

SKILLRISE CASE STUDY: Asian American Civic Association

Expanding Community Access Through Distance Learning

By [Kris Hattori](#) | EdSurge Solutions Studio

Since it was founded in 1967, the [Asian American Civic Association](#) has helped the greater Boston immigrant community become economically self-sufficient by giving its members the tools they need to enter college and vocational training programs. The organization provides workforce development, social services and adult education to economically disadvantaged people and English language learners who have come to the US from all over the world. Their English language program, the Next Steps Transitional English Program (Next STEP) is available for free at multiple levels for all adult learners.

We spoke with Next STEP director Shinobu Ando and instructors Alan Phillips and Kevin Freeley to find out how the team handled the transition to remote teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They explained how SkillRise helped them pivot through a difficult 2020 and plan for an optimistic 2021.

EdSurge: What changed for AACA in 2020 due to the pandemic?

Phillips: The sudden onset of the COVID-19 quarantine forced every department of our agency to adapt to working online. With all of us making the change at once, we could assist each other and provide more experience to quickly hammer out best practices. Counterintuitively, if it was only one program or department shifting online at a time with a more planned and organized schedule, the change wouldn't have gone as well.



Surprisingly, moving to online learning resulted in an increase in enrollment. It also increased the geographical area of where students are living. Previously, there were transportation issues that prevented people from coming in person to Chinatown, but now students in the suburbs can attend easily online, and people who were on vacation or had to return to their home countries to care for family members temporarily can attend class regardless of distance.

Ando: One of the silver linings the pandemic brought includes changing the culture of the way we incorporate technology into our work. We are not as afraid to learn new things and test things out. We are learning, testing

talk to advisors. A couple of staff members also have work cell phones, so students could call and text them directly. This all gave a strong impetus for students and clients unfamiliar with technology to learn—either by themselves or through the AACA, family or children.

Freeley: The difficulties were not only learning the language while learning the technology, but for many, it was a question of access. Some of the students did not have computers or reliable access to wifi. It is hard to gauge how many students are not participating due to access to technology or the skills needed to use the technology.

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and revising new ways of working—from recruitment, assessment and placement, to onboarding, advising and finding ways to collaborate with colleagues remotely.

How did the changes impact the people enrolled in your programs? How did you communicate these changes?

Ando: Remote learning continues to provide students a predictable and positive routine and a sense of community during a time when some students are laid off or furloughed. During the transition, we discussed the best ways to deliver information to students about all the changes. We regularly communicated with students by providing manageable amounts of information—through emails, verbal announcements in class and by posting in an online learning platform. The program implemented an online coffee hour for students where they could pop in and

Phillips: I think the change forced many students to get more tech-savvy faster than they would have in regular classes.

What were you most and least prepared for this year?

Ando: Our program began the spring 2020 cycle right after the Lunar New Year in February. So, some students had returned to their home countries to celebrate and were unable to return to Boston because flights were cancelled, or they had to quarantine at home for two weeks before joining the class.

The week before starting remote work in mid-March was chaotic with emergency meetings. The program quickly made a team decision to transition to Zoom and Google Classroom. We surveyed staff and students’ access to technology at their homes before going remote. We quickly tested Zoom and set

students up with Gmail because we knew we wanted to use Google Classroom during remote teaching.

On day one of the online classes, we tested Zoom with each student and enrolled students into Google Classroom as the only class activity. Students sometimes had children helping with tech set up in the background. We kept track of who couldn't access, and staff reached out to provide technical support.

Looking back, keeping the momentum going with classes was the best decision we made. Fortunately, we are a small program at a community organization, so we had flexibility to make a decision and moved quickly. We worked with a local school district to receive and distribute tablets to students who needed them. We stayed organized and communicated with each other, worked with other departments such as the multi-service center within the organization to make sure students' basic needs, such as food and housing, were met. We kept a positive schedule and routine and created a comfortable community for students and staff that we could look forward to every day during the early stages of pandemic.

Phillips: When we first went online, state officials and schools were saying, "We could be out as long as two weeks." Now it's nine months later. We weren't expecting it to go on so long, but as the spring continued, it was clear we had to prepare for the long haul.

Freeley: I think getting students online and comfortable with the software was most difficult. Teaching tech skills to the students onsite was dramatically easier. Onsite we could always depend on other students working together when there was an issue. Now, with the students isolated, tech issues became more difficult to remedy. It certainly takes a lot of time to prepare and do the same things online. Some things are still challenging to teach online, such as pronunciation.

One thing we implemented right after we went remote was to meet weekly and have a practical tech-sharing time—technology tips we've learned and can apply right away. When we were in a building, teachers and advisors shared a large office together, so they could turn around and ask quick questions any time on a daily basis. Now that we are remote, we schedule more frequent meetings to create a similar collaborative atmosphere.

How did the SkillRise course help you improve technology use in the move to remote learning?

Ando: It gave the three of us an opportunity to collaborate, learn and discuss our vision in depth. The timing of the course was perfect. We started the course at the beginning of the summer when we had a chance to look back and reflect on the past few months of remote teaching and working. The course made us think through our focus and strategies from different angles and set a long-term, actionable vision for the program.

Freeley: As Shinobu said, it was a perfect time for us to reflect on our teaching. We were eager and ready to assess our tech usage and make any necessary changes. The readings helped us see how tech skills not only

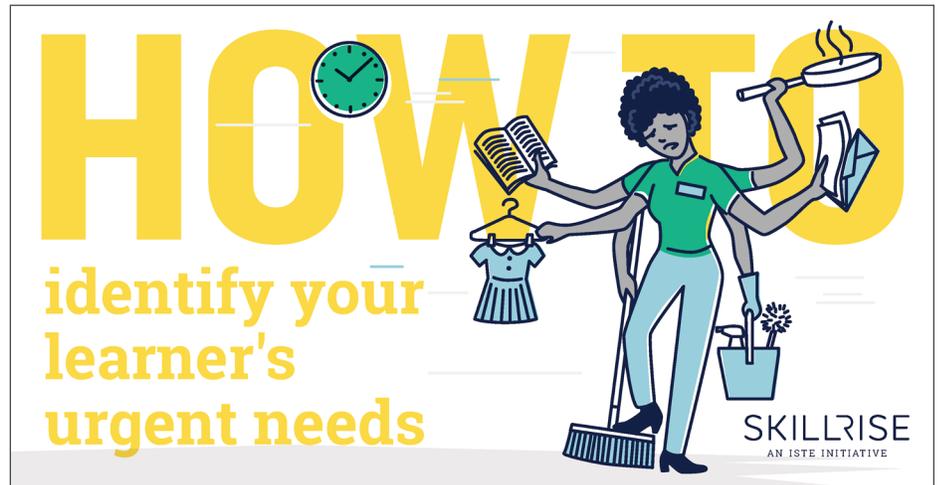


helped students learn English but how these skills also future-proofed their employment and careers.

Phillips: I think it helped us make the most of both the crisis and opportunity of the quarantine. Since we are all now online all the time, we can use the ideas we've learned with the SkillRise course and put them to use when they are most needed (as in the quarantine). Then, having tried out the strategies in a real-time test, we can continue to use what works in the future, post-quarantine environment.

How did you engage with your SkillRise coach? How did those interactions influence your edtech planning process?

Ando: Jeff not only shared practical tips and websites we could use right away, but he also challenged us to think more about long-term effects and benefits of remote learning and teaching. So, we are not just looking at how we can survive right now, but how remote teaching and advising can benefit students and clients even after the pandemic is under control. It definitely helped us refine our long-term vision.



Are there plans you're making in 2021 as a result of your experience with SkillRise?

Freeley: The readings and studies that we covered in the class made us even more resolute in the need to prepare our students with tech skills in addition to teaching them English. We have also started an action plan for a technology curriculum for each level of ESOL class. We are continuing to work on a sequential developmental plan so that students who finish the program will have a list of essential digital literacy skills. We're currently planning to present ideas to others in our agency so that we can all benefit from some of the best practices that we've learned. ■