

## **ADULT EDUCATION DISTANCE LEARNING LABORATORY (AEDLL): A CYBER LAB EXPERIENCE**

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The Adult Education Distance Learning Laboratory (AEDLL) is a Blackboard based laboratory created this past summer and offered to students currently enrolled in the Adult and Higher Education Graduate program at Western Washington University. The goal of AEDLL is to provide training and focused field experience in distance learning (DL) to the students through a cyber laboratory that builds on their experience and incorporates principles of adult education. Upon completion of AEDLL students can easily set up their own distance learning courses.

### ***NEED FOR AEDLL***

A recent examination of graduate programs in adult education in North America revealed most are quickly making the transition of using some or all DL delivery for their degree programs. Indeed institutions of higher education are being created around the world that are delivering all their courses through DL. A further examination into the quality of DL courses finds that many are fairly basic with instructors attempting to deliver their courses as they would in a face to face class, but through DL. The result is often a very poor quality course that is mostly one way communication.

As educational institutions throughout the world have taken a look at delivery of instruction by distance education on line, they are scrambling to get into the market. They request that their instructors convert their classes into DL. Many instructors are ill prepared to develop their own on line courses. A look at recent job descriptions finds almost every instructional position either requires or strongly requests experience in delivering instruction through DL.

The WWU graduate program in AHE is meeting the demand for graduates to be able to deliver instruction through DL and to incorporate adult education principles of learning into the DL delivery. To incorporate the two concepts of DL delivery of instruction and adult education principles, we developed AEDLL and deliver it only through a cyber laboratory. Once students become adept at delivering DL they are given the option of honing their skills by consulting with and assisting a client in developing their DL course.

### ***REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE***

With the implementation of AEDLL we have tried to create a place in which students can learn about the different facets of DL. Faculty cannot simply put their traditional face to face lecture class online and teach it the same way. Palloff and Pratt (1999, 2001), who have written extensively on the pedagogy of delivering DL, state that “Faculty need training and assistance in making the transition to the online environment, [and] students

need to be taught how to learn online. No longer is there a unidirectional imparting of knowledge by an 'expert' on a particular topic." To make the transition, Palloff & Pratt (2001) write, "Instructors need good training, technical support and the ability to participate in the process in the company of others." In the AEDLL lab we are focusing on two major parts of delivering DL: the relationship between facilitator (instructor) and students, and using technology appropriately. Students who become part of AEDLL first take a seminar in delivering effective DL which focuses on the "interpersonal aspects" of delivering distance education. Shniederman (1988) wrote, "technology can be wonderfully empowering for teachers and students, (but) the relationship between human beings is still at the heart of the educational process".

AEDLL provides an online learning community within which students and instructors can work, communicate, and learn from one another. Brook and Oliver (2003), state that "formation of a learning community must be a primary goal of online instructors". The face to face classroom provides a place in which a community resides for the period of the course. The same is true of the online classroom: it is important to create a safe container or relational community in which people talk and exchange ideas online. AEDLL provides the larger community in which all people who have been participants reside, and the different projects within AEDLL provide smaller communities in which people focused on these projects reside. Palloff & Pratt (1999) propose seven basic steps online instructors should use to develop online learning communities:

1. Clearly define the purpose of the group
2. Create a distinctive gathering place for the group
3. Promote effective leadership from within
4. Define norms and a clear code of conduct
5. Allow for a range of member roles
6. Allow for and facilitate sub-groups
7. Allow members to resolve their own conflict

AEDLL provides all of the above. One important aspect is our sponsor is a full professor in the AHE program. She also actively facilitates multiple online courses each quarter within the program. She is the thread that holds AEDLL together as students graduate and new students take over the different roles in the lab. Students in AEDLL take responsibility for maintenance of the AEDLL site, some provide peer support on technical issues and use of the course delivery system, and some provide facilitator services.

In the process of transforming courses from face to face to online, students learn to do this technically through use of the course management system. When moving from the classroom to online, many of the verbal and visual cues are lost. Another main goal of AEDLL is to teach students how to implement courses that appeal to many adult learning styles as well as to implement activities and assignments that utilize adult learning theories. Eshet et al (2003) state the following major problems with distance education: "poor course design and pedagogy, non-linear learning, anonymity and loneliness, readability and lack of tailor made learning materials".

Eshet et al (2003) state that “the online learning environment is designed to create optimal learning possibilities for the student. In order to promote non-linear and multiple learning styles, the online environment allows students to adapt the learning process to their personal preferences, offering a multitude of learning styles, ranging from linear learning [...] to task-oriented learning...” Within AEDLL we have been testing the use of audio for the verbal learner, presentation software for the visual learner, and written text for those who like to read. Information delivered online has been produced in all three ways and special attention has been given to providing audio with the visuals. The student can chose to use the materials that best suits their learning style.

Adult education principles incorporated in AEDLL are a composite from researchers in the field who created theories and learning constructs for teaching adults. These constructs, called “andragogy,” or the science of teaching adults, were coined by Malcolm Knowles (1990) in 1968. Andragogy is often cited as “good teaching” principles by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) and has become the basis for the field of study of adult education. A chart listing the characteristics of adult learners incorporates the principles that are taught in AEDLL. The characteristics of adult learners are:

- Broader base of experience
- Learning is often voluntary or self-motivated
- Learning can be self-directed
- Little time available for attending classes and studying
- Learning often motivated by life responsibilities and changes
- Need for immediate application
- View teacher as having a reciprocal relationships with students
- May have a negative self-concept
- May have established ideas, attitudes and behaviors which are difficult to change
- Often intimidated by and resistant to tests
- Extensive speaking vocabulary influences learning
- Physiological factors (visual, audio, health) may influence learning

## BASIC PRINCIPLES OF AEDLL

As AEDLL has been developed over the last year, basic principles have been established and incorporated into the program. Students enroll into the field experience course for 2-6 credit hours, depending upon the extent of their experience. A basic experience in which they learn how to deliver DL with adult education principles by changing a face to face syllabus to a DL syllabus is equal to 2 credits. For 4 credits they develop their

own DL syllabus and for 6 credits they work with a client to develop a DL course for the client. The basic principles of AEDLL are:

- Establish a framework to pursue field experiences with real-life area DL faculty
- Develop, test and document Andragogy-based DL practices
- Experiment through a "cyber laboratory" for DL
- Share DL knowledge, experiences and ideas with other AHE students
- Develop, test and document learning object techniques for DL
- Maintain access to the always-growing, AHE student-sustained AEDLL
- Explore, refine and document practical DL technology solutions
- Fully explore a typical DL delivery system
- "Roll-over" knowledge and lessons learned for future AHE students

### **Who and what are involved?**

The AEDLL is very much like an ever-growing toolbox of DL tools. You pick and use the tools that fit your task (field experience) and if you find or make a tool that you would like to share with your peers, leave it in the toolbox. The cyber nature of the AEDLL will facilitate collaboration between AHE students regardless of their location or schedule. Someday this collaborative effort may extend through cyberspace to other Adult Education programs using similar AEDLL approaches.

As in most labs, the Lab Instructor provides overall direction through a learning contract but delegates actual day-day lab duties to Lab Assistants (AHE students with instructor privileges on Blackboard). Analogies to elements of a physical Lab:

- Lab Instructor (AHE Instructor)
- Lab Assistants (AHE DL students)
- Students (many or few AHE and/or WWU students)
- Experiments in progress (current work by AHE DL students)
- Completed Experiments (AHE student maintained Blackboard Archives)
- Resources/Tools/Equipment (AHE student maintained Blackboard Archives)
- Bulletin Board to share ideas/thoughts (AHE student maintained Blackboard Forums)

### **What are examples of a typical AEDLL student project?**

As part of the AEDLL, students have the ability to create and test classes online. One such course offered last summer that Kathy Podmayer created is, "Facilitating Effective

Distance Education Courses Online". It is now taught to all AEDLL students for the first four weeks of the AEDLL experience. It has the potential of being published for the DL market. Kathy tested the curricula with the AEDLL students and used their feedback to refine the course. The components are:

### **Describe the difference between discussion in a face to face and DL class**

#### **Describe distance education facilitation skills**

- Develop Rules of "Netiquette"
- Develop Conflict Management Guidelines
- Develop Guidelines for Communications
- Instructor introductions and housekeeping guidelines

#### **Create a structure for implementing online discussion**

- Build an exercise to define rules of "netiquette" and to get to know each other
- Use the Roster of Blackboard to create the initial community
- Create large and small discussion groups
- Create a discussion group for casual conversation and issues of concern
- Manage group discussion of an issue

Another student in the AHE program requested assistance from AEDLL to create an experimental course on billing for childcare services for her DSHS staff across the state of WA. Two AEDLL students put the DL course together, helped her run the experimental session and now it appears that she plans to use the DL approach in the future.

An AHE alumni requested basic training through AEDLL this last quarter and is now developing her own business delivering boating safety certification through DL.

### ***CONCLUSION***

The AEDLL concept is built on the belief that as a cyber lab, it will facilitate collaboration between AHE students, regardless of their location, will provide an important tool for the students to use in their practice, and will illustrate the principles of good teaching methods in DL courses. This concept has been tested 2 quarters in 2003 and will continue through Summer 2004, to determine if a cyber lab is a viable delivery mechanism and if students using the lab can design their own DL courses and teach others how to design courses. WWU graduate students participating in AEDLL and those instructors they taught DL curriculum development to are interviewed to determine the effectiveness of AEDLL each quarter. Lab Assistants change each quarter and some of those who were students in the previous quarter take over the responsibility for the following quarter. Students not only learn DL skills but practice their leadership skills as

well. An article reporting the results of the study will be submitted for publication fall 2004.

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