



Innovations in Digital Learning: How the Pandemic Changed the Way We Serve Learners

a report by

Executive Summary



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Adult education services were halted in March 2020 as a result of COVID-19. In a few short weeks, many adult education providers transitioned from in-person service delivery to a virtual model. In July 2020, the messaging work group of the GOAL Collective commissioned a report to document the changes and ongoing findings about adult education service delivery. The focus of the report is to summarize a qualitative research study conducted with GOAL Collective partners in 2020. The findings of the report are summarized below.

KEY THEMES

1. Flexibility of Online Teaching & Learning

For learners, the greatest benefit of online education is the elimination of barriers that often impede their ability to attend in-person classes, such as issues of childcare, transportation, geography, and work schedules. Virtual education removes similar barriers for educators, staff, and volunteers as well. Additionally, virtual teaching allows for the use of a variety of digital content and engagement tools.

2. Program Capacity

For a few programs, the flexibility of online teaching mobilized a new pool of volunteers. Greater reliance on technology led to more efficient communication among staff and students, as well as greater efficiency in processes such as registration and onboarding. Due to the increased capacity for student attendance in Zoom calls compared to classrooms, and because of the perpetual impact of recorded lessons, there is greater potential to impact more students per educator and per lesson than could be achieved via in-person classes.

3. Digital Literacy

The abrupt transition to online education revealed the low levels of digital literacy among adult learners, adult educators, and staff. Onboarding students to technology has been challenging and time-consuming. Preparing educators to facilitate classes virtually has also proved to be a considerable challenge. The pervasiveness of low digital literacy is concerning and has spurred many adult education leaders to more strongly emphasize digital literacy within their respective programs.

4. Training

For students, training has focused more on the educational tools and programs needed for classes, rather than on basic use of devices themselves. For staff, there was often little time to master skills before being expected to teach them to others. While many educators are thriving in the online environment, some still struggle with serving students virtually. There is a need for more consistent digital literacy training for educators and volunteers.

5. Sharing Resources

With little time and immediate action required, partners efficiently shared data, funding information, innovative ideas, and best practices for online teaching to ensure they were supporting staff, educators, and learners. Service providers used class time to share information about essential resources and community services with learners. Many programs have worked to distribute laptops and have shared information about public connectivity options for learners.

6. Relationships

Since the pandemic limited in-person interaction, the social connection offered via online classes has been essential to the well-being of many learners and educators. Service providers have learned to make the most of digital communication and engagement tools. The increased effort required to maintain connections has led to more meaningful relationships between educators and learners. Additionally, established relationships among organizations were key to successful adjustments and innovations needed to serve learners. Within programs, the pandemic prompted more social-emotional support for educators and staff.

7. Reflection and Innovation

The initial halt in services in March 2020 allowed time for reflection on current processes and practices in adult education, as well as development of ideas for improvement. Throughout the pandemic, adult education program leaders, staff, and educators demonstrated resilience and creativity in order to continue serving their learners. In some cases, organizations adjusted their infrastructure and systems of communication to respond to the realities of the current world.

Because programs were driven to move their usual practices and processes online, staff and educators are now prepared to more effectively serve adult learners in the future. Online enrollment and orientation processes offer more efficient pathways for getting students to the classes they need, and provide adult learners with more flexibility and increased access to education. The experience of teaching virtual classes during the pandemic has prepared adult educators to facilitate classes online in the future, with most programs committing to offering virtual or hybrid class options post-COVID. Additionally, this experience has revealed the need for a greater focus on digital literacy in adult education programs in the future, for both learners and staff.

Despite the undeniable challenges that the transition to online education presented for adult education staff, teachers, learners, and organizations, the lessons learned since March 2020 will only help to improve adult education services. The knowledge and skills gained during this time have prepared organizations to better serve adult learners, and will continue to shape organizational and instructional decisions in the future.



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