

ACCESS Distance Learning

A Teacher's Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students State-wide, better known as ACCESS, is an education initiative developed through the Alabama Department of Education. ACCESS Distance Learning was launched in state of Alabama in 2006, funded through the line item budget through the state department of education. By the end of 2010, ACCESS had grown to the "third-largest virtual education program in the country" (Flanigan, 2012) and received \$18.5 million from the state in 2013. During the inception of ACCESS the number of low-income students taking

Advanced Placement courses has increased five times more than prior to implementing the program (Flanigan, 2012).

Due to an increase of teachers implementing blended learning, ACCESS is moving its focus toward blended learning in addition to distance learning. As a result of this new focus, in 2010, the official name changed to the Alabama ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning initiative. The enrollment of ACCESS had grown to approximately 44,000 students by the end of 2011.

BACKGROUND

There is no charge to attend courses through ACCESS Distance Learning as long as the students are enrolled in an Alabama public high school and in Grades 9–12. All courses are offered during normal school hours. The school must provide students with computers, textbooks, Internet connections and software. The typical ACCESS Distance Learning classroom contains "computer cameras, monitors and/or projectors for viewing content and teachers, interactive whiteboards, wireless routers and a minimum of 25 tablet computer" (Alabama Policy Institute, 2012).

Classes follow the local school calendar and closely match the school calendars. If the class is an interactive videoconferencing class, counselors will match the student's classes as close to the time as the on-site class in order for the students to interact with the teacher. Students are also eligible to take online or web-based courses.



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Any student interested in taking a course through ACCESS Distance Learning must make a request through their counselors.

Classes are taught in either synchronous or asynchronous format—or both. The class content containing synchronous format generally uses interactive videoconferencing in the course, whereas the course using asynchronous format is typically more of a web-based course. According to the Alabama Policy Institute (2012), synchronous learning is great way for students to gain knowledge and provide feedback in a timely fashion to assist with misunderstandings. Teachers are contracted to create courses or the state department will purchase a ready-made course with exclusive rights to make changes as necessary (Alabama Policy Institute, 2012).

BENEFITS OF ACCESS

There are many benefits to students, teachers, and counselors who use ACCESS Distance Learning. One major benefit is students, who live in rural Alabama, which is a large majority of students, have an opportunity to take courses not offered at their local high school. For whatever reason these courses are not offered, it does not hold the student back from taking Advanced Placement courses or any other course not available on-site. In the 2010–2011 school year, one of every five students took one course through ACCESS Distance Learning in rural Alabama. In that same year, in micropolitan areas one of every seven students took one course, while one of every 14 students took a course in the metropolitan districts.

Teachers have the ability to learn new methods of teaching, whether through synchronous, asynchronous or blended format. ACCESS Distance Learning provides different methods for teachers to be successful. Teachers are engaged and interactive with their students. Another benefit for teachers is teaching for ACCESS Dis-

tance Learning provides a supplement to the teaching income they are already receiving.

Counselors also benefit through ACCESS Distance Learning because now they have more classes to offer students in areas such as Advanced Placement, foreign languages, electives, and higher mathematics. The curriculum is state approved; therefore, there is no need to worry if it meets state standards. The teachers are highly qualified; therefore, the school system does not have to stress over personnel backgrounds.

THREE ROLES OF THE PROFESSIONAL AND ACCESS DISTANCE LEARNING

For the professional, ACCESS Distance Learning provides multiple opportunities. The roles to be discussed in more details include the counselor, the facilitator, and the teacher.

COUNSELOR'S ROLE

It is the counselor's responsibility to ensure students are enrolled in the correct ACCESS Distance Learning courses. Course requests are made through the ACCESS Distance Learning online registration link. Counselors determine if a student is ready for a distance learning course through ACCESS. They look for certain characteristics such as good writing skills, communication skills, interest in online learning, computer literacy, and a capacity for independent learning (Alabama Policy Institute, 2012). The student must work closely with the counselor to ensure the best possible course is selected for the success of the student. It is imperative the counselor does not give a student a class he/she is not ready for. The counselor works closely with the facilitator to monitor the student's success in the course throughout the semester and make any notes deemed vital to future decisions.

FACILITATOR'S ROLE

ACCESS Distance Learning facilitators do not have to be certified teachers. A facilitator is an adult supervisor who serves as the liaison between the student and the teacher. A facilitator must over 18 years of age and must be familiar with web-based instruction. Facilitators in a Title I school must be supervised by a certified teacher. Facilitators must also meet personnel qualifications set forth by the local school system.

A facilitator's responsibilities include monitoring student progress and ensuring students submit their coursework in a timely fashion. If there is a problem with a student, it is the facilitator who acts as the on-site person in charge of the student while the student is in the lab. If the student begins to fall behind, the facility will work closely with the student and counselor to ensure coursework is turned in as it should be. If there are any technical issues, it is the facilitator's job to see to the troubleshooting of the lab equipment. If it is a more complex technical issue, the technology department is contacted.

TEACHER'S ROLE

To become a teacher with ACCESS Distance Learning, an interested teacher must first fill out an application and submit the required paperwork, including a recommendation letter from the teacher's principal. Teachers then participate in an interview and attend a 3-day training session. These training sessions are conducted in Madison, Tuscaloosa, and Troy, Alabama. Once selected, ACCESS teachers participate and "attend scheduled, ongoing, professional development" (ACCESS Distance Learning, 2013, p. 2).

By teaching ACCESS Distance Learning classes, teachers learn different approaches to integrating technology in their own traditional classrooms. Teachers believe they always need to learn (Sugar & Slagter van

Tryon, 2014); therefore, teachers can use ACCESS Distance Learning as a learning resource. One example is the use of Moodle in the classroom or similar course management software. One teacher noted that using the software program has helped her decide which classroom management program would be useful and user-friendly to her students in the classroom. She also mentioned how using the web-based software is beneficial in monitoring student progress (teacher first initial and last name, personal communication, date).

Teachers must rely a great deal on using technology in the classroom when teaching through ACCESS Distance Learning classes. They must be familiar with the equipment in their classroom in order to troubleshoot problems that. For example, when a teacher is utilizing the interactive videoconferencing class format, they must be able to use the video equipment and the software that comes with it in order to teach their classes to students. If technical problems arise in the classrooms, the teacher must have the ability or knowledge to be able to troubleshoot minor problems. Problems which may arise can include printer issues, saving issues, file retrieval issues and computer freeze and crash issues, just to name a few. A facilitator on-site at the remote school is also beneficial.

While in a classroom setting, if teachers have any problems with an online student, they will first contact the student. Problems that may arise include students not turning in their work, not logging into the classroom, or plagiarism (K. Vaughan, personal communication, 2014). The teacher will contact the facilitator at the student's school to try and resolve the issue if talking with the student is not successful. Depending on the issue at hand, disciplinary issues could go as far getting the student's principal involved, but there has been no need for that type of action.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

Teachers using instructional strategies with virtual learning have the ability to utilize the same instructional strategies as used in the traditional classroom. Teachers must continue to plan for reading assignments, textbook use, and media deemed necessary (Marsap & Narin, 2009). No matter the media used to reach students in a virtual learning environment, communication is the key to success (Marsap & Narin, 2009).

When developing discussions for online courses, Berge's (1995) model is useful. It can be used to assist teachers and facilitators when performing multiple duties in both the online and traditional settings. Teachers and facilitators fulfill pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical roles (Safar & Alkhezzi, 2013). When used correctly, this model will transform teachers and facilitators so they can:

- help students become self-learners;
- increase student awareness of the course offered;
- help students become persistent and successful learners; and
- help students becoming lifelong learners (Safar & Alkhezzi, 2013).

One important note to remember when designing a class for e-learning through a virtual school is to create goals, objectives, class outline and major units and topics before doing anything else for the class (Ko & Rossen, 2010). This helps the teacher to have in mind what is being taught when designing the class and can implement the appropriate learning strategies for student success.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES THAT WORK

When designing a virtual classroom, it is important to remember the standards for this type of classroom just as with the traditional classroom. With the implementation of the Common Core Standards in Alabama, it is imperative the ACCESS Dis-

tance Learning courses follow the same rigor and standards as traditional classrooms. According to Buehl (2014), when implementing Common Core Standards, students will be expected to:

- read and comprehend texts of much greater complexity;
- read a higher volume of informational texts;
- perceive, analyze and develop argumentation as readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and viewers;
- expand their academic vocabularies; and
- regularly communicate their understanding as readers and learning through writing.

IMPLEMENTING DISCUSSION

QUESTIONS IN

ACCESS DISTANCE LEARNING

Discussion questions can either be asynchronous or synchronous. When developing discussions for ACCESS Distance Learning, the teacher must first determine the discussion question format. Does the teacher want the students to have time to reflect on the question and give thought-provoking responses (asynchronous), or does the teacher prefer the students respond to the questions in a timely fashion (synchronous), as in a bell ringer. Whichever response the teacher prefers, the goal and objectives of the class should help foster the decision making.

Ko and Rossen (2010) provided some helpful tips when implementing asynchronous discussions. These tips include:

- The teacher should start the major thread;
- Topics should be narrowed down;
- The class discussions should be organized in a chronological order or sequenced pattern;
- Make the threads personal by addressing the students by name;

- A pattern should be established when responding to posts;
- Facilitate the discussions and help students build on others' responses to aid in class participation;
- Higher order thinking should be stimulated in the students;
- Strategize for controversial topics as they may arise; and
- Cultural patterns should be reviewed.

Whatever type of discussion chosen for the ACCESS Distance Learning classroom, keeping students actively engaged is important.

WEB-ENHANCED AND BLENDED COURSES

Web-enhanced and blended courses are offered by ACCESS Distance Learning. Both provide the necessary tools needed for success in the classroom. A web-enhanced classroom consists of a broad category of content put on a website or classroom management system which may contain material such as a syllabus, class calendar, resources, and discussion boards. In the web-enhanced classroom, actual online participation may be optional (Ko & Rosson, 2010). In a blended classroom, a good percentage of the classroom material is delivered online and student participation and activity is online as well. A blended learning classroom is delivered in both a face-to-face classroom and online as well.

With ACCESS Distance Learning moving its focus to a blended classroom format, here are some tips in implementing a blended course:

- Avoid overloading students with more work than they would have received in a traditional classroom.
- Give clear directions on the goal the students are to accomplish. This helps to alleviate any misunderstandings.

- Give students an orientation of the blended classroom format so they understand how the course works (Ko & Rossen, 2010).

TIME COMMITMENT

Time is one of the greatest commitments a teacher with ACCESS Distance Learning or any virtual school can give. Although time is not spent in a physical classroom with virtual schools, this time can be well spent preparing lessons, recording lectures, developing websites, posting to discussions, answering questions, and interacting with students (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

COMMUNICATION

Communication is just as important when teaching at ACCESS Distance Learning as it is when teaching at a brick-and-mortar school. Effective communication is necessary with the exchange of ideas, messages and signals (Stancil, 2011). Students are successful when they can see or hear feedback. When a teacher communicates to the students the proper instructions and expectations of a class, students tend to learn better and have a better understanding of how the class will work (Ko & Rossen, 2010). Teachers will also notice behavioral problems are kept to a minimum because the student is well aware of any consequences for his/her actions.

CONCLUSION

Teachers have the ability to set the standards in a classroom, whether it is an e-learning classroom or a face-to-face classroom. Their approach to learning and their ability to identify with their students will determine the success of their students. The teachers' perspective of technology will influence their students' learning in ways they have never imagined. With so much information available, there is room for every student to be successful in an e-

learning classroom if only the teacher takes to the time to research and implement the strategies to help his or her students reach their goals.

Classrooms have moved from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered learning environment. Although student centered learning is not a new approach, the movement toward distance education brought student-centered learning back to the forefront of active learning (Simonson et al., 2012). In today's classrooms, with the implementation of Common Core Standards, teachers must implement more critical thinking skills. Open lines of communication with the students is a key to success as well. With the implementation of Plan 2020, schools have the task of getting students "college and career ready." Because of ACCESS Distance Learning, the third largest distance learning school in the country, the students of Alabama are well on their way to becoming "college and career ready" and ready to compete with other students domestically and globally in both the academic and the global markets.

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