



What Is a Distance Learning Experiment?

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At this time in history, administrators and teachers are looking for the best ways to use distance learning with adult learners. While distance education has been in common use since the late 19th century, it has typically been used with highly motivated learners who are self-disciplined and sufficiently skilled in reading, writing, and math that they can easily learn new content given a textbook or well-organized set of study materials. There are very few examples of using distance education with ABE students who need to learn basic academic skills. For this reason it is important to try out various strategies in a systematic fashion to learn such things as:

- How to identify the population of adult learners not already in classes who would find distant learning attractive and who also are suited to the independent study entailed.
- How to orient students for their role as distant learners – how to set goals for their learning, become acquainted with the instructional product to be studied at a distance, establish expectations for completing work, and learn the skills required to use the technologies involved—especially when the learning tasks require computers and the use of online activities.
- How to support students working at a distance: review their work, answer questions about the material, and help them maintain their motivation.
- How to assess their performance and count them in the state’s accountability system.

While we can identify a number of recommended practices in each of these areas, much more needs to be known. Recommended practice varies in two ways: by the product being used (Workplace Essential Skills, Crossroads Café, TV411, Plato, etc.) and by the constraints and opportunities of particular communities. For these reasons, we need to devise experiments that involve a variety of products and that are implemented in a variety of different communities. By collecting data from each experiment on what works best we will be able to develop a rich set of recommended practices to guide distance efforts in the future.

But experiments have an additional value. Those who deliver distance instruction need the opportunity to try out strategies and figure out what works best for them, given their particular skills and the opportunities in their community. An experiment serves as “practice teaching” for participants, and this can be one of the best forms of professional development we could devise.

An experiment has several features:

- **A Plan.** Each site develops an implementation plan following an outline provided by Project IDEAL. (In the online course being developed by IDEAL, teachers and administrators will develop an implementation plan for their site built around a particular instructional product – WES, TV411, etc.). Everyone’s plan will cover the same topics (recruitment, orientation, etc.), but each plan will look somewhat different reflecting different opportunities available in each locality and different skills that teachers bring to the activity.
- **An Experimental Mindset.** Participants need an experimental mindset. They are “researchers,” inventing and testing new practices, assessing their worth, discarding the ones that don’t seem to work and keeping the ones that do.
- **Sharing of Best Practices.** They share their findings with other researchers (teachers and administrators in other experimenting sites) to help everybody be successful and to contribute to an ever-growing collection of best practices. These best practices will appear in the Handbook of Distance Education for Adult Learners that will be revised annually and shared with all of the IDEAL states. A recommended cycle for sharing is monthly if conference calling is used, or more frequently if a listserv or electronic conference is used.
- **Collecting Data on The Big Questions.** Data on topics such as students served, seat time, learning gains, and teaching time are collected by participating teachers and administrators, but reported at half- or full-year intervals to help answer the larger questions about cost and value of meeting the needs of adult learners using out-of-classroom approaches.

Multiple Sites. In most arenas, practices deemed “successful” are many and varied. In one community local businesses might be a good resource to recruit distance learners, while in another community businesses are not open to this possibility. Using the Internet to support learners might be successful in one community where Internet access is easy and common, but it might not work in a community where Internet access is difficult and learners are less skilled at using computers. To discover best practices requires multiple sites trying to accomplish similar goals but using somewhat different strategies to reach those goals. Two or three sites may be good to start. As a state makes a strong commitment to distance education additional sites might be needed. In Pennsylvania’s second year of experimenting with teaching WES at a distance they recruited 20 sites (two teachers each). As a group they are finding many good practices, but not every site has the same good practice. Two sites have discovered good ways to work with local businesses to get students; four different sites have discovered compelling strategies to gain the cooperation of local One-Stops.