Virtual Learning Environments and Adult Literacy

White Paper

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Contents

Introduction

This white paper is intended for use when writing a grant proposal for adult literacy organizations. More specifically, the primary purpose of this document is to explain virtual learning environments (VLEs) as they relate to adult literacy programs so that you, as an advocate, can better articulate a need for such services.

This document includes an overview of what virtual learning environments are, how they're useful for adult literacy organizations, how to choose them, and the different software available. Additionally, the document provides relevant and timely literature about adult literacy and VLEs, and offers advice and tips on how to write a proposal related to these topics.

By the time you finish reading this document, you should feel better prepared to begin the proposal writing process to earn funds for an adult literacy organization.

What VLEs Are

A virtual learning environment is exactly what it sounds like, a learning space that can be accessed online instead of in-person. Typically, this entails making use of a video conferencing application (think Skype or Zoom, only fancier), which allows instructors and students to connect and collaborate from anywhere in the world. Oftentimes, these virtual learning environments have the same tools that a regular classroom would have (Dillenbourg, Schneider, & Synteta, 2002).

Additionally, research points to the effectiveness of virtual learning environments when improving literacy rates (Deshpande, Desrochers, Ksoll, & Shonchoy, 2017).

Not all virtual learning environments require synchronous communication. For instance, many virtual classroom software allow instructors to upload videos so that students can work at their own pace. This is especially useful when instructors and students live in different time zones or have conflicting schedules.

Why VLEs Matter

Among the top barriers preventing adult learners from continuing literacy services are transportation issues, a lack of childcare, and the stigmatization that comes with not knowing how to read or write (Savelsberg, Pignata, & Weckert, 2017). Virtual learning environments have the ability to revolutionize the way services are provided by eliminating many of these barriers and bringing the classroom directly to learners; students can engage with course materials at times most convenient for them and from their own personal devices.

Additionally, virtual learning environments allow adult literacy organizations to more easily track student performance and interaction. For organizations relying on charitable funding, this makes the statistics gathering process much simpler and more reliable.

Choosing a VLE

When choosing a virtual learning software for your organization, it's important to determine what exactly your instructors and students need in order to be successful. To do this, you should plan a time for stakeholders to meet and brainstorm features that they'd like to see in a virtual learning environment. Once you have a list of those features in hand, it will be much easier to decide which software is best-suited for your organization.

Available Software

Finding the right virtual learning software can be somewhat overwhelming—there are a lot of different options, each with their own unique features.

To help you begin the process, a few of the more popular options are listed below:

Adobe Connect - plans begin at $50/month
Features include a content management system, quick polls, an interactive whiteboard, cloud recording, and different modules and layouts for a highly customizable classroom.

Vedamo - plans begin at $25/month
Features include collaborative tools such as an online whiteboard, breakout rooms, screen sharing, and media sharing.

LearnCube - plans begin at $29/month
Features include an interactive whiteboard, custom branding, content management system, text chat and class recording

Each of these companies offers a trial period for their products, which you should take advantage of before making a final decision.

Additionally, while these three are among the most highly rated virtual learning software, they may still be lacking features that are important to your specific organization. Make sure to expand your research beyond this document to find the best fit possible.

Getting Started

Now that you have a better understanding of virtual learning environments and how they can benefit your adult literacy organization, the real work begins. This section will provide you with the information to get started on the proposal writing process and is divided into different parts, depending on your role.

If you're an adult literacy organization:
If you're an organization writing a proposal to help fund the purchase of virtual learning software, there are a few things you should keep in mind.

First, your organization will need to determine how the introduction of virtual learning software will coincide with or affect the programs you already offer. For example, it's likely that your processes for learner intake, tutor training, record-keeping, learner assessment, etc. will need to be adjusted.

In their highly informative article "Leading online learning initiatives in adult education," Olesen-Tracey outlines some of the most important goals for organizations getting started with this process. This includes, but is not limited to, setting realistic goals and benchmarks, establishing clear policies and procedures for reaching goals, defining your distance learning population, and assigning a "go-to" person in your organization for the online learning initiative (Olesen-Tracey, 2010).

Ultimately, you'll want to do as much research as possible before beginning the actual proposal writing process to ensure all bases are covered.

If you're a freelance proposal writer:
If you're a freelancer offering writing services to an adult literacy organization, your priorities will look a little different. While you may not be responsible for any of the planning behind the implementation of virtual learning environments, it will still be crucial for you to have a strong understanding of the organization's history and how the process will work.

When meeting with your partnering adult literacy organization for the first time, you should strive to learn as much about them as possible. Find out:

- What an average day looks like
- How the facility is laid out
- What programs are offered
- The number of individuals served
- The size of the staff
- If any similiar organizations are nearby

You should also discuss what the organization's goals are for the project and brainstorm ways in which you can present their case most effectively to funders. While you're the writer, your organization knows the ins and outs of their adult literacy programming and areas of outreach best and will be providing oversight and guidance throughout.

Lastly, it's crucial to set clear expectations with the organization and establish a timeline that works for all parties involved. The proposal writing process, especially for a new project, is time-consuming and requires buy-in from every stakeholder.

Finding Funders

Though the instinct may be to look for funders after the proposal has been written, the process will actually be much easier if you establish who your audience is from the start. Because proposal writing is such a rhetorical process, your language, approach, and tone can vary dramatically based on whom you're writing to.

For non-profit organizations with a history of grants received, you'll want to begin your search close to home. Foundations and agencies that have given to your organization in the past are likely the most willing to work with you on implementing virtual learning; they know of the hard work you do and have a vested interest in your success. When writing to these funders, you'll want to make sure to emphasize how virtual learning will enhance rather than disrupt your organization's current programming and outreach.

When looking beyond past or current funders, begin your search through grant databases such as Grants.gov and the Foundation Directory Online.

Grants.gov is a portal for finding and submitting grant applications for federal grant-making agencies. In other words, the requests for proposals (RFPs) that you'll find within this database come from federal initiatives and are, thus, generally larger scale.

The Foundation Directory Online (part of the Foundation Center) is another database, much like Grants.gov. The difference with the Foundation Directory, however, is that it includes private foundations and funders. Searches within the Foundation Directory will yield funders of different sizes; some have really large budgets (usually corporate funders), while others give much less (usually family foundations).

The scope of the work you wish to achieve by implementing a virtual learning environment will inform the type of funders you choose. If, for example, your focus is to make positive change at the county level, it might make more sense to write to a foundation that makes grants exclusively in your state.

When researching funders, be mindful of their mission statements and their areas of focus. Most of the time, mission statements and goals are intentionally left a bit vague (as to encourage submissions), but you'll still want to make sure you're not making too big of a stretch by aligning your values with theirs.

A good way to determine whether a funder is a good fit is to search for them on bigdatabase.com. To do so, type the name of the funder followed by "bigdatabase" in Google's search bar and click on the link that begins "BIG Online: US Foundation Summary." This page will provide you with free access to information such as the foundation's address, telephone number, director's name, and geographic distribution of grants. Most importantly, however, is the information at the bottom of the page. There, you'll find a list of past organizations and projects that the funder has granted money to before. You'll of course want to look for funders that have a history of partnering with adult literacy organizations, as they'll be your best bet for funding.

Finally, though it may not be necessary (or appropriate) when writing a proposal for federal funding or even a corporate foundation, if you're writing to a smaller family foundation, it's generally a good idea to reach out directly by phone to inquire further. A phone call helps establish an

initial connection and provides an opportunity for you to suss out any unclear information about the proposal submission process. It also creates an opportunity for you to briefly pitch your project and leave a lasting impression.

Before reaching out to any funder, make a list of the most important information about your organization and your virtual learning initiative. A thorough checklist of talking points will help keep you focused and ensure that you leave funders with a good idea of who you are and why your need is important.

Gathering Sources

With a plan in place and a funder in mind, the next step is to gather source material for the proposal itself.

Depending on who your funder is, you'll need to decide how much background information to provide. For example, when writing to a foundation with no prior ties to adult literacy programs, it's a good idea to provide a brief background on the epidemic of adult illiteracy and the need for services.

On the other hand, if your potential funder is well-versed about adult literacy, it's probably better to get to the point a little quicker.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCE) completed the most recent, comprehensive study of adult literacy by county. While the information is relatively old by academic standards (from 2003), it's consistently referenced when assessing rates of illiteracy. On the website, you can filter by state and county and use those statistics to make an argument for the need in your area.

It might also be helpful to paint a picture of how adult literacy affects society and the individuals and families at the center of it all. Mihai, Titan, & Manea in their article "Education and Poverty" (2017), make a compelling argument about the link between poverty and education levels and serve as a good starting point should you choose to discuss literacy from a socioeconomic perspective. "Poverty and Literacy: An Introduction" (Wamba, 2010), is equally effective for similar reasons, though its content focuses more on childhood literacy rates.

Outside of arguing for adult literacy from a socioeconomic perspective, it may also be helpful to approach the topic from a child-focused angle. More specifically, children of adults with low literacy levels are much more likely to be at the lowest reading levels themselves; according to ProLiteracy.org, that

rate is as high as 72%. Hemmerechts, Agirdag, & Kavadias in their article "The relationship between parental literacy involvement, socio-economic status and reading literacy" (2017), offer more insight on this matter.

Outside of these sources, Google Scholar is a great place to look for professional articles related to adult literacy and virtual learning environments. A few of the best keywords you can use, alone or in combination, are:

- adult literacy
- adult learning
- virtual classrooms
- distance learning

Google Scholar is especially useful when searching for recent articles, as the sidebar allows you to filter by year. While it's not always possible, you should strive to find the most recent literature to convince funders that your need is timely.

Rhetorical Appeals

After locating funders and gathering sources, it's time to begin the actual proposal writing process. While this document doesn't provide a how-to on proposal writing (there are countless great resources for that already--Geever's Guide to Proposal Writing, 6th ed. is one of the best), it does offer direction in terms of structuring your document rhetorically. This section will cover appeals to ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos.

Ethos
Ethos, or the appeal to character and authority, accounts for how you'll frame your organization throughout the proposal. This is where it's appropriate, and even necessary, to brag about your accomplishments, the gap you fill within your community, and what your learners go on to achieve. Your appeal to ethos will also include references to the qualifications of staff members. For example, if your executive director is well-regarded in the field of adult literacy, you'll want to emphasize that information somewhere in your document.

Your appeal to ethos will naturally be strongest in the organizational history section of the proposal, however, it's best to make your organization's authority well-known throughout the entirety of the

document. Since VLEs will be a new element of your organization, it will be important to lean on your past successes as a way to strengthen your case. Describing your organization's processes (like learner intake and management, tutor training, and metrics gathering), for example, is a subtle way to attest to your organization's know-how.

Pathos

Pathos, or the appeal to emotion, is an essential element of any successful proposal. When it comes to low literacy, people generally have a difficult time conceptualizing a world in which they can't read or write. Thus, it's especially important to make the struggle of illiteracy clear to your audience.

Personal stories, such as successes from past learners (back to ethos), can be a great way to put a face to the work your organization does.

Additionally, because people are generally more sympathetic towards children, it's often helpful to make parental literacy explicit throughout the proposal. To do so, point to how your programming and services have the potential to break the cycle of illiteracy by alluding to the important role that parents play in their children's educations.

Logos

Logos, or the appeal to logic, can be thought of as the backbone of a proposal, as it provides all of the reasoning for your ask. This will likely be strongest in your needs statement (where relevant statistics and literature is incorporated), however, like all rhetorical appeals, it should also be apparent throughout the entirety of the document.

When arguing a need for VLEs in your organization, it's best to cite the current number of learners served and the potential for growth if learners can tune-in remotely. For example, you might point out how, by offering classes online, a potential 1,000 additional learners can be reached yearly by your organization.

Kairos

Kairos, or the appeal to timeliness, is how you'll make your ask seem relevant and important for today. To do so, it might benefit you to cite the ubiquity of technology in society and the current lack of it in the adult literacy realm. Because most adult literacy statistics are, at this point, somewhat dated, you should lean on recent academic research and any applicable information about your local area that points to the need.

Conclusion

By now, you should have a more comprehensive understanding of VLEs and their potential to positively impact adult literacy organizations. With just a few simple changes, your organization can impact more learners than ever before and make a difference within your community and beyond.

The intention is that this white paper be used as a reference point as you begin or continue your grant writing process for this particular topic. The resources throughout have been carefully currated from time spent on a similar proposal and should answer many of the questions not addressed directly in this document.

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