move through the information and activities in this Handbook, you do so with your learners in mind. As with all educational programming, both distance and blended education implementation varies greatly depending on learner audience, resources available, and other context-specific characteristics. The goal is for you to be able to increase options for your adult learners and remove some of the barriers that may have prevented adults from entering or persisting in traditional classroom programs. This Handbook is designed to help you address the challenges that may arise as you engage in that work.

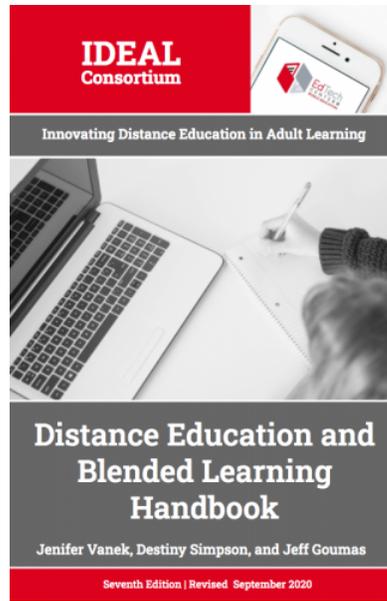
We urge you to bear in mind that implementing an effective distance education program and developing the skills to become an effective distance education and blended learning teacher are endeavors that require time and hard work. One state director involved in the early days of Project IDEAL put it best when she cautioned against wanting “instant gratification,” and instead urged those new to distance education to realize that they need to nurture fledgling efforts and allow time for growth.

We welcome you to join us in this work and to become a champion for distance education and blended learning. Our predecessors in this work, Leslie Petty and Jere Johnston, elegantly noted in the introduction to the fourth edition:

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.

The words ring true today and perhaps have taken on more urgency. In a time of technological ubiquity and programmatic priority shifts due to WIOA, adult education programs must give learners opportunities to use technology for learning and for problem-solving tasks that support both their academic development and the growth of technology skills. We believe that distance education and blending learning make this possible and that the path to success is through systematic experimentation supported by professional development and reflection.

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