



Is the Most Effective Education Technology Always the Most Cutting Edge?

G. Martinez Cabrera | January 26, 2015

Imagine yourself trying to find a job when you don't have a high school diploma. You go to a local community center and ask about the GED classes they offer, but you are too late—the next opening isn't for months.

Most people don't get much further than this. Life intervenes and they drift away. Even for the persistent, there's no guarantee they will find the services they need.

In Philadelphia, the Mayor's Commission on Literacy is tackling this lack of access to adult education head on, in a city where half of adults lack basic skills and two-thirds of the commission's students read, write and do math below an eighth-grade level. The Commission, part of our Beacon Project that recognizes the most innovative adult learning programs in the country, shows the best way to solve these big problems often isn't by using the most cutting-edge technology; it's using the technology that best fills the need.

Tracking: Becoming a Registrar for a Whole City

When Judith Rényi took the helm as the Commission's executive director, she noticed adult learners kept returning to her office looking for referrals. Though the Commission's staff knew where the strongest programs in the city were located, there was no system in place that could track whether the individual had followed up, nor a way of knowing the availability of class seats. "Basically, we were sending people out into a black hole," Rényi said. As a result, she and her staff created myPLACE, a system to better match students' needs with available courses, almost like a city-wide college registrar.

Now, when adult learners ask about classes, commission staff can make an appointment at a myPLACE Campus, a onestop registration and assessment center. Once tested, the myPLACE staff can immediately enroll learners in their first class. Because 24 additional partner agencies maintain their class schedules and available seats in the database, students are registered without concern about whether they will lose their spot.

This database is unique with adult education, especially at this scale and in an urban area like Philadelphia. What's even more unique is how the Commission uses online courses to prepare students for class.

In addition to assessing and assigning the student, myPLACE staff lead students through an Introduction to Adult Learning and Careers course.

"Learners are learning not only basic academic skills; they are learning how to be online," said Diane Inverso, the Commission's Senior Director. "They are also learning how to be students."

This introductory course includes digital skills assessment, tutorials, and adult study skills exercises. Notably, it also offers career exploration and the creation of a career pathway/learning plan portfolio, which includes an online resume the student creates.

On a visit to a myPLACE Campus, we met Latanya, who was discovering an interest in the medical field that she didn't know she had.

"I knew I wanted to help people, but I didn't know what I could do with that," she said.

Continue on next page.



Is the Most Effective Education Technology Always the Most Cutting Edge? (continued)

She then went on to show us her academic plan. This roadmap showed all the steps she would have to take after she earned her GED, the kinds of courses she would have to take, how long that course of study would be, and where she could take these courses.

Scalable and Affordable Solutions for Low-Skilled Adult Learners

Unlike some states, Pennsylvania does not have a centralized system of adult education. Instead, adult ed is primarily offered through community-based organizations (CBOs).

Because these organizations are often underfunded, they have to offer multi-level GED classes, which means a student working at an eighth-grade level is sitting next to someone who can only read at a fourth-grade level.

“We send students to GED classes as a default position, and then they fail,” Rényi said.

She understood that somewhere along the line, a set of pre-GED classes had to be set up, but the answer had to be scalable and affordable.

Starting in spring 2014, the Commission rolled out four online courses in Reading/Writing and Math, for learners at a 4.0-5.9 Grade Equivalency (GE) level. The curriculum is contextualized – weekly prompts are offered in different industries that students might be interested in, such as manufacturing, health care, or transportation and logistics.

Learners may choose which of the versions to complete, thereby earning industry-specific skills as they build their basic academic knowledge. Once the students complete these courses, they are usually ready to take preGED or even GED classes, and from what the early data is showing, partner sites are seeing students succeed more often than they were before the program began.

Good Pedagogy & Policy Go Hand in Hand

The Commission’s online courses not only help reach students and keep them within the adult education system, they help other agencies do their work better.

“We don’t want to compete with these other agencies for funding,” Rényi said of the over 80 programs that host adult ed classes in the city.

“Now, our partners can level their classes,” Inverso said. “Partner agencies now focus on one level at a time because our online courses help them help students who aren’t ready for a GED class.”

Rényi agreed.

“Yes. Tech has accelerated college and K-12 students,” she said. “We can do the same with low-skilled adults.”

For us in the adult education space, the Commission raises an interesting question: What kind of technology can accelerate adult education? The Commission’s success suggests tech does not necessarily have to be “cutting edge” in order to help adult learners in a meaningful way; it just needs to be implemented intelligently.

Read the full article at: <http://www.digitalpromise.org/blog/entry/is-the-most-effective-education-technology-always-the-most-cutting-edge>