

## RESEARCH DIGEST



*By Juanita  
Johnson-Bailey*

*University of Georgia*

### Adult Basic Education and the Cyber Classroom

Since the 1990s, online teaching and learning via the internet has been impacting and reshaping U.S. education (Harasim, 1996), as students and educational institutions embrace the virtual delivery method because of its accessibility and convenience. Now online education is growing rapidly in Adult Basic Education. According to Hayes (2000), the new millennium ushered in a developing trend for learners under the age of 18 to enroll in federally funded adult education programs. Askov, Johnston, Petty, and Young (2003) report that online delivery is expanding access to adult literacy with one purported benefit being that, because adults are free to share experiences in computer-based group discussions, the computer-bound classroom eradicates the remoteness of working alone and reduces the internalized perceived stigma of low literacy.

In addition, there are advantages for both the ABE provider and the ABE learner. For students, particularly those who live in distant areas or for those who have transportation limitations, online options remove the need to travel, offering a savings in both time and costs. As regards the ABE provider, one benefit of online ABE education programs is the ability to handle an increase in student enrollment even when budget constraints prevent the addition of more classrooms. Therefore, a program can serve more students without incurring the expense of acquiring more space, with the only additional outlay being for instruction. While higher education also marches towards increasing online instruction, research suggests less altruistic motives, as the primary reasons center on financial motivations, market demands as online education can generate more revenue through increased student enrollment with the added benefit of not taxing the physical plant; online education can also expand the institution's geographical reach beyond its region and its national borders

without requiring physical campus expansion (Wake & Bunn, 2015).

Since there is an increase in online instruction in ABE, it is important to ask how this move towards the virtual teaching/learning world affects our field's mission to democratize our citizenry. Another essential question that our field must pose is how does this method of delivery impact our learner-centered environment that prides itself on a reciprocal teaching/learner exchange that is intended to empower learners? Some proponents hail online education as a possible way of leveling the academic playing field because it equalizes access and is more convenient for workers who could be bound by a work day that will not allow them to participate in the traditional school day format of morning to afternoon (Wake & Bunn, 2015; Weller, 2002). The supporters of online education reason that learning in cyberspace erases the need to travel to and from a classroom to sit and learn and eliminates time parameters on education, while concurrently addressing financial and life/balance burdens. Additionally, online education has also been touted as a way of removing biases that interfere in face-to-face classrooms, with the reasoning being that if the students cannot see each other, then learned societal biases, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia might magically disappear (Blum, 2005; Weinbaum, 2016). However, research also reveals that the alleged anonymity of the cyber environment can also embolden learners/participants to be less civil and less tolerant of others (Davis, Randall, Ambrose, & Orand, 2014; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Rosenberry, 2011). While research supports both the positives and negatives of each of these positions, the findings appear to be context specific and dependent.

I find the discussions about online education as the possible panacea for eliminating classroom biases and as the possible financial answer to rising costs of education in physical spaces a bit one-dimensional and idealistically optimistic. I am simultaneously troubled by what is not being discussed: the students' perspective. As an adult educator, I am more interested in what is happening to our learners in our cyber classrooms. There are three issues that kindle my concerns regarding learning in the cyber world: the appropriateness of online learning for courses with sensitive subject matter, the comfort level of nontraditional learners in this new setting, and the inability as an instructor to fully engage with the learner in real time. I find myself asking: 1) are our online classes learner-centered in this realm of quasi-connections; 2) what are the student/student and student/instructor relationships in this synchronous/asynchronous world; 3) is the virtual environment empowering to our learners; and 4) is this new world a safe space? It is the latter query,

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“Is the online setting a safe space?” that challenges me as an adult educator and pushes me to be ever mindful of facilitating my student/student and student/instructor interactions. My experiences in teaching learners online have shown me that the manifestations of power subtleties that present in the face-to-face classroom, such as interruptions that occur along gender lines (with men interrupting women) and the silencing of working class students by middle-class students still occur. More alarming still is that the pseudo-anonymity of online bolsters incivility (Blum, 2005; Rosenberry, 2011). Additionally, it has been my observations across online courses, from 2003 to 2016, that the offensiveness occurs more often in the cyber classroom than in the face-to-face classroom and that this disruptive behavior often rises to the level of bullying, occurring along the lines of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation (Davis et al., 2014; Misawa, 2010). Bullying, which is defined as using electronic technology to engage in antisocial behaviors such as harassment, malicious banter, unwanted aggressive behavior, and verbal threats (Beauchere, 2014; Juvonen & Gross, 2008) and which has recently been designated as a public health issue (Edgerton et al., 2016), has been more difficult for me to address in this digital universe where it occurs out of my presence and thus does not give me the opportunity to immediately interrupt it or to directly address the behavior. Although there are researchers that maintain that the lack of physical embodiment in the online classroom creates a prejudice-free world that is empowering to disenfranchised groups, especially women (Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Kramarae, 2007; Weinbaum, 2016) because the inability to see eliminates biased, gendered responses, this premise is contradicted by my experience that in our technological society, the easily accessed and user friendly search engine makes finding the digital footprints of one’s co-learners and teachers a matter of child’s play. Rarely have I gone past the first online discussion without a student revealing something that they have learned about me or another student from a cursory online search. So the notion that gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are lost to the anonymity of virtualness is not valid. Therefore, I conjecture that people do not perform in an academic cyber vacuum, but exist in this technological space as they exist and behave in the real world, with their biases, fears, and socialized conduct in tow (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000).

When online bullying has occurred in my classes, in some instances, I have been able to discover the bullying hours after it has happened, but in some unfortunate instances, it has been days before I was aware of the incident because it occurred in the student/student chat group. In my experiences

of working with one program where—because of limited resources, GED prep students and ESL students shared the same classroom, instructor, and occasionally engaged in the same exercises—negative encounters sometimes occurred when students shared their personal perspectives regarding another learner’s experiences. In one such instance, when an ultra-conservative student began to bully other students I had to insert myself into the online chat and then constructively confront him in a private online chat about his online discussion posts. Unfortunately, he changed his tactics and began to post offensive literature and links to websites that were misogynist and anti-immigrant in nature. It became necessary to assign my two volunteers to alternating shifts so that they could make hourly checks to try to moderate his posting. Eventually, I decided to require the student to run his posts through me for approval.

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### **Pedagogical Strategies to Manage Potential Online Bullying**

As we race towards incorporating online teaching and learning into our ABE classrooms that routinely have more disenfranchised learners, I would set forth that active facilitation is even more important as online bullying occurs more often to members of disenfranchised groups (Davis et al., 2014; Sanchez, 2010; Misawa, 2010). Three strategies for fighting online bullying are prevention, intervention, and student reporting. First, posting protocols for online discussions can avoid instances of this antisocial behavior. I have adapted my favorite list of rules for face-to-face classroom conduct from a 1990 list (Cannon, 1990). Secondly, it is important to be a constant presence online and to immediately address any behavior that could be interpreted as bullying conduct, such as belittling statements and the joking use of epithets, which if unchecked can grow into more aggressive practices. The third strategy for working against online bullying is to build an environment where students feel comfortable reporting any interactions that make them uncomfortable (Williford, 2015). This type of trust can be built by using face-to-face classroom rapport building techniques such as reaching out to students privately through email, replicating the after class chat of the traditional classroom. Having the students work to build a safe environment free of bullying is especially effective as collectively students spend more time online than the instructor and are therefore more likely spot the behavior sooner.

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Overall, a learning environment is only successful and safe if it is well facilitated. While that applies to all learning settings, I think it takes on

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particular significance for ABE settings because so many of our learners are disenfranchised. As we rush headlong into including more online instruction into the ABE realm, in part because of the benefits to the learners/instructors (such as eliminating travel and time constraints and therefore maximizing convenience), as well as the potential savings for the provider (no additional classroom space and removing the need to have enrollment dictated by space), it is worth pausing to examine and weigh the positives and possible negatives of learning in the dimension of cyberspace and then proceed accordingly. More research needs to be done on the use of online instruction in ABE and that examination must include the voices of the learners. However, I remain hopeful as regards to the use of online learning with ABE because the key to building a successful classroom environment is constructing an environment of shared governance and learning reciprocity; and that is adult education at its core.

**Juanita Johnson-Bailey**, who holds the Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professorship, is the Director of the Institute for Women's Studies and a professor in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at The University of Georgia. Her book, *Sistahs in College: Making a Way Out of No Way* (Krieger Press, 2001), received the Phillip E. Frandson Award for Literature in Continuing Higher Education and the Sadie T. Mossell Alexander Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Black Women's Studies. She is also the co-editor of *Flat-Footed Truths: Telling Black Women's Lives* (Henry Holt, 1998), and the *Handbook of Race in Adult Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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