Changing Course in Uncharted Territory

By Kris Hattori | EdSurge Solutions Studio

"Moving online—that happened really, really quickly. We transitioned over spring break, and the teachers started teaching the following Wednesday," explains Susan Aguilar, Director of Central Arizona College's (CAC) Adult Basic Education Program. "We had to contact all of the students. We had to let them know this was happening. We had to let them know not to come to class. I can't even tell you how appreciative I am of all of our staff that were able to do that."

While most schools had to deal with a quick shift to online learning this year, CAC had an especially difficult timeline to meet—measured not in months and weeks but in days.

Aguilar emphasized that, while there is no COVID-19 playbook, no perfect guide or master plan, elbow grease and iterative design allowed her team to turn initial stumbles into successes.

Aguilar shared with EdSurge the hardest lessons learned this year and explained how SkillRise helped her team make informed decisions in uncertain times.

EdSurge: What were some of the hardware and infrastructure changes that you had to make once you learned the school was going remote?

Aguilar: We were fortunate in many regards; I think that our teachers were all very well prepared with internet and the hardware that they needed. The staff, for the most part, was also very well prepared with technology. CAC did a really good job setting us all up.

We also supplied the teachers with those portable ELMO cameras with CARES money. They're little tiny document cameras that you can attach to your computer. It's bendable so you can show different

parts of your computer when you're sharing the screen. At that time, a lot of our teachers were still writing on a piece of paper, so they were showing how to do a math problem, for example. They could take that camera and point it down to their paper, and it would project to the students.

CAC also jumped right in with a laptop checkout system for all students, which was great. One thing we didn't have was internet hotspots. But surprisingly, most of our students, very surprisingly to me, either had internet access at home or were able to get it through a friend or a family member.
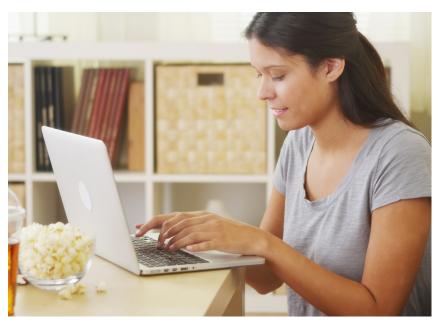
What did you find out about your students' digital literacy as you moved online?

We discovered some technical challenges as soon as we transitioned to remote teaching in March and one of the things that came out is that some students didn't know how to copy and paste or share their screens. Just teaching students how to do those two things has made a world of difference in the classroom. Another thing—and this was surprising to me—students did not know how to access their email on various types of technology. If they always got it on their phone, they didn't know how to get to it on their computer and vice versa.

Now, we are going to have digital literacy as part of the orientation. It's going to be two consecutive days the week prior to classes starting. The first day covers Blackboard and Blackboard Collaborate—how do I get into my class, how do I participate in my class, how do I turn on my microphone and my camera. That kind of thing. Then the second day covers basic computer skills. If a student comes in with very high level digital literacy skills, they still need that Blackboard instruction, but they may be excused from the second day's basic computer skills lesson.

Who did you turn to for help throughout this process?

There is no playbook. We had a little bit of guidance from the state. They told us certain things like, "Okay, you have to do face-to-face registration." Then it's like, "Okay, how are we going to do that?" We kind of had to figure it out on our own. For some things, we would turn to other adult ed programs in the state and ask them what they were doing. We would collaborate a little bit with other programs.

SkillRise really helped with the digital literacy piece in particular because it challenged us to ask the right questions—to make sure we are not leaving things out and to not be afraid to scrap ideas if they are not working. We have a lot of great people in our program, and we have fantastic ideas left, right and all day long, but SkillRise helped us to focus and remember best practices when implementing something new. I found that part of it really, really helpful.

The adult ed programs aren't always as forthcoming with the Arizona Department of Education as maybe they could be or should be. But COVID has really just blown that to pieces. Everybody is very upfront with all of the challenges that they're facing, so that's kind of refreshing. I think that's the silver lining to it.

Were there any subjects that were particularly difficult to shift online?

ESL was really challenging and still is to this day. Our student enrollment has dropped pretty significantly, probably half. From what I hear, a lot of the phone calls we get from ESL students are, "Are you back face-to-face yet? Oh, you're not? Then I am going to wait and come back when you're face-to-face." I don't know how else to say it. They want to be face-to-face. They like that personal attention with the teacher. It's just a lot harder to learn a language, I think, online than it is in person. Our ESL students really miss the face-to-face component. That's been challenging.

I think it was probably a little more challenging for our ESL teachers to make that transition as well, as opposed to the GED teachers. Not only are the ESL students needing to learn English, they also need the technology skills. Trying to teach them the technology and English skills at the same time is really hard.

What was enrollment like during the change, and what do things look like now for CAC?

The attrition was terrible. Our student attendance was terrible. The teachers were very discouraged, so it was a rough, rough spring. But we got the registration system up. We got the teachers cameras. Jana, our instructional specialist, provided a lot of professional development over the summer for the teachers. In August, things were better. Then, this session that started in October, it's just night and day compared to what we were going through in March. Things are much, much better.

Our teachers are so much more comfortable teaching online now. They know how to form their small groups in Blackboard; they can create these breakout sessions, and they maintain student contact. We are calling and emailing our students more than ever before. The face-to-face registration with students is fantastic because there are five of us now doing registration appointments, and they get half an hour of our time where they can ask us anything they want. That seems to be very appealing to them. They really like it. They can see that, "Oh, this isn't so hard. I can do this." ■

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