TABE CLAS–E Spotlight: Victoria College Adult Education in Victoria, Texas

Have you considered the advantages of online testing over paper-based testing for your adult English learners? In this in-depth interview, we sat down with Tiffany Johnson, Director of Adult Education at Victoria College, to learn how her program uses TABE CLAS-E™ Online. She shared the benefits of an online format for her English learners, the relevance and usefulness of CLAS-E content, and her thoughts on the future of remote instruction and assessment beyond the pandemic.

ADVANTAGES OF THE TABE CLAS-E ONLINE FORMAT

How long have you been using TABE CLAS-E Online?
We were part of the pilot program that started in June 2020 and have continued using it since then.

How would you say CLAS-E Online compares to paper-based testing?
The computer-based test is so much easier for students, as well as the scoring and the time constraints. It's definitely an advantage to be able to test more than one person at a time at multiple levels. It's just so much more convenient.

I think one of the big struggles with paper-based testing was having enough space to complete the different parts of the test. With computer-based, you can have one station to deliver individual Speaking tests, and then the student can go join a group and complete the other tests in a group computer setting. Whereas with the paper, it was just such a challenge. When we first started, even before CLAS-E when we started with TABE® 11&12, we had to have three rooms for testing. Students would finish their Locator test and we'd run them to the next room, and then the next room. It required a lot of quick thinking and shuffling of students. So, the computer-based delivery is far more convenient in terms of timing and the number of staff needed. You only need two monitors, one for the Speaking test and one for the group setting.

You mentioned scoring. How is that different with the online format?
Scoring is also easier with the online format because you don't need every test proctor to be a scorer. We use one person who's an excellent scorer, so a proctor can be someone who isn't necessarily trained in that skill set. In our facility, we have proctors who make sure the tests are completed and make sure the protocols and security measures are followed, and then we have one person who comes in after everyone has finished to do the scoring. She scores every test, she prints all the reports, and she sends them on their way.

How do your students respond to the online format?
Another advantage of CLAS-E Online is that the online format is easier for our international students. These students often aren't familiar with how standardized testing works and how to mark the answers on paper tests. This isn't something that they did in their native country, especially Mexico. Their lower elementary schools and what we would consider junior high never gave standardized tests. We had many students writing in the book instead of on their answer sheet, or not comfortable writing on the portfolio side. It's a challenge to get good results when you're really struggling with the delivery method. Online is easier for them.

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How do you prepare students for taking the TABE CLAS-E Online?

I love meeting students, especially at the beginning when they're first starting their journey. That first step is going to set the pace. If you're a drill sergeant and you have the mentality that this is standardized testing and we must be secure and scare people, I think that's going to be reflective of the answers they give you on their test. So, we talk them through it, tell them there's no pass or fail, we just have to see where you are. Then we go through the Online Tools Training, let them get comfortable, and let them practice.

How important is the Online Tools Training for your students?

The key to being successful with online testing is definitely preparing students with a session prior to the test. You can't just walk in the room, throw a student in front of a computer, and say, "Click here and get started." You have to make them comfortable with the tools, whether it's remotely or face to face–you want to make sure that they have a good understanding of the computer tools.

When we go through the Online Tools Training with students prior to testing, I tell them, "I don't want to test your computer ability, I want to test your knowledge and your skill set. Unless you understand what tools you're using and you understand how to take the test, then you'll be at a disadvantage." I think that was a big difference when we went from paper to a computer-based test.

It sounds like you really focus on building people's confidence and making them feel comfortable and enthusiastic about testing, which can be hard to do.

I think it's all in how you explain it. For example, I tell them that it's not just that initial eligibility test–it's the post-test that's the most exciting. You've been in class with us and spent time here, whether it's for eight weeks or three months. When we send the invitation out to post-test, we tell them that it's an honor, and we say, "Congratulations, you've earned enough hours to take this post-test."

Also, these are adults. If they come in at a Level 2 and you've been teaching them for six months and they're still a Level 2, they need to know that. They need to know what's going on, and how they can improve.

BENEFITS OF TABE CLAS-E CONTENT

What do you see as the benefits of CLAS-E content for your student and program goals over other options?

One of the things that I love about TABE CLASE-E Online is that it tests all four areas: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Being able to test all four of those areas give me, as an educator, a comprehensive picture of where my student is when starting our program and where I need to take them. Listening is such an important component that I don't see being tested anywhere else. I wish we could test everybody with that, not just English learners. It's such a good skill.

One of the things we see with a lot of our second language speakers who have lived in our area for a while is that they have excellent speaking and listening skills. They function just fine in society; they communicate at their jobs and in public. They come to us for help with their reading and writing. Ironically, we see the opposite from some of our international students from Asia and Russia. They come to us having taken so many English courses in their native country before they arrived that their challenge is speaking and listening, and they're excellent at reading and writing. As a result, some of our classes have to be leveled out by those subjects. I think there's a misconception when people think about second language learners where they assume they're all together in one group. That's

definitely not the case. When we get the diagnostic report from CLAS-E, we pull it apart and find out what exactly we need to teach to help a student get where they need to be in order to get into college, get through training, and to get a job.

How is CLAS-E content relevant for your students?

In a past teaching job, I had to give standardized assessments that asked things that were completely irrelevant to those adult students. I thought, "Why am I asking these questions? I don't care, they don't care, this really isn't helping either one of us." It just was such a hassle. The first thing adult ed students want to know is, how long is this going to take? They want to know that you're not going to waste their time teaching them or giving them anything that they don't need.

The first time I saw the scenarios that are tested in CLAS-E, I thought, "This is real world. This is what people need to see." CLAS-E is not wasting students' time. These are relevant, real-world life experiences and work experiences, like how to tell a waiter there's a crack in your glass, and how to ask someone to please get the box off the top shelf. If I know for a fact that you can't write a note to your child's teacher, that should be my number one priority to teach you. So, I just really, really like the content that's being tested.

Do you hear from students after they leave your program about how they're doing and the successes they've had?

We have several students who have gone on to career training, especially with our college. We've had some become LPNs (Licensed Practical Nurse), and accounting majors who graduated with their associate's degree and were very successful academically. We also have a few entrepreneurs, including someone who has a couple of local restaurants, someone who has several nail places in town, and another person who owns her own massage business. We've definitely had students who have been good role models for others.

What are the key take-aways that you would share with other adult ed programs who are considering using TABE CLAS-E?

I think first and foremost, as an educator, I see the value of using TABE CLAS-E not just a test to assign students a level and meet the eligibility criteria, but as a tool. It's the perfect tool to start a conversation with the student and to get a good, comprehensive picture of where a student is when they're walking in your door so that you know what next steps to take. When you approach it that way, it's definitely not as intimidating for students. Explaining to them that this is a tool for us to use, and we're going to share results

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as they go through their journey, helps them feel more comfortable about it and gives them ownership of their education, which I think is a very important component of using a product properly.

Sometimes adult ed programs are slow to make changes. Even when you know a product might be a better option, you stick with what you know because you're busy, and you don't want to have to train everybody. I think now is a good time. If we're going to re-emerge as better and stronger programs, then we need to invest a little bit of time and energy in finding the right product and putting it into practice. Sometimes that might mean a little discomfort with trying something new. This has been a year of craziness–if anybody's going to try something new, now's a great time to do it.

REMOTE TESTING WITH TABE CLAS-E ONLINE

What has your experience been like with delivering CLAS-E Online as a remote test?

We do a lot of remote testing. We started in spring 2020 with TABE 11&12 and then jumped right in with TABE CLAS-E as well. We were only working remotely for the month of April in 2020, and in May we returned to campus and started back with our face-to-face offerings, but with social distancing, sanitizing, and COVID screening. So, we were able to offer students the option of either face-to-face or remote testing early on. It's been great to be able to give students the opportunity to choose depending on what they feel comfortable with. Now it's just become a convenience, to be honest. It's really alleviated transportation barriers and even childcare problems sometimes. It's been going very well.

How has remote testing impacted your staff?

We actually lost several of our test proctors, unfortunately, after we closed for the month of April. We had several proctors who said, "You know, with this situation I don't feel comfortable continuing, and I don't want to go out face to face, and I certainly don't have

the skill set to deliver it online." So, we kind of lost our whole crew overnight. We had a couple of die-hards who stuck with us who were very comfortable with just computer-based testing at our main site. So, the testing coordinator and I took it upon ourselves to figure it out and make it work. We slowly waded in, tried it out on a few people, and we have been doing all the remote testing between the two of us.

It's a different skill set, in a way. You have to find the right person who's comfortable with remote testing. But then again, you can dictate the timing better. I can jump on and do a session with five minute's notice, and I can do it from anywhere. For example, I have an employee who had a baby last fall, so she's been working more from home, which is great for me. She stays home with the baby, but she's able to split her shifts. She can do morning, she can do night, she can pop on in the afternoon and conduct whatever I need, versus when she was 8:00 to 5:00 and stuck in the office.

So, in some ways it's more convenient for some staff in certain situations, but on the flip side we haven't been brave enough to test a lot of people at once.

What advantages have you seen with delivering TABE CLAS-E remotely?

With adult ed students, you have to be flexible and work around them. You can't say, "I'm sorry, if you're not here tomorrow at 8:00 a.m., you're not getting into classes." Without students, we have no program. The whole point of us being here is to make it more convenient and to work around their lives.

When we launched our classes for the fall 2020 session and we let students know, "Okay, you all asked for it, we're going face to face, come on back," we were surprised. They didn't line up around the corner to come back. They said, "You know what? It's not so bad. I can sit in my jammies at home and watch this. I can participate through the chat box, I can do this from my phone, I can do this from my tablet." We had a lot of students who had participated in virtual options, whether it's testing, or orientation, instruction, or distance learning. So, we were really surprised that there wasn't a mass rush for the face-to-face option. I think it surprised the students. Just in the last two months, we are getting more applications from way outside of our service area from students who either were not happy with the programs they were in or wanted different options. We're seeing some virtual people coming in through applications and testing and orientation, and they never have to set foot in our office, so they can be from anywhere.

It's amazing. We've used remote testing with some of our students who have left the country and we still needed their tests. Peru was the last one, and in January we tested someone who was in China. It's perfectly doable. There are no borders any more with being able to offer everything virtually.

It sounds like because your program was quick to roll out remote testing, it really drew a lot of students to you who may not have participated otherwise.

Right. Some of them may have been at home for the pandemic and felt like that was the best option for their family, and we were still able to come in and provide for them. I really think that is an advantage. In addition, the TABE is required in the state of Texas for adult ed students, and there are other federal standardized testing requirements for adult ed. So that was another advantage for us to quickly start remote testing when all the testing places closed.

Will you continue to offer remote testing in the future?

Yes. Even though we have been open since last May, we've been able to offer so many more trainings and classes and to streamline things so much just by going virtual. I think there's a misconception that ESL students aren't tech savvy–that they don't have computers or internet access. As a matter of fact, our ESL students who we primarily work with on TABE CLAS-E are far more technologically inclined than some of our English speakers. I think that has been kind of a myth, that they won't grasp the technology and they won't be successful. If anything, we see more students choose virtual than our face-to-face options now.

The pandemic has changed so much about instruction and assessment. Where do you go from here?

Who would have ever thought before the pandemic that we could send someone a link and jump on a remote test in a matter of minutes with a student who lives three hours away and has their kids in the other room? Now I can communicate with someone on the other side of the country, see them face to face, deliver an assessment, put them in a class, and teach them – all remotely. We have amazing potential with this to emerge as a better and improved program.

With face-to-face settings, I would never feel comfortable going into people's classes and watching my teachers instruct or walking into a test session and watching a proctor deliver a test. It's much easier to be an observer with the virtual format. I've seen wonderful things emerge, and I've been able to uncover some areas that I think we can improve. I'm an optimist, and I definitely think that we're going to re-emerge with expanded offerings and the ability to serve more people in a way that helps them take advantage of their education.

You have an enthusiasm and positivity about the work you do that's truly inspiring. I'm sure you've heard that before!

I do get that a lot. I remember one time I answered our office phone, and it was a wrong number. The gentleman on the phone asked me, "Well, what do you do?" I was telling him about my job and everything we do, and I think 15 minutes later he said, "I know what you do now, and whatever it is you just recruited me. I think I want to be an adult ed director because you just sound like you love your job so much." I do, and I just wish I could make sure everybody gets excited about that, because you should. Education's a great thing to be excited about.

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