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# 'A SEA OF ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES': Applying Adaptive Courseware in English Composition



## A CASE STUDY OF ADAPTIVE LEARNING TECHNOLOGY IN THE HUMANITIES

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# ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is one of 12 higher education and digital learning organizations that make up the Every Learner Everywhere (Every Learner) Network, whose mission is to help higher education institutions improve and ensure more equitable student outcomes through advances in digital learning, particularly among poverty-impacted, racially minoritized, and first-generation students. Every Learner partners are addressing high failure rates in foundational courses through the provision of scalable, high-quality support to colleges and universities seeking to implement adaptive courseware on their campuses. As part of its ongoing effort to help community colleges develop effective teaching and learning practices, ATD is working with seven community colleges in Florida, Ohio, and Texas on this initiative, providing coaching and direct support to the colleges, fostering collaboration within and among the participating institutions, and serving as a liaison to the Every Learner network.

The following case study is part of a series of studies conducted by ATD examining how adaptive courseware is implemented at those institutions as well as how courseware is used in particular disciplines to better serve students. Case studies are based on a series of interviews with college leaders, faculty, instructional designers, developers, technology specialists and students who were enrolled in classes using the courseware.

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# OVERVIEW

Courses in English challenge students to strengthen skills in critical thinking, reading, writing structure and strategies, and grammar that also help build competency in comprehension and composition. While colleges participating in the Every Learner Network struggled to find adaptive English courseware that met all of their needs, particularly in reading comprehension, faculty found that the technologies they were able to implement helped students make connections between mastering discrete skills and their overall progress in writing. Among their findings:

- Participating faculty focused on adaptive courseware that supported building discrete skills in areas such as grammar and structure to support broader learning objectives in courses focused on composition.
- Institutions focused on supporting students with the greatest needs, integrating adaptive courseware into corequisite support classes, programs for non-native English learners, and for adult learners seeking GEDs.
- Faculty at times struggled to connect discrete skills data from work in adaptive courseware with broader course objectives.
- Students and faculty valued adaptive courseware most when it was intentionally integrated into class activities.



## SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The Every Learner initiative supports broader efforts to foster student learning with evidence-based practices, including supporting students as they develop a broad range of skills and competencies. At participating institutions, adaptive courseware helped students master critical skills required to develop broader competencies in comprehension and composition. “It helps them make the

connection,” says Rhonda Bobb, an English assistant professor at Broward College. The initiative also reflects the contexts in which broader institutional reform is taking place at community colleges throughout the ATD Network, including building a culture of excellence in teaching and learning and leveraging data and technology to support student success and equitable student outcomes. To learn more, see p. 7.



## COURSE AND COURSEWARE DATA SNAPSHOT

Three of the seven community colleges in the Every Learner Network piloted adaptive courseware in science courses, focused on gateway biology, chemistry and physics courses.

INSTITUTION	COURSES	COURSEWARE
Amarillo College Amarillo, TX 9,739 students	Composition I Composition II	InQuizitive (W.W. Norton and Company)
Broward College Fort Lauderdale, FL 38,976 students	Advanced Composition I (EAP1540C – ESL)	MyLabsPlus (Pearson)
Indian River State College Fort Pierce, Florida 16,686 students	English Comp 1	Waymaker (Lumen Learning)

For more detail on the pilot efforts at each college, see case studies for each institution.

# INTRODUCTION

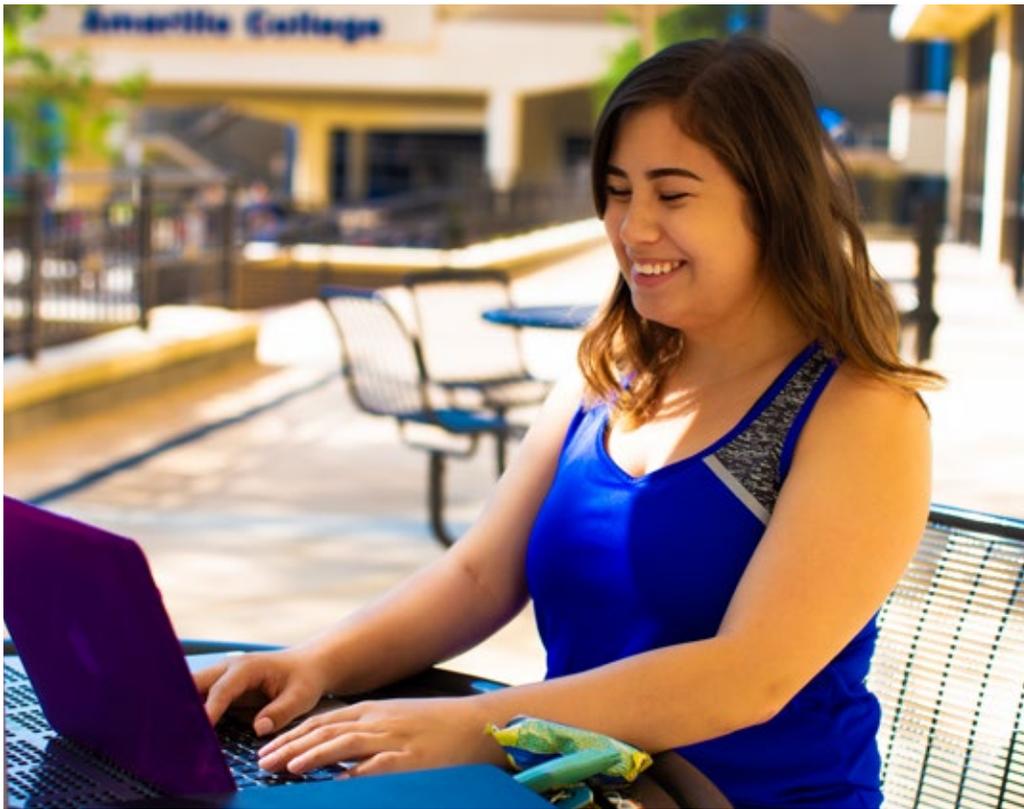
Katie Cisneros returned to Amarillo College for the first time in more than a decade to seek a new career in computer information systems. However, the 31-year-old was most worried about passing English courses on her way to an associate degree.

“I could read, but I didn’t really comprehend,” she says. “I needed a little bit more help.”

To get up to speed, she and her peers in an Amarillo College English composition course would go to a corequisite support class immediately after each daily lesson ended, where they would discuss the finer points of grammar and

other writing mechanics, followed by an adaptive courseware homework assignment that built on the skills they had just learned.

For Cisneros, the connection of in-person support and adaptive homework was critical to passing the course. “I think I was successful in freshman comp because of that,” she says.



# 'A SEA OF ENDLESS OPPORTUNITIES'

Three of the community colleges participating in the Every Learner initiative—Indian River State College (IRSC) and Broward College in Florida and Amarillo College in Texas—experimented with adaptive courseware in English courses, which presented different challenges than other disciplines in the initiative.

While introductory and developmental English courses focus on discrete skills that build students' ability to read, reason, and master the mechanics of writing, faculty participating in the Every Learner project say there are comparably fewer cut-and-dry, easily automatable processes that courseware can readily support. "In math, you have to solve this problem before you move to that problem. It's not the same in English," says IRSC English and communications professor Dr. Sarah Mallonee.

One faculty member used a fitting metaphor to explain the challenges and potential of using adaptive courseware to build skills in language comprehension and composition. "There's a sea of endless opportunities in English," says Marvin Hobson, an IRSC English and communications professor. And like the sea, he adds, the learning process can vary from day to day and from student to student.

Because of the focus on discrete skills in most English adaptive courseware, faculty at the three institutions integrated it into broader course redesigns to support the students with the greatest needs, including multilingual learners and adult learners in GED programs. As with adaptive courseware implementation in other disciplines, some institutions focused on its use in introductory composition courses in the wake of state-level reforms that essentially eliminated standalone non-credit developmental courses.

“To me, it was organized, planned out, and that’s what made it so successful. It always tied in.”

—Katie Cisneros, Amarillo College student

At IRSC, for example, 70 percent of incoming students had tested into developmental English, math, or both, before statewide reforms eliminated mandatory assessment and placement processes at institutions throughout Florida, including IRSC and Broward College.

"We knew we were bringing in students who are at very low levels (of English proficiency)," says Broward English professor Carol Summers. "There were huge gaps in skill levels. We had to do something, and this fell into our laps."

Participating faculty believed adaptive courseware could be a particularly good fit in supporting the mastery of basic skills. "The corequisite courses are the ones where you really see the intensity of how students are engaging with the materials," says Hobson. "It's really interesting to see how they're engaging with the grammar and other materials in a more explicit way than in other courses."

## BUILDING ON ATD'S CORNERSTONES OF EXCELLENCE

Like other community colleges which are part of the ATD Network participating in the Every Learner grant, the three institutions profiled in this case study have committed to engaging in bold, holistic, and sustainable change across multiple institutional areas and priorities. Their efforts to implement adaptive courseware to support the development of core skills and competency in English reflect the importance of several key cornerstones of institutional change, including leveraging data and technology to support student success and equitable student outcomes and building a culture of excellence in teaching and learning.

ATD's [Institutional Capacity Framework and Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool \(ICAT\)](#) outlines seven essential institutional capacities required to create a student-focused culture that promotes student success. One focuses specifically on teaching and learning and the commitment to engaging full-time and adjunct faculty in examinations of pedagogy, meaningful professional development, and a central role for faculty as change agents within the institution. Building capacity in this area is crucial because, as ATD President Dr. Karen A. Stout recently asserted, "focusing on teaching and learning is still not central to the field's overall theory of change. We still have much more to do to build a deep focus on pedagogy and to support our colleges in building a culture of teaching and learning excellence."

To foster this culture of teaching and learning excellence, [ATD's Teaching & Learning Toolkit: A Research-Based Guide to Building a Culture of Teaching & Learning Excellence](#) is centered on four cornerstones of excellence that provide a forward-looking vision that campuses can use to inform their work.



Initiatives such as Every Learner provide important resources and supports to community colleges and the time and space to explore innovative pedagogical approaches to improving student learning and outcomes. They also offer sustained opportunities to build on these cornerstones of excellence. At these three institutions, the grant provided faculty in a wide range of

courses and disciplines with the time and resources needed to evaluate, implement, and modify their use of adaptive courseware to best serve students.

Faculty-led efforts to identify evidence-based instructional practices that foster student learning were centered in efforts to align courseware with intentional course design and broader outcomes. "We're linking it up with what composition is teaching to make sure it's actually supporting our students," says Amarillo College English professor Carol Summers.

These efforts exemplify strategies that empower faculty to consider, adapt, test, and refine new approaches to fit their campus context and the needs of their students. "It helps students really have that footing and grounding that's sometimes difficult to give in a classroom setting, and I really love it for that capacity," says Marvin Hobson, an English and communications associate professor at IRSC.

Adaptive courseware also provided opportunities for faculty to develop their own competencies to execute new models of instruction, including flipped classroom models, according to Katharine Pritchek, master instructor and chair of gateway English and English composition at IRSC.

# A FOCUS ON SUPPORT?

While their approaches varied, all three institutions focused on integrating adaptive courseware into newly reconfigured introductory courses.

At IRSC, the same faculty members teach paired corequisite courses, which begin with grammar and mechanics and work through the topics involved in writing research papers, including analysis and the use of sources. Faculty based the model on a developmental writing skills lab initially created at the University of Mississippi. “They worked with us to adapt the lesson plans we wanted for what we wanted our students to learn,” says Dr. Scott Stein, dean of liberal arts.

The targeted course had adopted courseware with limited adaptive elements before IRSC’s work with Every Learner, but it was inadequate for the redesigned course model because “the supports weren’t cohesive,” says Stein. “The hope is to help our students develop the skills necessary to be successful in that course.”

Faculty searched for adaptive courseware to focus on grammar and structure so students could spend more time working on college-level writing in class. They ultimately found a product capable of serving as the cornerstone of a flipped model for the support courses. Students now “come having done the work and bringing questions,” says Hobson. Lessons are short—10-15 minutes—with

the idea that students can see if the examples “are easier or more difficult than what I saw in the courseware,” he says. “Then we can dig down a bit deeper.”

In similar fashion, integrated reading and writing courses at Amarillo College were shifted to a corequisite model to better support the wide range of student needs, including the college’s significant number of multilingual learners. Instructors from developmental and credit-bearing English courses formed a group to “research every type of courseware you could imagine,” Summers says. Meeting weekly, the group discussed needs with courseware publishers and narrowed down potential products. They ultimately opted to pursue courseware focused on grammar because it was a central focus of corequisite support, in which composition students would move to the support course immediately after class ended.

College-level faculty “wanted (developmental instructors) to develop the skills for basic writing,” Summers says. “The grammar was something we could address and let them work on outside of the classroom.” In class, she adds, courseware allows instructors “the opportunity to focus less on

(grammar) and more on the writing side” when working with students.

As students progressed through the composition course, corequisite courses scaffolded what they were learning throughout the semester—beginning with basic components like sentence fragments and run-on sentences and moving through more complex topics such as properly incorporating quotations into research papers. “We tried to sync it up with what the English class was working on at the time,” Summers says. Classes focus on a review of the current topic, with time for questions, followed by adaptive work on the students’ own time.

“The adaptive work allowed us to do shorter lessons — just enough to make sure they know what they’re doing and that they can do it on their own,” says Summers.

Broward College focused on integrating adaptive courseware into a new type of in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course, which is intended for multilingual learners. Previously, students had been required to do 13 hours of hands-on grammar activities in a lab setting during the course. “You can only imagine how that was at the end of the semester when you had to have the hours—the labs got full,” says Rhonda Bobb, an assistant professor of English.

As a result, Bobb and other EAP instructors made the courseware the foundation of their in-person classes. “At first, it was separate—we said

you’re lacking in this area, go online and practice,” Bobb says. “Now we’re bringing it into the classroom and aligning it with the syllabus. It helps to bring them together. I appreciated it because they knew how to tackle (new skills) vs. being at home and trying to figure it out.”

The courseware helped instructors identify areas of challenge for each student. “I can pull up the lab and show them where they can improve,” Bobb says. “It helps them make the connection.”



“Our curriculum was one (concept) on top of the other, but quite a few of our students didn’t need it to be that slow. Adaptive really filled that gap.”

— Dr. Teresa Gaus-Bowling, curriculum specialist, Amarillo College

# CENTERING SKILLS INTEGRATION?

Faculty at all three institutions reported early but meaningful results from adaptive courseware. At IRSC, for example, a pilot course in one 30-student section during summer 2020 saw significant declines in failing grades and withdrawals, according to Stein.

Participating faculty members said that work in adaptive courseware helped students do more than master core skills. “It shows there’s a structure to how you write an essay to students who come in and say they’ve never written before,” Hobson says. “This program is going to help you build that foundation, and I’m going to help you take this to the next level so you’re prepared for all the other courses you’re going to take. We’ve had students say that in other courses they felt like they understood things in the classroom setting, but as soon as they leave it’s hard for them to make the connections in the same way they thought they were making them in the classroom. This just reinforces that for them.”

Bobb adds that the extra work with grammar skills was particularly beneficial to support the integration of these skills for English language learners in composition courses. “A lot of times, they think grammar is separate,” she says.

However, faculty noted that how adaptive courseware is used within classes plays a key role in its success. At Broward, for

“I’m more of a hands-on learner. I feel like it helps me more because if I don’t understand it there’s always a little help button.”

—Katie Cisneros, Amarillo College student

example, EAP faculty found a clear divide in how students used and perceived courseware when used as a key element of the class versus as a supplementary resource. When used during class time, “they were able to ask me if they needed help going over the skills together,” Bobb says. “If they didn’t finish in class, they could go home and do it and in the next class, we could know whether everyone got the skill.” By contrast, students in EAP courses where the courseware was a complementary tool struggled more. “A lot of them got behind. A lot didn’t want to do it,” Bobb says. “If you’re going to use it, use it fully — in and outside the course.”

# ADAPTIVE COURSEWARE IN PRACTICE: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

## What Worked Well:

**Alignment with existing materials.** Broward College faculty selected adaptive courseware specifically for its alignment with existing textbooks. In similar fashion, Amarillo College's courseware was selected in part because it worked well with existing textbooks used for grammar. This alignment helped support the shift to shorter, more focused lessons in class.

**Cost.** Faculty at all three institutions credited adaptive courseware to keeping student costs low—or cutting them dramatically. In one English composition class at IRSC, the switch cut costs by 60 percent, saving students \$200,000, according to Dr. Scott Stein, dean of liberal arts. At Amarillo College, the courseware initially cost only \$15 per student—and now is bundled with the textbook at no cost.

**Tiered levels of support.** Given the wide skill level gaps in corequisite courses, faculty cited the role of adaptive courseware in providing intensive supports for students where needed, while others could choose to engage minimally or move ahead entirely without added supports. "The higher-level students can finish in relatively little time—maybe 5 minutes—whereas it could take one of the lower-level students 45 minutes to an hour to do," says Amarillo College English professor Carol Summers. "They're all getting the same thing, but it's not using the time for those students who don't need it."

**Adaptability.** A key to implementation at Broward College was the ability for instructors to create their own course shells and assessments within the adaptive courseware. A former faculty member who worked with the publisher helped staff build shells.

Faculty also stressed the technology's ability to support a wide range of models—including flipped classrooms and supplemental support.

"I think it works meaningfully either way," says Katharine Piatchek, master instructor and chair of gateway English and English composition at IRSC.

**Engagement.** Students across all skill levels found adaptive courseware engaging. "It was set up almost like a game, and students enjoyed using it, whether it was for five minutes or an hour," Summers says. IRSC English and communications professor Dr. Sarah Mallonee agrees. Encouraging students to "do work more than once so you can get a better grade incentivizes the engagement with content," she says. "It's doing some of the heavy lifting for me in the background."

**Supporting accelerated terms.** Amarillo College faculty said that adaptive software works well with eight-week terms—with the understanding that "it becomes even more important that adaptive becomes embedded and integrated into the course," says former dean of academic success Edie Carter, who now serves as the college's dean of STEM programs.

## Ongoing Challenges:

**Limited options.** Faculty reported comparatively fewer adaptive products in English and were challenged to find options that worked well for them, particularly in the area of reading comprehension. Faculty at Lorain County Community College in Ohio, for example, ultimately decided to not include English in their Every Learner pilot efforts when they determined that no product they evaluated met the reading comprehension needs of their most underserved students. Other Every Learner institutions ultimately found solutions by focusing on strengthening grammar to support student writing. At IRSC, for example, it took English faculty significantly longer than peers in other disciplines to find suitable adaptive courseware to complement ongoing efforts to redesign composition courses.



**The nature of English pedagogy.** Participating faculty stressed the challenge of connecting individual skills to larger course objectives. “The English discipline, and especially the composition discipline is not really isolated skills and components,” Mallonee says. “Fragments, comma slices, sentence structure—everyone starts there, but then where do you go?”

**Technology availability and familiarity.** As with faculty in other disciplines, the need to ensure that students are capable of using technology outside of class was critical. Amarillo’s adult programs, for example, worked with the college’s distance learning coordinator to ensure that each student interested in courseware had internet access and other resources required to access it—including backup plans if their primary internet connection at home was disrupted. “We’re trying to meet students where they are,” says Dr. Teresa Gaus-Bowling, curriculum specialist at Amarillo College.

Some faculty emphasized the ease of use of newer adaptive products. “Our prior courseware required pop-up windows and Flash and technical wizardry,” says Piatchek. “Adoption was easier because the technical component wasn’t a barrier.”

**Data use.** Faculty reported differing levels of comfort determining useful interventions or strategies based on data from the discrete skills practiced in adaptive courseware. At IRSC, for example, instructors instead used in-class polling as a check for understanding whether students were comfortable with the concepts. Other faculty members stressed that it’s hard to connect results in courseware with overall progress in course objectives. “I go back and look more at their writing than the different skills,” Amarillo College’s Summers says. “That’s why we use it more as support.”

# LESSONS LEARNED

Keys to the successful implementation of adaptive courseware in English courses across Every Learner sites:

- **Supporting broader institutional initiatives.**

While models varied across the three institutions, adaptive courseware implementation was housed within the framework of broader course changes. At Broward College, for example, adaptive work was situated within ongoing efforts to encourage more holistic approaches to redesign, including in the English for Academic Purposes course. Importantly, implementation followed existing adoption models which were in place at their respective institutions. At IRSC, faculty followed past adoption models and rolled out adaptive courseware in each section of the targeted course, while Amarillo College intentionally left one section out of the pilot to compare performance.

“We started from the perspective of finding the best resource for the course vs. the best adaptive courseware for the course,” says Katharine Piathek, master instructor and chair of gateway English and English composition at IRSC.

Individual faculty members also said adoption helped support broader pedagogical shifts. For example, at IRSC, courseware helped support the transition to flipped learning models in Piathek’s support courses—“which was something I wanted to try anyway, but had not made it to,” she says.

- **Connecting adaptive coursework to instruction.**

Across institutions, faculty said that students benefitted most when courseware was integrated into classroom activities. At

Amarillo College, for example, corequisite grammar lessons—and the aligned adaptive homework—were synced up with topics in the composition course. “We’re linking it up with what composition is teaching to make sure it’s actually supporting our students,” Summers says.

- **The importance of onboarding.** Students stressed the importance of becoming familiar with the adaptive courseware before beginning work on their own. “We did exercises within the adaptive courseware to get familiarized with it and eventually in a couple of days the prof would push us out of the nest,” says Amarillo student Katie Cisneros. “If you are going to intertwine it into your coursework, make sure you have a tutorial and do a walkthrough with the students so they can familiarize themselves with it.”

- **Targeting adaptive courseware to students comfortable with technology.** At Amarillo College, not all adult students in GED programs were given adaptive work. Faculty identified those comfortable with technology and who “wanted to get in and out” of the program, says Dr. Teresa Gaus-Bowling, curriculum specialist. As terms progressed, faculty also pulled students not using courseware out of the program and added other students.

“It depends on whether students are suited to technology or wary of it,” Gaus-Bowling says. “Making it a one-size-fits-all might not have the best intended consequences.”

# CONCLUSION

“At times it can be repetitive. But to me, it’s just extra practice. There are more ways to confirm and help me believe in myself.”

—Katie Cisneros, Amarillo College student

All three institutions are continuing to explore ways to expand the use of adaptive courseware in core English courses—often by continuing to develop and refine new models and course designs.

Since first adopting the courseware, IRSC faculty members have rebuilt the introductory course “from the ground up,” Stein says, as part of rolling out the software across all sections starting in fall 2020. At Broward College, English faculty are introducing new advanced EAP courses as optional elective courses as students work towards their degrees.

Amarillo College may be the first institution to adapt courseware to fill a gap—the lack of adaptive products focused on GED programs—by working with a developer to support their adult learners. We provided them with our curriculum and the Texas GED standards, and they created our course for us,” says Dr. Teresa

Gaus-Bowling, an Amarillo College curriculum specialist.

Students echo their instructors’ emphasis on integrating courseware into class activities while stressing an important point repeated by their peers across all campuses and disciplines—that engaged and supportive faculty members made the greatest difference in their success. “The courseware is just another reinforcement for me,” Cisneros says. Her professor “would ask us how the homework was last night, and after hearing everybody’s issues, she went through and discussed all the issues we had. It all comes down to the professor. She’d stay after the class and go over things with us to get us to believe that we could do it.”





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