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Forum: Responses to Stephen Reder's Article

(Part 2 of 4)

Distance Education and Equity in Adult Education: Opportunities and Unanswered Questions

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As a scholar of technology in adult education (AE), I reflect on emerging questions about distance education in light of the findings of Reder (2026). While almost no learners in Reder's study used distance education in the 2007–2008 cohort, by 2018–2019, nearly 20% had participated in this format even as overall AE enrollment declined by more than two-thirds (Reder, 2026). This pattern reflects national and international trends following COVID-19. A large European study of nonformal programs reported that nearly half (47.8%) were conducted online between 2022 and 2025 (Karger et al., 2024). At the same time, Reder's findings may not fully reflect broader pre-pandemic U.S. trends. NRS data from 2016–2019 show less than 4% of learners enrolled nationally (though reporting discrepancies may account for some of the difference), with learners performing as well as or better than those learning primarily in person (Belzer et al., 2022; Vanek, 2022). As distance education becomes more central to program delivery in AE, its relationship to what Reder and others have found related to longer-term participation trajectories and skill development deserves closer examination.

Distance education has existed for decades in AE. Modalities continue to expand with available technologies and now include live, synchronous instruction online; asynchronous online instruction where learners complete activities independently; and hybrid approaches where some aspect of learning occurs in person (Cherewka et al., 2024). Distance education is defined through the NRS dataset used by Reder as a "formal learning activity where students and instructors are separated by geography, time, or both for the majority of the instructional period" (National Reporting System for Adult Education, 2025, p. 48). According to Cherewka et al. (2024), this reporting criteria has remained the same since the early days of distance education in the mid 2000s. Further, reporting on distance education at the state level is optional. If states require local agencies to report distance education, they must provide more specific guidance based on the above definition. In practice, this has produced wide variation in how states and programs interpret key terms such as *hybrid* or "the majority of the instructional period," complicating efforts to compare findings or identify best practices.

Much has been written about the affordances and challenges of distance education in AE, and Reder (2026) provides some new perspectives. First, Reder's findings highlight the nuances related to understanding who may (or may not) participate in distance education. Reder notes individuals who participate in distance education are more likely to be "female, native English-speaking, younger, and less educated" (2026, p. 13). The digital divide, which refers to gaps in technology access and skills, has been cited as a challenge related to distance education in AE (Belzer et al., 2022; Kobrin, 2024)

However, adult digital literacy is highly situational and complex, based on a range of factors such as an adults' values, needs, goals, and resources. For example, individuals who are less educated have been found to have lower digital skills according to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which might suggest they would participate in distance education less often (Mamedova et al., 2018). These same individuals are more likely to be smartphone-dependent (Gelles-Watnick, 2024), raising the possibility that they can participate in mobile-based distance education while struggling with computer- or tablet-based testing formats like the PIAAC.

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Such findings complicate simplistic assumptions about who can and cannot engage online.

Despite the digital divide, it has been widely recognized that distance education is more convenient for many adult learners, who often juggle multiple jobs, have childcare responsibilities, and struggle with the cost of transportation (Rosen & Vanek, 2017). Regarding individuals who were female, as Reder highlights, I wondered if distance education may reflect an opportunity for women with childcare responsibilities. Reder's findings regarding learners whose participation unfolds across multiple programs and time periods also introduce an additional dimension: flexibility not only within programs, but across them. For example, when my colleagues and I worked at the Office of Adult Education in Philadelphia, I implemented citywide asynchronous modules accessible across programs using a shared Learning Management System. Learners appreciated being able to pause and resume courses as needed, and being able to easily save their progress was appreciated by the providers. While challenges such as forgotten passwords and uneven access persisted, the model reflected the lived realities of adult learners' mobility. Distance education can be well-suited for learning over time, as previous coursework and topics can be automatically saved, making it easy to track progression and review.

As Reder (2020) has noted, adult learning should not only be lifelong, but also life-wide, encompassing a broad range of topics geared at civic, cultural, economic, and social participation. Based on my own research, low-income adults who lack basic reading and digital skills are using platforms like YouTube for diverse goals from home improvement projects, to learning about global cultures, to following their favorite performers. Given its reliance on videos, images, and other multimedia (with adults as not only consumers but potentially producers), distance education seems primed for content that integrates these broader goals and interests.

However, the absence of a shared understanding of distance education in AE makes identifying best practices for lifelong and life-wide participation challenging. As noted above, based on NRS data, we know that distance education is at least, if not more, effective than in-person learning. Important gaps in understanding remain. We should be wary of tendencies in AE to view technology platforms as a panacea that will address huge resource disparities in our field, which Vanek and Harris refer to as the "cool tools problem" (2020, p. 5). Distance education, like in-person instruction, is only as effective as its design and alignment with the needs of the population served. Robust research on adult learning and teaching, including andragogy, self-directed learning, culturally responsive instruction, etc., can guide promising approaches, but gaining large-scale investment might be difficult in the absence of much knowledge of what is happening already. I strongly agree with Cherewka et al. (2024) that the lack of alignment on different instructional modalities nationally makes any large-scale research on effectiveness challenging.

As distance education continues to expand, the field must not only develop shared understandings across states and programs, but also critically examine how specific distance education models can support long-term participation trajectories in light of Reder's findings.

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