



Online Learning, Digital Isolation and COVID-19

Information provided by adult literacy and learning specialists around Australia in direct contact with adult learners throughout COVID, including Community Colleges, TAFEs, and adult literacy peak bodies.

What happened with adult literacy online learning during the pandemic?

- face to face classes ceased, many courses moved online; adapting lessons and materials was fast-tracked
- some learnt new digital skills; doors opened for people who couldn't attend face-to-face previously.
- learning curve was too steep for others -unable to continue studying; inequalities between learners increased
- social services sector reports that requirement for this additional kind of literacy compounds social disadvantage

What have we learned for the future?

- National trend towards normalizing online learning needs may not suit adult literacy classes
- Many adults don't have the skills or access to technology to succeed in online study
- Government services /forms are shifting online; employers require workers to use more digital practices, requiring extra training
- Extra funding needed to ensure equitable learning opportunities via face to face or distance alternatives to online study
- Professional networks need to share strategies, identify champion teachers, build learning resources to create an equitable way forward

Online Learning: Assumptions vs Reality

ASSUMPTION	REALITY	WHAT'S NEEDED
Everyone learns well online	Learning online can be overwhelming Beginners need face to face People with low literacy face extra barriers Building teacher/student relationship essential at early stages	Funding for Digital Hubs with WiFi & device support, especially in regions. Face to face and distance options available – mail, phone, radio.
Everyone has access to devices and reliable internet.	Not everyone has a computer. Mobile phones inadequate for study. Unreliable internet especially in regions	Infrastructure funding to ensure access. Paper based learning materials and phone support, or face to face classes. Loan devices/learning hub with support
Everyone can afford data	Data limits/plans hard to understand. Data expensive for platforms like Zoom. Students get big bills.	Clear data plans from telcos.
Everyone can use a computer	Many mature aged students losing jobs in COVID can't navigate digital world.	Paper based materials and phone support Easy English guides to online platforms with graphics.



Everyone has a place to study without distractions	Many home environments not suitable. Devices shared by family	Study hubs with devices and Wi-Fi. More locations to access computers.
Troubleshooting is easy	Software crashes, audio devices malfunction frequently. Students don't have skills or experience to troubleshoot - get shut out.	Access to technical support to assist with trouble shooting
Young people are good at online learning	Many are comfortable with phone and social media, but not computers, applications or file management.	Hard copy learning materials and phone support or face to face classes.
Teachers can transition to online teaching	Many teachers have had little training in online teaching. It's difficult to give IT support at same time as teaching course content	More training for teachers IT support for classes Small digital literacy groups for beginner learners.
It's easy to show students how to use learning platforms	Many different devices used in each class. Many platforms have different functionality on each device. Difficult for beginners to follow along as demonstrated	Devices for loan same as teachers. Long-term loans for whole course Platforms that work well across devices Classes to teach platforms on each of the devices available for students
Online learning is a great innovation – convenient, reduces costs and increases access.	Online-only courses exclude many vulnerable learners. Students need classes for community, companionship, and a safe place to be. Inequitable access to education. More social disadvantage.	Ensure both distance & face to face options offered and funded. Funding caps reviewed so that RTOs offering only online learning are not advantaged financially.

Susie's story

Susie, a young mum with three children, lives in a remote area. Susie has an internet connection that's intermittent at best, and she lacks the literacy and IT skills to use a computer independently. It was a huge step to ask for help with literacy, something Susie found awkward and embarrassing to do.

Before Covid, Susie would come to town fortnightly for shopping, errands and to meet with her tutor. During the fortnight Susie would work on homework tasks and especially wanted to read stories to her children. She was dedicated in attendance. With the Covid lockdown, tutoring abruptly stopped, and Susie has discontinued. She hasn't found the confidence to get back into the swing of learning although tutoring has recommenced.

Mary's story

Mary, a young TAFE student, had no mobile service at home, limited data and one laptop shared between five siblings. The younger ones who were in lockdown from school had priority for use, so it was difficult for her to access the connected classroom her teacher set up. They connected by phone with an appointment time arranged by email prior. Some weeks Mary would book to visit campus and use a college computer for a couple of hours.