

## Feature Article

---

# *Testing the Waters for Distance Education in Adult Education Programs*

Kathleen P. King

### Abstract

Distance learning has great possibilities for meeting many needs of adult education programs. However, in order to use it appropriately, programs must first consider cost-benefit evaluation, educational direction, and equity. More specifically, programs need to evaluate seven areas of concern, including the needs of communities and learners, course development, program commitment, faculty staffing, and support. Choosing the right distance education options for a specific program is another challenge to which adult education is rising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article presents a comprehensive framework to help program directors and faculty evaluate new opportunities available through current and emerging technologies.

### Introduction

*Melissa hurried to the library; it was 9 a.m. Saturday, and she had reserved her one hour of computer time. Settling in at the workstation, she logged into the ESL class web site and checked the schedule. Yes, she had time to read the discussion board and post her comments before the live class started at 9:30 a.m.*

*Melissa had been pleased to enroll in this modified distance education program; with her two part time jobs and small children she couldn't arrange to make regular weekday classes. The online class gave her opportunities to practice her written English, her comprehension, and some oral skills. The monthly Saturday morning meetings gave her a chance to practice verbal skills live as she went*

---

Kathleen King is Associate Professor and Program Director, Adult Education and Human Resources Development, Fordham University.

*once a month to the center where they had daycare and the ESL face-to-face discussion group. It was always so exciting to get to know her online classmates in person! There was so much to talk about in classes!*

*Melissa checked her schedule and notes and went to the week's discussion questions. All the questions were in the course outline, so she had already written out answers, based on her readings, at home. Now she inputted her responses carefully. Next, she looked through responses by her classmates and answered their questions about her home country, Venezuela, and asked a few in return. She found words she did not know and used the online dictionary, writing down the words and definitions for her journal. She also posted a journal entry for this week in her online portfolio. Then she glanced at the clock—time for class chat!*

*She moved to that area of the web site where five of her classmates and teacher were already greeting one another. Shortly, the teacher started to ask brief questions about the week's reading. They took turns responding. It was exciting to participate in the live Internet classroom; she could never wait for the next comment. Time just flew by in these sessions, and at 9:55 a.m. the live class session ended. She sent the computer log of the chat session to the printer so she could study it further at home. Wednesday night she would be back to do more work online. In the meantime she would review the cassette tape lessons, practice her pronunciation, and read the next assigned chapter.*

*Melissa was so glad that, even with her time constraints, she could continue her study of English. The class never seemed far away. Walking into the library every week, she always felt like she was entering a school zone. Learning was never far away when you had so many options.*

How do adult education programs start distance education programs like the one in which Melissa was enrolled? What are the best technologies? What technologies fit our students and programs? How will we “convert” our programs to fit distance education formats? Who will teach with the technology? Where will our adult educators learn to use it? At a time when distance education initiatives are spreading rapidly and, in

order to stay competitive, higher education institutions are being forced to determine what place it should take in their institutions, adult education organizations have been unable to progress at the same rate for a variety of reasons. This article will provide a basis from which adult basic, continuing, and community education programs may evaluate the opportunities and challenges of distance education. Both a framework and guiding questions will be presented for such programs to use in evaluating distance education options.

### **Distance Education Issues for Adult Education Programs**

In the race to provide distance education options for their learners, many educational providers seem to have forgotten to ask some fundamental questions. Distance education offers great possibilities for adult education, but, as educators, we need to be informed and make careful choices. Based on adult education program planning and andragogical principles, adult education organizations should take into account several salient issues and avoid making the same mistakes.

#### ***Cost-Benefit Analysis***

At the core of distance education issues should be the needs of the learners and community. Historically, adult education programs have addressed these needs well; technology should further this success, not get in the way. As higher education institutions have rushed ahead into distance education, some have not accurately “counted the cost” and are now retreating partially or fully from their cost-heavy financial commitments (Blumenstyk, 2001; Carr, 2001). Therefore, despite much public interest in bringing technology into education and the demand for skilled workers, we should ask whether distance education is the best choice for adult education (Carnevale & Young, 2001; Carr, 2000).

Weighing the cost of startup, training, troubleshooting, upgrading, and maintaining technology, curriculum development, and faculty staffing against the potential benefits and revenue of a distance education program is a necessary, responsible task and formula to guide decisions. More detail will be provided in the “framework” section of this article, but it is important to start with a costs versus benefits perspective (Caffarella, 1994). For example, alternative funding may be gained for establishing a distance education program, but how will it be maintained and continually upgraded? Do we know how many adults in our service area would use a

distance education technology option? Do we know whether our funding agencies will support financially course development and delivery via distance education? Drafting a costs versus benefits ledger account of a potential project offers a balanced view of the opportunities and responsibilities before committing time and resources to a project.

### ***Education Needs to Drive the Adoption of Technology***

Our choices about distance education should be based on an understanding of what are the educational needs and what technologies are available (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Verduin & Clark, 1991). Several other considerations are necessary, but the core is that *education should drive technology adoption*, not vice versa (King, 2001). As adult educators we are building on much expertise in meeting adult learners' needs; technology and distance education should broaden this opportunity, not constrain it. Educators should be introduced to a vision of technology and its fundamental capabilities and opportunities in order to discuss the meaning of technology for their programs. With such a foundation they can then be valuable contributors in determining how technology may be used to meet the needs of their programs' constituencies. The educators should be engaged in collaborative planning to explore how technology can be used (King, 2001, 2002; Picciano, 2001). Speaking as a former "techie," I urge administrators continually to involve their educators in planning. I encourage the use of this guiding principle: hold forth technology to the light of educational purposes, and, in that relationship, discover what uses technology can serve.

### ***The Digital Divide***

The use of technology in distance education must, of necessity, involve consideration of ethical and equity issues (Holt, 1998; Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, & Bennett deMarrais, 1997). In recent years it has been documented that the same racial, socioeconomic, gender, disabilities, and geographical boundaries that influence the inequitable distribution of opportunity and discrimination are evident in technology access (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999; Revenaugh, 2000). Careful consideration needs to be given to a program constituency's access to, and skill and comfort level with, technology. If we offer distance education programs, will many of our potential learners be excluded because they do not have the needed access or skills? Does our community provide freely available technology access seven days a week? How can our program itself provide the fundamental training and

access that is needed to support entry into the distance education classes? Programs that recognize and plan to face these equity issues can offer a tremendous service to their communities. This emphasis is much like that which critical theorists have suggested in the past to promote social change (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). At the same time, ignoring the issues will only further ingrain the disparity of opportunity and privilege and eliminate still more options for underserved people.

### **A Framework for Evaluating Distance Education Opportunities**

Now that we have laid the groundwork of these fundamental issues, we can turn our attention to a proposed framework for evaluating distance education opportunities for adult, continuing, and community education programs. The major points of this framework include consideration of the needs of communities and learners, technology resources, learner support and follow-up, course development and academic issues, technology choices, staff needs, and financial resources. Each element of this framework will be presented and pertinent questions to guide program planning will be delineated. This framework and accompanying questions can be used best by a program director first reviewing them and then either all the faculty, or a representative committee, working through thoughtful responses to them (Bates, 2000; King, 2002; Picciano, 2001). Teams using this framework should determine the degree to which their organization is prepared for distance education. Together, this team of educators can develop gradually the outline of what they can, need, and want to offer through distance education. While using this framework, the committee should develop an action plan of what it will do next, starting with gathering additional needed information, making preliminary decisions, and initiating a pilot project to assess how its choices about distance education actually work within its program. Ongoing and final evaluation of the pilot and all future distance learning courses will be invaluable in providing direction and improvement.

#### ***Needs of Communities and Learners***

As program directors and educators survey the possibilities of distance education, the needs of their constituencies should be foremost in their minds. Questions regarding whether their learners need, want, and can use distance education options need to be considered. Current research demonstrates that students have varying attitudes, needs, and

learning styles that have an impact on their distance learning (Christensen, Anakwe, & Kessler, 2001; Diglio, 1998; King, 2001; Merrifield, et al., 1997; Sanders & Morrison-Shetlar, 2001). By basing distance education choices upon a sound needs assessment, a program will keep the learner in focus. Guiding questions for this element include the following:

- What educational programs and courses do our learners need?
- What educational programs and courses do our learners want?
- Can our learners' needs and preferences be met through distance education?
- Do our learners have a willingness to try a new learning medium?
- Do our learners have sufficient technology skills to use distance education options?
- Do our learners want to take classes via distance education?
- Will employers of our learners value the completion of distance learning classes?

### ***Technology Resources***

Additionally, programs need to assess honestly their own and their learners' current and potential technology resources (King, 2001). For instance, it obviously would be unrealistic to plan to conduct online classes if the program did not have and did not plan to have suitable Internet access. In the same way programs need to determine the capacity of their technology resources, because in some cases they will have maximum capacities that need to be considered. For instance, videostreaming delivery through some web sites has a maximum number of users who may log in at the same time. Technology restrictions such as this should be considered when determining course offerings and class sizes. Some preliminary financial considerations must be considered critically in this early stage as well.

- Do our learners have the needed technology resources?
- Do our facilities and programs have the needed technology resources?
- How could our program provide resources for our learners?
- How can we maximize the use of our current resources and build upon them?

- How can our program gain needed resources?
- Can we partner with a business or other educational institution to share resources?
- How will additional learner support services be delivered through technology?

### *Learner Support and Follow-up*

The importance of student support cannot be overstated. Just as our learners need multiple support services in face-to-face classes, they need them equally, if not more, for classes offered at a distance (Bates, 2000). In addition, learners reliant on technology at a distance have some different needs than do onsite learners, including remote access to technical support and alternative library and testing services. Programs are advised to think in terms of flexibility, creativity, and partnerships to determine how they may support their learners at a distance. The importance of the teacher-learner relationship is essential in all teacher-led courses; however, with distance education the relationships that the student has with other aspects of the program seem to be especially important. If learners are given genuine attention, consideration, and aid by technical support and program staff, these experiences can build a positive image of the institution/program and facilitate retention and completion of courses. While many learners enjoy the convenience of distance learning, they do not necessarily want to be treated anonymously. With forethought and coordination, technology itself can provide solutions for personalized communication through student listservs, web-based discussion boards, online question and answer databases (FAQs), and live help via school chat rooms. With forethought and planning, technology can be used successfully to develop valuable learning communities (Kearsley, 2000; King, 2002; Palloff, & Pratt, 1999).

- How can our current support services be made accessible to offsite students?
- What additional support will our learners need (i.e., technical support, skill acquisition, etc.)?
- What multiple avenues of support can we provide for our learners (telephone, online, email, in-person at the institution, etc.)?
- Will all learners have easy and reliable access to at least two forms of support to assure that their needs may be met?

### *Course Development and Academic Issues*

As programs consider distance education classes and programs, for some reason they seem to make a lot of assumptions about course development. Mostly they expect that “it will just happen” the way they usually prepare courses. However, in reality, creating courses for distance learning is more than the mere “revision” or adaptation of existing courses. In order to provide meaningful and successful distance education courses, educators must first consider a course’s place within a given program, its objectives, and learners’ needs and then begin to design a new course that will excel in the same areas through the use of the selected technologies. Remembering the essentials of adult learning, putting learners first, building on their experience, and developing a climate of respect are a few of the essentials that also need to be woven into distance learning experiences (Brookfield, 1986, 1990; Cahoon, 1998; King, 1998; Knowles, 1978; Lawler & King, 2000). Without sufficient foresight, educational expertise, and resources devoted to this task, a distance learning program cannot meet its specific educational aims.

- Will we develop our own courses or purchase courses already available?
- Who will develop our distance education courses?
- What role will the faculty play in developing these courses?
- Do we want to develop courses that employ only distance education strategies, or will we also use in-person sessions for some courses?
- Will the distance education courses carry the same award of completion as face-to-face courses (i.e., credits, CEUs, certificate, etc.)?
- Will we be able to consider alternative criteria for course completion, such as competencies rather than contact hours?
- How will we assign intellectual property rights for courses that are developed by full-time staff, subcontracts, or consultants?
- Which programs and courses would best be developed and piloted first?
- Do we want to make a sequence of courses available at a distance?
- What technologies best fit the individual courses?



### ***Technology Choices***

Technology choices are emerging so quickly today that it is hard to keep up with them. Therefore, adult education programs should encourage their faculty to make use of quality journals and email newsletters that discuss current and emerging technologies in light of educational needs. *Syllabus* magazine and the EDTECH and DEOS-L listservs are just three examples of such free resources. Additionally, providing sustained and varied professional development initiatives, sending faculty to educational technology conferences, or inviting speakers to demonstrate technology use in the classroom are reliable ways to learn about the latest technologies. At this time technologies being used for distance education include, but are not limited to, videotapes, cassette tapes, the World Wide Web, e-mail, listservs, teleconferencing, videoconferencing (from classrooms and desktops), video-streaming, multimedia presentations, web-based presentations, digital cameras, scanners, cell phones, PDAs, pocket PCs, the postal service, television, and radio (Field, 1997; Picciano, 2001). With technology changing daily, educators need to watch the front line and determine which developments will help meet the diverse needs of adult learners. Additionally, programs should consider combining technologies and offering hybrid courses that are part distance education and part in-person/traditional (Gilbert, 2001; King, 2001).

- What technology choices are available?
- What technology choices do our learners prefer?
- What technology choices fit appropriately the classes and programs we need?
- How can more than one technology be used in our program to facilitate successful distance education or hybrid courses?

### ***Staff Needs***

The faculty of educational programs set a standard of excellence. Properly equipping our faculty to use and integrate technology into educational programs is essential for any distance education program's success. Lawler and King (2000) provide a model for professional development planning in general that can assist programs in meeting staff needs. Additionally, *Keeping Pace with Technology* (King, 2002) provides a model designed specifically for professional development in educational technology. Such models build on the needs of the faculty in order to engage them in hands-on, active learning. Building both a program and culture of

professional development in educational institutions will result in a revitalization of educators and provide fertile ground for developing distance education initiatives.

- Does our program have enough educators already equipped to use the distance technologies we are considering?
- How will our educators be prepared initially to teach at a distance?
- Should we train some, or all, of the faculty?
- Will professional development be provided through workshops, complete courses, or distance education? How will it be funded?
- Do distance education instructors need to be members of our in-house staff?
- Do we have sources for finding additional qualified adult education instructors to use these technologies?
- Do we need additional faculty to be able to offer duplicate distance education offerings so that every course at a distance has a face-to-face counterpart as a learner's alternate choice? Do we want to use this criterion?
- Given that online courses can cost faculty two to three times the amount of work in creating and teaching them, will a distance education course be considered equal to an onsite class as a faculty assignment?

### *Financial Resources*

Many adult education programs are used to being entrepreneurial regarding funding sources. Distance education provides a challenge in this area as well. Contrary to popular belief, distance education can be more expensive, in some ways, than face-to-face classes when one considers faculty development, curriculum development, costly hardware purchases, upgrades and maintenance, and technical support. Creative solutions can be discovered to reduce these costs through partnerships, sharing resources, and consolidating efforts. Programs need to address financial concerns early on in the distance education evaluation process (Bates, 2000; Hopey, 1998; Picciano, 2001; Shoemaker, 1998).

- What financial resources does our program have to support distance education?

- How will we gain financial support to cover additional startup expenses (i.e., grants, donations, public aid, community partnerships/sponsorships, etc.)?
- How will we gain ongoing financial support to cover startup expenses such as technology lab staffing, troubleshooting, upgrades, and maintenance?
- How reliable and renewable will alternative funding for this project be?
- At what point, if any, will our proposed distance education program be self-sustaining?
- Is the funding stream sufficient to meet the expenses of the distance education initiative? If not, will the education program or funding agency cover the difference?

### *Evaluation*

When considering the potential of distance education for adult education programs, the ultimate question is this: do the benefits of the proposed distance education courses or programs outweigh the costs to the learners, program, and personnel? Using the framework described here, we can evaluate this question systematically by noting whether our program has the needed personnel, resources, and services available. Clearly, if little support for planning, development, and delivery of distance education courses and programs is available, our organization must consider whether distance education would benefit the program and learners. If distance education is chosen, adult education organizations can use the information identified in this framework to chart a course for the future by determining the following:

- Do we want to pursue distance education?
- If so, how soon?
- Based on the evaluation framework, where are our gaps in understanding and resources?
- How can we gain the needed resources?

With this overview educators/planners can return to their extensive responses and break down the list into blocks of four to six items that they can pursue actively. In order to expedite this emerging agenda, the group should assign items and deadlines and report back frequently to reassess and facilitate its progress.

### Conclusion

Distance learning has great possibilities for making adult learning available, affordable, convenient, and more interesting. However, using distance learning appropriately also comes with a heavy price tag of development, commitment, and cost. Selecting the right distance education options for a specific program is an example of the choices that face adult education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Equipped with a comprehensive framework grounded in the history, knowledge base, and wisdom of adult education, new opportunities may be available for many adult education programs through the use of current and still emerging technologies.

### References

- Bates, A. W. (2000). *Managing technological change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Blumenstyk, G. (2001, July 20). Temple U. shuts down for-profit distance education company. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47, A29.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1990). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Caffarella, R. S. (1994). *Planning programs for adult learners: A practical guide for educators, trainers, and staff developers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cahoon, B. (1998). Teaching and learning Internet skills. In B. Cahoon (Ed.), *Adult learning and the Internet* (pp. 5-14). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 78)
- Carnevale, D., & Young, J. R. (2001, July 13). Telecourses change channels. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47, A29.
- Carr, S. (2000, Dec. 15). A day in the life of a new type of professor. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47, A47.
- Carr, S. (2001, Feb. 16). Is anyone making money in distance education? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47, A41
- Christensen, E., Anakwe, U., & Kessler, E. (2001). Receptivity to distance learning: The effect of technology, reputation, constraints and learning preferences. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 33, 263-279.

- Diglio, A. H. (1998). Web-based instruction adjusts to the individual needs of adult learners. *Journal of Instruction Delivery Systems*, 12(4), 26-28.
- Field, J. (Ed.). (1997). *Electronic pathways: Adult learning and the new communications technologies*. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Gilbert, S. (2001). The hybrids are in bloom. *Syllabus*, 14(6), 16.
- Holt, M. (1998). Ethical considerations in Internet-based adult education. In B. Cahoon (Ed.), *Adult learning and the Internet* (pp. 63-70). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 78)
- Hopey, C. (1998). Planning and funding for technology. In C. Hopey (Ed.), *Technology, basic skills, and adult education: Getting ready and moving forward* (Information Series No. 372, pp. 11-24). Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED423420)
- Kearsley, G. (2000). *Online education: Learning and teaching in cyberspace*. New York: Wadsworth.
- King, K. P. (1998). Course development on the World Wide Web. In B. Cahoon (Ed.), *Adult learning and the Internet* (pp. 15-24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 78)
- King, K. P. (2001). Educators revitalize the classroom "bulletin board." *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 33, 337-354.
- King, K. P. (2002). *Keeping pace with technology* (Vol. 1). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Knowles, M. (1978). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (2nd ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf.
- Lawler, P. A., & King, K. P. (2000). *Planning for effective faculty development: Using adult learning principles*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Merrifield, J., Bingman, M. B., Hemphill, D., & Bennett deMarrais, K. P. (1997). *Life at the margins: Literacy, language, and technology in everyday life*. New York: Teachers College Press
- Merriam, S., & Caffarella, R. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view*. New York: Wadsworth.

- National Telecommunications and Information Administration. (1999). *Falling through the net: Defining the digital divide* [On-line]. Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/ftn99/contents.html>
- Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Picciano, A. (2001). *Distance learning: Making connections across virtual space and time*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, Prentice-Hall.
- Sanders, D. W., & Morrison-Shetlar, A. I. (2001). Student attitudes toward web-enhanced instruction in an introductory biology course. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 33, 251-262.
- Shoemaker, C. (1998). *Leadership in continuing and distance education in higher education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Revenaugh, M. (2000). Beyond the digital divide: Pathways to equity. *Technology & Learning*, 20(10), 38-40, 44, 46, 48, 50.
- Verduin, J. R., & Clark, T. A. (1991). *Distance education: The foundations of effective practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.