

The

# Adult Basic Classroom

*For Florida Adult Basic  
Education Practitioners*

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[www.ABEFlorida.org](http://www.ABEFlorida.org)

**Distance learning is a buzzword in education right now, but will it work for ABE programs? Would any of my students be better served through a distance learning ABE class? Can my institution support such instruction?**

It was probably inevitable that the growth of the Internet and the use of computers would develop in such a way that they became a new kind of classroom. Distance learning classrooms are prestigious; you don't sound illiterate if you are taking a class, any class, on a computer. They are user friendly because they can be attended at the student's convenience. They provide access to all kinds of information not found in a traditional classroom. Still, how do adult education students fit in the picture? If you are struggling with basic skills, can you manipulate computers well enough to learn what you need to be learning? Can adult students maintain the personal incentive needed to keep up with work on a screen?

## WHAT IS DISTANCE LEARNING?

It is important to remember that distance learning is a delivery method; it is not a new course but a new way to teach the same course. An on-line distance learning program uses the Internet to deliver instruction. A virtual classroom is established on-line by using an instructional platform that allows teachers to maintain a roster, post assignments, give quizzes, and communicate on-line with students via e-mail or class discussion boards or chat rooms. Okaloosa-Walton Community College Adult Education Division (OWCC) and The English Center in Miami-Dade County both have successful Distance Learning ABE programs up and running.

## WHO DOES DISTANCE LEARNING SERVE?

OWCC suggests providers of Adult Basic Education consider three questions when deciding if their students need the option of a distance learning classroom. First, are there many eligible students in your area who do not have access to site-based classes at fixed times and location? Second, do significant numbers of students drop your classes because of scheduling

conflicts or discontinued support services or finances? Third, do you lack facility space to accommodate instructional classes at times and locations that are best for students in your area to attend? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you have students who would be well-served by a distance learning classroom.

At OWCC all of their students who are in the distance learning program are functioning at literacy levels 4.0 and above. A student who is functioning below the 4.0 literacy level may not have the reading skills needed for the distance learning classroom.

Current distance learning students list several reasons for choosing on-line learning. Carolina Landgraf of The Learning Center (TLC) in Miami-Dade writes, "I'm taking the Internet course because I think (for me) it is the best way to study English when your time is limited." Erin Galloway of TLC Miami-Dade likes to study at night when her four children are asleep. This cuts on childcare costs, too. Juslene Francois of TLC Miami-Dade writes, "I like school but I don't have enough time to go because I have a full-time job." Hannah Kahn of TLC Miami-Dade found success in the on-line program that eluded her in the traditional classroom because of medical challenges. "I have narcolepsy, a severe sleep disorder that causes me to fall asleep periodically without warning. It was difficult to go to school and sit in class." Studying on-line allows her to work toward her GED in spite of her narcolepsy. Mayerly Martinez of TLC Miami-Dade is a recent GED graduate. She praised the on-line program: "I like that system because I can practice and practice. When I don't understand something I can review it until I understand it. It is also good because I can study whenever I have the time."

Students with medical challenges, child care concerns, employment restrictions and transportation problems are well-served with on-line learning. Distance learning can also serve prison communities and can supplement the work of traditional students who want to be able to move

along faster with their studies. Most schools providing distance learning also provide a lab classroom where students can come to use the computers to work on-line, can meet face to face with teachers and other students and can get computer instruction if needed, so both those immediately comfortable with the computer and those needing more computer support can be effectively served.

## STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS ON-LINE

Suzy Wood, an ABE/GED Distance Learning Instructor with Okaloosa-Walton Community College, was originally concerned about the quality of the teacher-student relationship on-line. "When I first began my job as a distance learning teacher, I wondered if the relationship between teacher and student would be less than in a traditional classroom and how it would affect learning. I have found that students are just as motivated and welcome the opportunity to reach their goals. Communication between student and teacher is essential and occurs regularly.

The Learning Center On-line program of Miami-Dade recognizes that the single key to successful distance learning is the student-teacher interaction. This interaction should happen daily through e-mail, telephone calls, discussion boards and sometimes face-to-face contact. On-line teachers do more than just disseminate information, keep attendance records and point students to web sites. On-line teachers help students learn to efficiently and effectively use the technology of on-line learning; they bring knowledge within reach of students and help them understand and apply that knowledge; they help motivate students and help students to stay focused on and make progress toward their final education goals. Sound familiar? Much like in a traditional classroom, on-line teachers are expected to facilitate learning, establish good communication and rapport with

students, monitor students' work and provide timely feedback, update Florida Curriculum Framework checklists, keep attendance reports and retention logs and assist students with software and computer literacy problems. Many of these tasks are easier for the teacher teaching on-line because the computer is excellent at keeping records and providing summaries of data, but with the daily individual responses required for each student and the constant teaching and management of computer skills, doesn't teaching a distance learning class require more time than teaching students in a traditional classroom?

### TIME MANAGEMENT

Many teachers are hesitant to begin teaching a distance learning class because they fear the time requirement. Suzy Wood reports that she spends an average of 30 minutes to one hour per student per week. This includes on-line correspondence, and some planning and grading. Ms. Wood is employed for 25 hours a week and successfully teaches 30 to 35 students; her colleague works 18 hours per week and works with 20 to 25 students. This seems to be a comparable time frame to working with multilevel students in a traditional classroom.

Many teachers are also hesitant to take on the task of learning the technology used to teach distance learning classes, and this is a requirement of your time. However, most software is teacher friendly and does offer fully developed lesson plans, 24-hour on-line support and teacher training.

### BENEFITS

All of the information on distance learning reminds us that teaching on the Internet makes available resources and learning opportunities not available in the traditional classroom that is not wired. Besides access to research, there is access to interactive learning as students work in small groups on-line to publish a summary of a chapter or study questions they have written. There is access for interaction between students, teachers and even experts on discussion boards. Students are often more confident in their answers because they have had time to write and revise them before publishing them. Students get feedback on their work from a variety of people (other students or interested professionals) who provide a variety of perspectives about the work. Publishing to an audience other than the teacher also gives students an extra incentive to publish their best work.

Many students praise the availability and flexibility of the course when it is presented on-line, so should teachers. Now a teacher can respond to student needs at odd hours, when a

childcare provider cancels or is ill, and after time to thoughtfully consider each response. Also, e-mail and discussion boards provide a record of each teacher-student interaction. This is helpful in planning for and evaluating student progress.

### PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are a real risk in on-line learning. Students may answer questions on quizzes while using their texts; students may get outside help writing papers or essays. Still, the risks of plagiarism and cheating on-line are not prohibitive. Teachers will be watching a student's work in progress and will be able to tell, just like in a traditional classroom, if a student's work has made an unrealistic jump to perfection. Teachers can set up real-time tests that are timed and don't allow students adequate time to check their texts for answers. There are numerous software programs that help teachers check written work for plagiarism. Your program may want tests for certain levels of LCPs to be done in person at a monitored computer lab. Ultimately, students will not be passing the GED if they have not somehow absorbed the material expected. But as in all learning, the most important factor in determining student success is teacher-student interaction. The student in a distance learning class who has a positive and important relationship with his teacher will be less likely to cheat.

### GETTING READY

Mike Murray of WebCT acknowledges that all that has worked in the traditional classroom will not work in the distance learning classroom. However, he does provide some ideas for learning to teach on-line. First, he recommends using the information computers can give you about a student's activity. Such tracking allows you to notice early which students are having trouble starting the course; sending an e-mail is a good way to remind them that you want them in class.

Murray suggests an easy way to help out with technological and other problems. "Another way to help students feel comfortable with (and, therefore, connected to) the learning experience is to make them part of its organization. The very first time I taught a distance course, I held bi-weekly sessions to discuss the delivery of the course itself. These students shared insights with me about what it is like to learn on-line. In the process they put themselves in my place and made an investment in the course they might otherwise not have made. These sessions are very valuable and can easily be conducted with bi-weekly chat sessions."

Finally, it is important to find ways to generate enthusiasm on-line. The tone of your board

discussion prompts, the language of your e-mails to students, the promptness with which you respond to student work all convey your own enthusiasm for teaching on-line and indicate to your students that you find this work important, even if it is getting done at midnight.

### IS YOUR SCHOOL READY?

Suzy Wood reminds us that "The distance learning classroom is another choice for students not meant to replace the traditional classroom. Students have a choice between the regular classroom and the distance learning classroom; therefore, we are reaching more students than ever before." Students with inadequate computer skills or minimal interest in using a computer will sign up for the traditional classroom; others will make the time investment to learn the computer skills needed to do the coursework. Such computer skills are beneficial in the market place and some research has suggested that the higher level thinking skills enhanced by working at a computer in interactive study help create lifelong learners.

Beneficial and abundant student-teacher interaction; access to research and interactive work with peers, teacher and experts; and accessibility 24 hours a day, seven days a week make distance learning a valuable option for ABE/GED students and their teachers. Is your school ready for this?

**For more information,  
go to the following web sites:**

<http://literacy.owcc.net>

[http://www.tecmiami.com/tlc/  
goingtoclass.htm](http://www.tecmiami.com/tlc/goingtoclass.htm)

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