

From the Handbook of Distance
Education for Adult Learners, 4th Ed.
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan,
Project IDEAL Support Center.

Chapter 4: Assessment

Assessment is an important part of education. It can help a teacher determine an appropriate placement for a student before instruction begins, it can help a teacher gauge learner progress in the course of an instructional sequence, and it can help a teacher or program administrator gauge how well a program of instruction is working. This chapter begins by discussing the 2007 guidelines issued by OVAE that allow distance learners to be included in the National Reporting System (NRS). It then looks at determining instructional time for distance learners and explores the different types of assessment in a distance context.

Assessment to Meet the NRS Guidelines

In June 2007 OVAE announced that distance learners could be included in the NRS, as long as states have an approved distance learning policy in their state's adult education plan. This announcement sparked additional interest in distance education as states and local agencies were now able to count their distance learners. In order to be included in the NRS, distance learners must be assessed according to the same policy that is in place for all adult learners in the state. Your state will provide guidance on how to report distance learners. The following discussion of NRS requirements is intended only to provide some general background information; for specific details refer to the appropriate NRS and OVAE documents.

States must include the following information about assessment in their distance learning policy:

- The test(s) that can be used to assess distance learners
- How, where and by whom tests may be administered
- The methods used to determine when to posttest distance students.

Assessment must use a standardized test identified in the state's assessment policy and must take place in a secure, monitored setting. This does not mean, however, that the assessment must occur at the adult education center. Some distance learning agencies have made arrangements with local public schools or libraries and trained staff there to administer and proctor testing for students living in those communities. A few teachers travel to remote locations to administer the assessments.

The NRS Guidelines state that distance learners “should be posttested after the same amount of instructional time as other students, according to the state’s approved NRS assessment policy.”³

Measuring Instructional Time for Distance Learners: Proxy Contact Hours

How do you measure instructional time for distance learners? In a classroom, the most commonly used approach is to record “contact hours,” the amount of time a student is physically present in orientation, the classroom, the lab, etc.⁴ This figure determines when a learner becomes an official student (at 12 hours) and when assessment of educational functioning level should be administered (frequently after 40 or 50 hours). A parallel approach for distance learners establishes *proxy contact hours* for curricula taught at a distance. Proxy contact hours provide an indication of how much instructional time, on average, distance students are likely to spend on specific components of a curriculum. From an assessment perspective, proxy contact hours serve the same functions as contact hours: they allow adult education providers to determine when to retest students. They also provide instructors with another way of monitoring their student’s engagement with the curriculum and help instructors determine where additional support or intervention might be warranted.

Proxy contact hours are assigned to a curriculum throughout a systematic process. Your state will provide guidance on what proxy contact hours (if any) you will use for your distance learners: this is not typically a decision that individual teachers or adult education centers make. For NRS purposes, the following three models of determining proxy contact hours are acceptable:⁵

- **Clock Time Model.** This model can be used with online or stand-alone software programs that track the time that a student is engaged with the curriculum and which log out students after a pre-determined period of inactivity. Typically, one hour of time in the program is accepted to be one proxy contact hour. Curricula used by Project IDEAL states that use this model include *Aztec*, *McGraw Hill Contemporary GED Online*, *PLATO* and *SkillsTutor*.
- **Teacher Verification Model.** The Teacher Verification Model is well suited to multi-media curricula, where students receive instruction from a variety of sources. In this model, a fixed number of proxy contact hours are given for completion of each instructional activity in the curriculum. The assignment of hours is

³ Changes to NRS Guideline for Distance Learners, June 2007. Downloaded 8/14/08 from http://www.nrsweb.org/foundations/implementation_guidelines.aspx

⁴ Earlier versions of the Handbook used the term “seat time” to describe the same general concept. As “contact hours” is terminology used for federal reporting purposes, it is also being used in this revised Handbook.

⁵ Changes to NRS Guideline for Distance Learners, June 2007. Downloaded 8/14/08 from http://www.nrsweb.org/foundations/implementation_guidelines.aspx

based on a teacher verifying that the assignment was completed. *GED Connection*, *Pre-GED Connection*, *Workplace Essential Skills* and *Madison Heights/Lifelines* are examples of curricula using this proxy contact hour model.

- **Learner Mastery Model.** In this model, the degree to which learners have mastered instructional content is connected to the assignment of proxy contact hours. The Learner Mastery Model assigns a fixed number of proxy contact hours based on the learner passing a test on the content of each lesson. Students must score at a pre-determined level (typically 70%-80%) to earn the credit hours attached to the material. Curricula used by Project IDEAL states that use this model include *Crossroads Café* and *English for All*.⁶

States are *not* required to report proxy contact hours to the NRS. However, if proxy contact hours are reported, they must be used to determine when it is appropriate to posttest students. States that do not use proxy hours must provide information in their distance learning plan that explains how they will make decisions about appropriate posttesting intervals.

Assessment to Gauge Student Progress

Assessing student work on a regular basis provides both the teacher and the student with a sense of the student's progress, indicates strengths and areas for improvement and helps the teacher plan appropriately to meet the student's needs. This type of assessment is valuable for students, as it provides a mechanism through which they can gauge their progress toward meeting goals. For distance teachers, it provides guidance for instructional planning. Classroom teachers have a variety of methods they can use to provide formal and informal assessment of students' performance: homework and class assignments, discussions with students, the questions a student raises in class, students' body language, quizzes and tests, etc. However, assessing students to gauge progress is likely to be more difficult for distance teachers who may have only a subset of these options available. Thus, one of the key tasks for distance teachers is to develop ways of obtaining the information they need to conduct assessment of student progress on a regular basis.

Clearly, one way for teachers to assess student progress is to regularly review the work the student completes and provide feedback to the student on that work; this was discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. Another option would be using tests and quizzes to assess distance students; this may make distance assessment more parallel to classroom-based assessment. It may be possible to have students take pencil and paper quizzes at a designated location; if that is not possible, students might be able to take the quizzes at home and mail them back to their teachers. Another possibility would be to make online quizzes available for students who are studying online. Since the primary

⁶ See the chart in the Appendix for additional information about the proxy contact hours associated with some of the curricula used in Project IDEAL states.

focus of these quizzes is to gain information to help the teacher in instructional planning, issues about secure testing sites, that are a concern for accountability purposes, are less relevant. Teachers must assume students are acting independently to complete assessments.

The majority of curricula being used by Project IDEAL member states offer some form of tailored assessment (e.g., diagnostic instruments, unit quizzes or tests, etc.) designed to help teachers and students gauge student progress; there vary depending on the type of delivery system used by the product developer. For example, interactive instructional software programs (e.g., *MHC GED Online*, *PLATO*, *SkillsTutor*, etc.) include both diagnostic assessments and interim progress measures all of which are available online. The multimedia products GEDC and WES, offer paper-based “Skills Preview” and “Skills Review” in each workbook. GEDC also offers two tailored, online GED practice tests in each content area. While these product-tailored assessment measures are not accepted for accountability purposes, they can be valuable tools in monitoring student progress.

Maintaining portfolios of student work is another way for teachers to track and demonstrate growth. Students using the online components of WES and GEDC maintain an online portfolio of their work; teachers may want to supplement this with a paper portfolio of selected workbook assignments. Teachers using other curricula may want to consider having their students compile either paper or online portfolios as a way to track their progress and reflect on their growth. Although portfolios *do not* meet NRS requirements, they can provide additional evaluation information to guide instruction.

Project IDEAL states have suggested several possibilities for ongoing or interim assessment of distance student progress, including:

- GED practice tests
- Passing individual sections of the GED exam
- Comparing the pre- and posttest scores generated by CAI programs
- “Mid-terms” sent to the student either via regular mail or email
- Requiring students to return to the agency either to have work reviewed or to take a quiz
- Online tests (either those associated with the curriculum or those created by the teacher or by a third party site)
- Phone consultations during which teachers can review student work and ask students questions to assess their understanding of concepts
- Performance-based products, such as a resume or performance in a mock interview (particularly for students studying work-based curricula)

Posttesting Students

Getting students to come back to the adult education center for posttesting is one the major challenges facing distance teachers. Students may find it difficult to create time in their schedule to meet this requirement, may fail to see the importance of testing or may be unwilling to meet face-to-face when the majority of their studies occur independently at a distance. Yet posttesting is important both for monitoring student progress to guide instruction and for accountability purposes. Teachers in Project IDEAL states report that they have used the following approaches to encourage students to return for posttesting:

- Using incentives. Teachers have used incentives ranging from gas cards, pizza parties and raffles to bring students back from testing. Others find that certificates or other tangible forms of recognition may motivate students to posttest.
- Setting expectations for posttesting at orientation and reminding students of this as they study. This may help students perceive this as an integral part of their distance learning program. Some teachers also stress that this allows the teacher to more effectively focus instruction to best meet the students' needs.
- Appealing to students' sense of responsibility. Some teachers explain to their students that in order for the agency to be able to continue to offer free services, they need to have information on student's progress. They encourage students to come in for testing so that the programs will be available not only for them but for others who might need similar services.
- Offer posttesting in locations that are convenient for the students. Some agencies have established with local libraries or schools located in the students' communities to conduct posttesting. A few teachers have reported that they will drive to the students' communities to administer posttests
- As a last resort, block students from the distance program until they posttest.

The Voice of Experience

Our state requires students to return to a GED class and take a posttest in at least one subject every three months. First, we remind students to go in and take a posttest. We point out how valuable this is to us and them. Then, if they do not respond or go in and take a posttest, we "block" them from class until they go in and take a posttest. If they have a good reason for not posttesting right away, I will give them some extra time.

----A Missouri Distance Teacher

The Voice of Experience

We use the GED practice test, if they are taking the GED. When they take it this provides a match. We TABE and Practice test them during their orientation and instruction. I also don't give the entire practice test at the orientation. This gives students a reason to return and thus increases the number of hours that you see them.

---A Pennsylvania Distance Teacher