Case Study: Computer Learning

Issue

After completing a GED or work certification course, many adult education students find themselves ill-prepared for an increasingly computerized and technology driven workplace.

Challenges

The digital divide is still a very real issue in many communities, and it places adult education students at a distinct disadvantage. While a traditional classroom environment might seem more accessible to students who are not technologically literate, in reality it does those students a disservice.

Joseph Tully, a coordinator and trainer for the City Colleges of Chicago, knows all about these kinds of challenges. Serving a city of 2.5 million people means a student population that is economically and socially diverse.

"Most of them are already out in the world—they're surviving and making their way and they're pretty smart," Tully said. "They come here to make up the gaps."

Those gaps can include having gotten by without computer literacy, a habit that is in danger of becoming a permanent disadvantage.

"The most resistant was a 17-year-old who didn't want to learn to type, didn't have a Facebook account, didn't want to learn computers at all," Tully said.

Solution

Teachers who are confident and empowered using technology can inspire their students to become the same. And online learning programs that impart technology skills while also delivering curriculum are a valuable tool.

"*Workforce Connects* helps our students use computers in meaningful ways," says Tully. "And it exposes students who have traditionally been locked out to a viable career path."

Adult education students at City Colleges of Chicago start with a teacher in the classroom who can help them log on and register, and can observe the student's skill level from the outset.

"It's the perfect avenue for me as a teacher to help them understand the computer skills they'll need, such as word processing, coupled with the skill of writing for work," Tully said.

One key to having empowered teachers is an ongoing program of coaching and mentoring that helps teachers develop their own style and approach for using technology in the classroom. But the most compelling argument from a teacher's point of view is improved student outcomes.

Benefits

Tully says that his teachers can see student benefits in real time, and that builds momentum for computer-based learning.

"When students find it appealing, it keeps them engaged and focused throughout," he said. Students like the 24/7 nature of an online tool; teachers like the tracking and reporting ability, and that it's available to their students when the teacher may not be.

Some students have even been inspired to buy their first computer, narrowing the digital divide one household at a time.

And what about the 17 year old who didn't have a Facebook page? His teacher walked him through his pre-assessment n *Workforce Connects,* tying what he was doing to his future career goals at every step of the way. He has embraced the computer now, and his instructor reports that his math and grammar usage have both noticeably improved.

Perhaps even more importantly, he's learning practical skills that will increase his access and participation for the rest of his life. Tully credits the young man's teacher for helping him see a larger world that he can be a part of.

"Teachers who embrace computer learning tools are using them to inspire their students."