Mini-Learning Activity #2

Distance Learning: State Sponsored ABE Programs in Arizona

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Abstract:

For my second Mini-Learning Activity, I interviewed Sheryl Hart, Educational Technology Manager for the Arizona Department of Education - Adult Education to gain insights on how state-sponsored Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs are utilizing Distance Learning (DL). Hart tracks how ABE teachers are integrating technology into the classroom. We discussed the current programs being offered in Arizona; how those programs are structured, the technologies and learning platforms being utilized; some background information related to the students, teachers curriculum and programs; and her assessments of the current challenges and overall success of the programs thus far. This paper addresses highlights from that discussion.

In addition, since my first Mini-Learning Activity was an interview with Jamie Collins, a DL high school English teacher with the Paradise Valley Unified School District about that program (Distance Learning: Paradise Valley Unified School District, An Examination of an Online Secondary Education Program, Scott Foster, June 27, 2011), I offer some general conclusions I have now drawn concerning Distance Learning Programs as a result of these interviews.

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Sheryl Hart is the Educational Technology Manager for the Arizona Department of Education – Adult Education. Her primary responsibility is tracking how teachers in Arizona’s state-sponsored ABE programs are utilizing DL. Her other role is that of DL coordinator for these programs. I recently interviewed her to learn more about what the state is doing with DL in these programs, how they are implementing it, some details about the programs, and her assessment of the programs strengths and weaknesses to date.

I was curious to compare and contrast how these programs are integrating DL compared to the DL program at the Paradise Valley Unified School district, the subject of my previous Mini-Learning Activity (Foster, 2011). I was also very interested in seeing what conclusions could be drawn from those interviews.

Here are some highlights of my interview with Hart and my finding as a result of both interviews:

**Program Profile**

**Participating Institutions**

Currently, there are 27 state-sponsored ABE programs operating in the state of Arizona, nine of which offer some form of DL as a component of their program. These programs are spread out throughout the state and consist of both community colleges and community-based organizations focusing on Adult Literacy. Sheryl explained that they use the term “state-sponsored” because these programs are not currently state-funded. The Arizona State Legislature has allocated $0 to Adult Education in the current budget. Funding for these programs is primarily provided by the federal government and supplemented with revenues from other Arizona state institutions of higher learning. As a result, funding issues are limiting further expansion of existing programs. As Hart points out, “We’d love to grow these programs, but thus far we haven’t been able to add more funding (S. Hart, personal communication, July 6, 2011). Arizona initiated its DL program for ABE six years ago, however for the first three years, only seven of the current nine programs participated, and that was on a pilot program basis.

**Participating Students and Program Focus**

Hundreds of students across the state participate in these programs. Hart did not have an exact figure. The main focus of these programs is General Educational Development (GED) test preparation, although the curriculum has recently been expanded in some of these programs to include preparation for success in college and career as well, including resume writing, higher level reading and writing, and other non-technical skills. Consequently, some high-level English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA) students participate as well. All programs must adhere to state standards and requirements to comply with federal funding guidelines.

**Technologies and Learning Platforms Utilized**

These programs have used and continue to use a number of different platforms and technologies including:

* **Plato** - These programs currently utilize Plato, a fee-based Learning Management System (LMS) as the primary learning platform. Plato also includes the actual curriculum for the program, which some teachers supplement with curriculum obtained from other sources. More information on Plato can be found at their website, [www.plato.com](http://www.plato.com). The State of Arizona has purchased the rights to utilize this system for the programs. According to Hart, both teachers and students find Plato to be highly intuitive in its approach and very easy to use. Plato also includes discussion boards and email capability, which students and teachers utilize. Instruction using Plato is primarily asynchronous.
* **McGraw Hill GED Online** - Initially, the programs utilized McGraw Hill GED Online ([www.mcgraw-hill.com](http://www.mcgraw-hill.com)) as their LMS. They switched to Plato because they found that it better served their needs and was easier to use for both students and teachers.
* **Moodle** – Some teachers also utilize Moodle (<http://moodle.org>) a free LMS available to educators. Those teachers then link Moodle to Plato. Moodle is the LMS utilized by Paradise Valley Unified School District (Foster, 2011).
* **Twitter –** Some teachers utilize Twitter as a way to communicate with students without giving out their cell phone numbers.
* **Other Technologies Utilized –** According to Hart, text messaging works best for some students. In addition teachers utilize Skype. Some are also experimenting with Facebook as a way to entice students to become more engaged.

**Hart’s Assessments**

**Biggest Challenges**

* **Ongoing Funding –** Given the current budgetary crisis in Arizona and the lack of any state funding, teachers and program directors are pressured to make the programs economically viable. Cost per student varies widely among the DL ABE programs. For some, the cost per student is half of the equivalent ground based instructions while others are way over, skewing the overall results. Consequently, the overall costs in aggregate are about twice as much as ground based instructions. Ongoing funding issues not only prevent current expansion of the DL programs, but leave the future existence of the programs precariously hinging on continued federal funding.
* **Teacher Commitment to Distance Learning as a Viable Platform –** According to Hart,

“The biggest challenge has been finding the right fit for the teachers because it’s a different skill set than traditional teaching. They can take their best face to face teacher, put them in DL, and they hate it. Finding a teacher that believes that Distance Learning is a viable option and who is determined to figure out what it takes to make it work is the key to being successful” (S. Hart, personal communication, July 6, 2011).

Hart adds that some teachers do not believe in DL, and hence do not try to make it work, citing a student’s lack of progress as a sign that it is a flawed system. Other teachers approach it as a personal challenge for them to make it work. All teachers who participate attend DL 101, a course developed through the University of Michigan and Project Ideal ([www.projectideal.org](http://www.projectideal.org)). While this provides a uniform basis of instruction for DL teachers in the program, teacher attitude and initiative is what makes or breaks a program according to Hart.

* **Barriers to Student Success –** Many of the students in the GED DL programs have personal circumstances that pose barriers to their success including family issues and other challenges. To counter these obstacles, administrators in the program emphasize flexibility. According to Hart, “(We tell them) this is one way of doing it. If this doesn’t work for you, or if things aren’t working in your life for you, let us know, and you can step out and come back when it may work better” (S. Hart, personal communication, July 6, 2011).

**Keys to Success**

* **Hybrid Approach –** Most of the teachers in the program do not use DL exclusively. They give the students the opportunity (but do not require them) to come in for face to face help if they want or need it. Per Hart, “We have found that the hybrid approach has been most successful for the most number of students” (S. Hart, personal communication, July 6, 2011). Typically, students will come in for face to face contact once or twice a month or as needed. This combination of face to face and distance learning often causes students to be more engaged than if they were only doing face to face or only doing distance learning. As Hart points out, “Students who may never say a word in face to face classrooms become outspoken when utilizing DL,” and adds “I’ve seen the same thing from teachers who would typically not say much in a discussion in person become much more engaged in an online setting” (S. Hart, personal communication, July 6, 2011).
* **Face to Face Enrollment, Orientation, and Assessment –** Prior to starting any of the DL programs offered for ABE, all students must attend in person a Comprehensive Intake Orientation that includes enrollment; a frank and open discussion of their responsibilities and what to expect; and, to comply with federal funding guidelines, a face to face needs assessment. Hart points to this requirement as a key to student success in the DL programs, “The biggest thing we’ve learned is that comprehensive intake fully informs them of what will be required. We also tell them that if this will not work for you, there are other options available” (S. Hart, personal communication, July 6, 2011).

**Hart’s Overall Conclusions**

Although the data necessary to fully analyze the success of Arizona’s DL programs for ABE is elusive, Hart feels encouraged by the current results that can be measured and future potential for the programs. In general, the Distance Learning demonstrates favorable student outcomes that are slightly ahead of ground based education. It provides an opportunity and a flexibility that meets the needs of some students providing them with a resource to obtain their GED that they may not be able to obtain otherwise. Fully understanding and refining these programs is a work in progress. A more in depth understanding is emerging primarily through the efforts of teachers engaged in Distance Learning that believe in Distance Learning and who take the initiative to persevere and make Distance Learning work. While it does not work for every student every time, it is working for many in an economically feasible way, and with more time and further analysis on an ongoing basis, Distance Learning is sure to have an even greater positive impact moving into the future.

**My Conclusions Based on Two Interviews**

As a distance learner myself in the program at Colorado State University, I have learned much about the platform from personal experiences, but was very interested in getting professional advice and input from educators involved in other DL programs. The two interviews that I have now conducted lead me to the following findings about what makes DL successful. Based on those discussions, I offer these general conclusions:

* DL programs must develop and evolve over time, largely through trial and error. The sub-field is still in its infancy and not fully understood, but offers tremendous potential.
* Ideally, these programs should be first tested with a pilot program to identify and correct the biggest challenges prior to being offered en masse.
* DL programs provide a number of situational, educational, and economic benefits to institutions, teachers, and students, but do not work for everyone in every situation. Often a hybrid of DL and traditional classroom learning is the ideal platform.
* Before undertaking DL programs, students should be professionally assessed as to their suitability for such programs based on their individual life situations, goals, and educational needs.
* Both teachers and students participating in DL should receive an in depth orientation that sets expectations prior to beginning a DL program, for it may not work for every student or teacher practically and/or philosophically.
* Inherently, DL programs provide flexibility, increase available learning opportunities, and lead to desirable outcomes for students who are motivated and committed to achieving their educational goals.