

Summation of Ongoing Research on Applying Distance Education in Adult Literacy Program

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Distance education is growing rapidly as a means of delivering instruction primarily in higher education, with most institutions using the Internet ([US Department of Education, 1999](#)). Distance education offers access to students who may be fully employed during the day or who are home-bound with small children or disabilities, or otherwise unable to attend traditional classes. Can the distance education opportunities that institutions of higher education are using also be undertaken by adult literacy programs? Is distance education viable for learners who are functioning below a high school level?

The growing popularity of distance education raises the issue of what learning is. Burge ([1988](#)) asserts that most distance education courses are built on the transmission model since distance education has its origins in correspondence study. With the advent of two-way technologies, such as audio- and video-conferencing, a constructivist learning environment became possible. Internet technology now makes possible learning in a social environment since learners can be linked in a “virtual” classroom with an instructor. The World Wide Web has opened up opportunities for social learning leading to the development of higher order thinking and learning.

In the constructivist view learning is socially constructed and situated in a specific context ([Bruner, 1990](#)). Learners construct new knowledge and skills through interacting with others and the environment and reflecting upon these experiences. Learning that closely resembles the real world of the participants occurs as a social process involving others in solving real-world problems (problem-based learning).

The paper reports on a segment of a larger research project. The investigator was funded by the US Department of Education to explore applications of online distance education in adult literacy programs. She conducted extensive web searches and email correspondence primarily in the US and Australia to identify literacy programs using distance education. She also visited Australia for three months in 2001 to conduct site visits of programs that are using distance education for instruction. This article reports on the Australian part of the research. A monograph ([Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003](#)) summarizes the entire study in the US and, by contrast, in Australia.

Methods

Data were gathered from Australian adult literacy programs that are using online instruction for distance education. The investigator used surveys, interviews, and email correspondence as well as analysis of instructional web sites in data collection. Australia, through its federal and state planning for flexible learning and targeted funding, has

strategically set out to be the international leader in this arena. Although flexible learning does not necessarily mean online delivery, use of the Internet has certainly been part of the instructional effort. Federal dollars have also been used for professional development, encouraging teachers to experiment and develop their capacity to help others with flexible learning. Although the government's evaluation efforts have focused primarily on policy strategies rather than on learner outcomes, and although many of the instructional efforts are experimental and supplemental to the traditional classroom, the descriptions of practice can provide insights for the United States about implementing online distance education. Like the United States, Australia has both federal and state efforts in adult literacy. All have taken different approaches to online distance education for adult literacy programs. We will draw some lessons learned from these case studies to inform the efforts in the United States.

Data were gathered on federal efforts as well as state initiatives in four states. The federal efforts were gleaned primarily from interviews with key informants and policy review. The four states became case studies of implementation of online distance education in adult literacy programs. Further descriptive analyses and discussion are provided elsewhere ([Askov, et al., 2003](#)). One state case study is presented after a description of the federal efforts in online distance education in adult basic education.

Results

Federal Efforts in Australia

Australia is striving to become a global leader in applying new technologies to vocational and adult education and training through the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National VET (Vocational Education and Training) System 2000–2004. (For more information see *Strategy 2002*: flexiblelearning.net.au.) Federally funded activities, most funded by the Australian National Training Authority, fall under each goal of the framework. To encourage independent access of services, learners are provided a national gateway to various educational and training programs on a Web site (www.edna.edu.au/index.html).

The first goal of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework calls for “creative, capable people.” The main strategy in attaining that goal is professional development. As part of this strategy, several programs have been established with federal funds: LearnScope, which supports practitioners in developing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to apply new learning technologies for flexible learning and delivery; Virtual Learning Community, which encourages the continued development and integration of online learning communities across the VET sector for professional development for flexible learning; Flexible Learning Leaders, which provides professional development for the high-skill end of the flexible learning continuum of practitioners; and Flexways, which provides a Web-based resource to assist practitioners in identifying their professional development needs in learning technologies and flexible learning, developing a professional development plan, and accessing nationally developed resources.

These federal programs provide professional development not only for practitioners new to distance education, but also for experienced educators so that they can become Flexible Learning Leaders and mentors of others who are inexperienced. Teachers are urged to share what they have learned through the Virtual Learning Community program. Career development is encouraged through support for Flexways.

The federal funds are also used to encourage innovation in the LearnScope grants (learnscope.anta.gov.au) as a safe way to learn how to apply distance education to the literacy programs. LearnScope now has a strong presence throughout Australia and is enhancing the professional skills of both individual practitioners and their organizations. In 2000, 293 projects were established with more than 2,700 participants across all states/territories. In 2001, 337 projects were established with more than 3,000 participants across Australia. The authors are unaware of any similar programs for professional development at the federal or state level in the United States.

Other goals related to distance education for literacy programs concern the creation of a supportive technological infrastructure and world-class online content development and support services. Strategies include online national product development, evaluation, and further implementation, as well as access to and equity in online learning especially for targeted populations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, learners with disabilities, and learners with low literacy levels).

The development of toolboxes has also occurred with federal support. A toolbox is a collection of online training materials comprising learning activities, resources, and user guides to support delivery of competencies (including literacy) from endorsed training packages. By sponsoring the development of 41 toolboxes, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework has supported the implementation of 24 training packages and the development of 566 industry competencies. In addition, six online product projects for equity groups have been developed. More information is available at the toolbox Web site (www.flexiblelearning.net.au/toolbox/).

The Australian government has also funded research to increase the understanding of pedagogical, technical, and managerial aspects of flexible learning, including online learning. Use of a quality assurance framework including national protocols for nationally funded projects is supported at the federal level to develop and implement online programs. Research on distance education for literacy programs has received limited federal support in the United States. The issues of quality assurance and comparability to face-to-face programs have not been considered.

The Flexible Learning Web site (the.flexiblelearning.net.au/accessequity/content/research.asp) provides links to research concerning access to and equity of literacy services. Research papers have been developed to provide the theoretical background as well as report on a study conducted with targeted online learners. The extensive report prepared as part of Strategy 2000 suggests that online learning alone would be inappropriate for the special needs groups; these groups need human contact and support in their learning. These learners also will learn best if instruction is tailored

to their learning styles and cultures rather than “one size fits all” online instruction. Guidelines for managers and practitioners, for Web accessibility, and for course development are also provided.

Perhaps most remarkable is not the amount of federal money devoted to these efforts but the process of continually updating annual strategic plans after evaluating and revising fundable activities. Australia has been very systematic in establishing goals and strategies, revised annually, to become a world leader in flexible learning, including online learning. The deliberate federal efforts moving Australia into a position of global leadership in flexible online learning includes adult education as well as vocational education and training programs. These targeted efforts appear to be unmatched in the United States.

State Efforts in Australia

As in the United States, states in Australia have been very active in providing funding to design online instruction for literacy instruction. Although the monograph ([Askov, et al., 2003](#)) considers four different models that various Australian states have pursued, this paper focuses only on one state as an example. Most of the states use the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) institutes to develop and deliver online instruction in adult and vocational education.

The government of Western Australia (WA) established WestOne Services (www.westone.wa.gov.au) with the mission of enhancing adult and vocational education and training in this very large state. WestOne occupies a large office building in Perth with impressive television and videoconferencing studios in addition to Web authoring and printing capabilities. It also is responsible for business development, product development and distribution, and other services. The state’s fiscal resources for course development are centralized at WestOne. WestOne offers no instruction directly. All instruction is offered through the state’s TAFE institutes.

WestOne Online designs and delivers courses to the TAFE institutes throughout the state. Its centralized approach to development allows local input, as a TAFE institute can propose a course to be developed to WestOne. Often, a local college instructor develops the content in partnership with WestOne’s technical experts, and a quality assurance process follows. The course then can be used—but not modified—by any TAFE institute in the state. WestOne holds the copyright on the materials. Although WebCT is frequently used, CD-ROMs and workbooks often supplement the online components.

One course entitled “Flying through the Web” is currently available under the General Curriculum Options 3 (part of the Certificates of General Education for Adults) that roughly corresponds to mid-level literacy skills. This course was developed first as part of a series of online literacy courses orienting mid-level literacy learners to Internet use. The home page pictures an Australian barbecue; learners click on various objects at the barbecue to take them into bulletin boards, e-mail, chat, and so forth. The “guide” is a

talking parrot who provides navigational assistance. The next course, "Reading and Writing for Level 3," has been developed, as will a course in numeracy and mathematics at the same level. All are written in the WebCT learning management system.

The Western Australian experience suggests that course development occurs best in teams of practitioners and instructional designers/computer specialists. Practitioners offer the content expertise, and technology specialists have the expertise to design Web pages that are easy to read and appealing to the target audience. Selecting instruction in the use of the Web as the first course in a package makes sense to enable learners to engage in literacy content instruction.

Conclusions from the Study of Australia

Because of Australia's commitment to flexible learning that includes online learning, federal and state resources have been directed toward making the country a world leader in this arena. The purpose is to offer options to people who need additional training, thereby expanding access to services. Literacy is considered a part of a more global effort to enhance vocational education and training because literacy is recognized as a prerequisite to and part of most training programs.

Most Australian states use the WebCT learning management system for course development and delivery. Although a site license for WebCT is expensive, it offers consistency to both teachers and learners. Its communication tools (i.e., e-mail, threaded discussions on bulletin boards, chat rooms) provide opportunities for students to construct their own knowledge from the instructional materials presented on the Web and to learn by interacting with others. Additional materials, such as workbooks and CD-ROMs, can be easily integrated into the learning management system. Although the instructional portions of the courses may follow a transmission model of learning, the communication tools generally encourage teachers to follow constructivist and social learning philosophical models.

Especially interesting are WebQuests, instructional activities that teachers construct using existing Web sites. As part of the WebCT learning management system, teachers usually create WebQuests for face-to-face instruction and then may incorporate them in online courses. These WebQuests are usually based on constructivist theory and problem-based learning. Their purpose is to encourage students to use language and literacy skills to solve real-world problems. As they do not require sophisticated programming skills, WebQuests offer teachers opportunities to develop learner-centered and relevant materials for their students. A similar tool would be very useful in the United States as professional development, to encourage teachers to create and use online instructional materials. By developing and using WebQuests, teachers can become comfortable with online instruction as well as problem-based learning.

Teachers rather than literacy experts have taken the lead in developing Web-based instruction in Australia. Although most of this development supplements classroom instruction, it provides the opportunity for teachers to experiment with online instruction.

Many of these “experiments” eventually are offered to distance education students. The support for teachers has come from federal and state funding. Federally funded LearnScope projects have been a primary vehicle for supporting teacher experimentation and professional development.

This paper has tried to capture what is happening currently in Australia to guide the institutionalization of online literacy programs for distance education in the United States. State policymakers and practitioners in the United States need to think about a model, or hybrid of models, that might fit their states. Reflecting on the efforts of another country may help us think about what is happening in the United States. Development and delivery of online literacy instruction in the United States have been primarily through large multimedia products that are distributed nationally. Less emphasis has been placed on the professional development of teachers. Development in Australia, on the other hand, has been on a state-by-state basis primarily by teachers. Although this approach may lead to “reinventing the wheel,” it brings the development and delivery process closer to those who will use the online products. It also permits customization of the products to the unique needs of the state, perhaps making them more learner-centered.

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[Back](#)

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[Back](#)