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Celebrating 10 Years of Enhancing Adult Literacy ...Through Technology

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As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Ohio Literacy Resource Center, it's fascinating to look back on the changes in technology since its inception. Ten years ago, the Internet was in its infancy – there were no local program websites, teachers using the Web to locate instructional materials, or online discussion groups linking a tutor in Washington to a tutor in Florida. The OLRC started with a single email account on a then-revolutionary mainframe system and a Gopher search. In 2003, from January to October alone, our websites have accounted for over 1.3 million page views from 354,000 visitors.

For many valid reasons, adult education often lags a bit behind other educational domains when it comes to technology. Issues such as funding, available time for teachers, student persistence in programs, and a lack of age-appropriate technology-based materials all contribute to the slower integration of technology into adult education classrooms.

It's natural to assume that "integrating technology" means using computer-based educational software. However, the term "technology" includes not only educational software, but also Internet-based sites and applications, video and audio applications, and distance learning. These technological media can be successfully integrated into classrooms, providing teachers and students with a range of teaching and learning modes that can be customized to meet the needs of each.

During its ten years working with programs and developing resources, the OLRC has worked with a number of partners, created materials for ABLE teachers, and participated in pilot projects to evaluate the benefits of resources for use in the adult literacy classrooms. Three projects, Ohio's Project IDEAL pilot, Madison Heights pilot, and Eureka! database are three programs which use very different technologies to provide teachers with resources to enhance and augment their teaching.

Distance Learning: Project IDEAL

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Adult students often find it difficult to attend traditional classes due to work schedules, childcare responsibilities, or childcare difficulties. Distance learning, therefore, could

meet more students' needs. Project IDEAL is a program funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult and Vocational Education (OVAE) and managed by the University of Michigan. Fourteen other states are also participating in the pilot study. With "learning outside the traditional classroom" being the delivery method, each state has chosen at least one already-developed curriculum to deliver via distance learning. Ohio chose to use GED Connection as the instructional content for the pilot study. GED Connection, developed jointly by PBS, KET, and NCAL, includes 39 half-hour video programs, 3 full-color workbooks, Web-based learning activities, a teacher's guide, and an online management system.

Fourteen Ohio ABLE programs submitted grant proposals for inclusion in the pilot program and seven programs representing a variety of communities were selected. Pilots received \$19,500 in additional funding from the Ohio Department of Education ABLE Office for teacher salaries and benefits, supplies purchase, meeting and training expenses, and a limited offset to director/coordinator salary. The grant supplement allowed programs some flexibility with recruiting and retaining students using a distance learning model without having to be concerned with decreasing their enrollment in their regular, non-distance classes. A goal was set to recruit 100 new distance learning students across all seven programs.

Staff from the seven pilot programs attended a three-day training to learn GED Connection, its online management system, and data reporting required by the national Project IDEAL office. Pilot staff also participated in a distance learning course for continuing professional development. Sites began recruiting distance learners in January of 2003 and continued until June, 2003 when the grant year formally ended.

As potential distance learners inquired about the program, Ohio required a face-to-face orientation at an Ohio ABLE program, although not necessarily the same program providing the distance learning component. Students were accepted into the program if they met certain requirements for participation, including a entry NRS level of Low or High Adult Secondary Education, computer skills, and Internet access.

Pilot sites used a variety of methods to provide distance learning instruction: a “partial distance program,” in which distance learning was augmented with limited face-to-face interaction between teacher and student; regular classroom supplements to distance education; and “pure distance” education with teachers and students interacting only by phone or online.

While still in pilot phase, Ohio’s seven programs have provided a large amount of technical data and anecdotal information about their distance learning implementations. As of the close of the grant period in June, 2003, 215 students had 12 or more seat hours, excluding orientation time, and 197 students had met their stated goals. Demographic data show that the majority of students were in the 25-to-44-year old age range, white, female, and employed.

Most teachers felt that, due to a number of reasons, the majority of students that participated would not have wanted or been able to attend traditional classes. Distance learning has the very real potential to provide additional instruction to students who would ordinarily not attend in-person classes. Ohio’s pilot program continues this fiscal year with programs increasing their recruitment goals and gathering additional data for the study. Visit the Ohio Project IDEAL website at <literacy.kent.edu/ideal>.

Video Supplements for Instruction: Madison Heights/Lifelines

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The Madison Heights and Lifelines series are projects of Intelcom, designed for use in adult literacy programs to promote change in family settings. In 2002, nine states contributed to the design and development of the two series, which include over twenty videotapes and supporting materials. The video series consist of dramatic videos (Madison Heights) and documentaries (Lifelines); teacher resource books and blackline handout masters are available to supplement the video/workbook products.

In the Fall of 2002, Ohio released a request for proposal for participation to programs with Ohio ABLE-approved and funded Family Literacy components. Six programs became pilot sites. The goals of the pilot and curriculum were to provide experiences that help adults improve their literacy and problem solving skills, help adults enhance their self esteem and improve their ability to interact with others, help adults in their roles as parents and caregivers, provide ideas for age-appropriate interactive activities, and provide experience to help adults with their own needs and those of their families.

Programs were awarded \$8,000 grants to offset teacher time for instructional support, purchase of materials, travel expenses, marketing, or other costs associated with the project. Program staff participated in a two-day training in January, 2003 which provided a walk-through of the curriculum, videos, and work texts. Program staff also received an administrative overview of implementation issues, such as student assessment, reporting, and accountability.

Programs began recruiting students after the initial training and continued working with them until the close of the grant and pilot phase in June, 2003. Because of the integrated design of the materials - videos, work texts, handouts – teachers could customize instruction and activities based on students’ needs. Videos could be watched at the program, in a library, or in a student’s home; the paper-based materials could be used in the same way.

The pilot phase for Madison Heights/Lifelines ended in June, 2003 with tapes and materials being distributed to all Ohio programs with approved Family Literacy components. Two teachers who participated in the pilot program, Barb Nourse (Scioto County) and Cindy Smith (Kettering), developed an Implementation Guide which will be distributed along with the tapes and materials.

The Madison Heights/Lifelines materials and content were very well-received by students. Most liked the flexibility that the integrated design provided. The video series deals with emotionally intense subjects and often elicits strong responses from viewers. Teachers reported that the subject matter and students’ responses produced very deep, meaningful discussions and a sense of community within the classroom.

The use of integrated curriculum provides a viable and economically feasible option for programs that want to supplement existing instruction with technology-based materials.

Online Database Supplement for Instruction: EUREKA!

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In 1995, the OLRC began the Recommended Tradebooks for Adult Literacy Programs project, evaluating authentic literature for use in adult literacy classrooms. We convened the Reading Group, a set of educators who read, evaluated, and provided audience and instructional information for inclusion in a print digest. Several years into the project, a hierarchy of keywords was begun in an attempt to classify and categorize the 300+ books that had been added to the collection. The discussion of “keywords” led to a decision to convert the then-print catalog into an online, searchable database.

In 1999, during a project brainstorming session, we decided that the while we were converting the Tradebooks to an online version, we could also enhance both the collection and keyword search results by adding websites, software, and lesson plans to the already extensive set of books available on the database. This collection could be a one-stop, searchable website that would provide a rich set of materials for adult education teachers. And Eureka! was born.

The first step in designing Eureka was the creation of the hierarchical search mechanism, the keyword search that has become the focal point of the system. Existing keywords needed to be standardized, grouped, and evaluated. Existing keywords were arranged into logical groups, eventually resulting in 22 categories and nearly 1,000 keywords with more being added.

This web-based resource allows users to search by keyword, top-level category, audience, and GED descriptor to find reviewed and compiled resources. Available resources include books, websites, software, and lesson plans appropriate for use in adult and family literacy programs. Each type of resource has a specific detail page which includes publication information, web addresses, and file links for lesson plans. Summaries, teaching suggestions, and all relevant keywords for the item are also included. One of the most powerful features of Eureka is the ability to run searches from the keywords on resource detail pages.

The Eureka database search is now our most popular web-based resource, with nearly 50,000 searches conducted between January and October of 2003 alone. Visit the Eureka! website at: <literacy.kent.edu/eureka>.