Increasing Engagement in Online Intervener Training

In 2017-2018, NCDB conducted the Intervener Training Pilot Project (ITPP) to develop effective processes and tools for state deaf-blind projects to use for intervener training. The online program used the Open Hands, Open Access (OHOA): Deaf-Blind Intervener Learning Modules and the National Intervener Certification E-Portfolio (NICE), in conjunction with consultation and coaching by state deaf-blind projects. Seventy-eight percent of 27 participants successfully completed the program, much higher than online training completion rates typically reported by state deaf-blind projects.

After the ITTP ended, participants and state project personnel were asked to complete an evaluation. Both groups unanimously reported that it was a high-quality training program. To further aid state projects with their intervener training efforts, this article describes the top three lessons learned:

- Communication is critical for engagement
- Synchronous meetings reduce participant attrition
- Modifications are required to accommodate participants' needs

COMMUNICATION

Before the Training

Communication between the training program host and participants was one of the most important ITTP components. Participants were divided into three cohorts depending on experience. Before the training began, each participant and their state deaf-blind project were provided with the syllabus (scroll to end of page) for their cohort. It included the names and contact information for the host and NCDB staff, a description of the program, information about online etiquette and technical support, and a schedule.

When the course started, the host opened the welcome module and—via its discussion board—introduced herself, welcomed participants, explained the program, and outlined expectations for the participants (e.g., online discussion processes, assignments, deadlines) and for herself, as coach.

She also sent a welcome email to the state project personnel and coaches containing information similar to what she shared with participants and describing their own roles and responsibilities.

During the Training

The host used Moodle's News Forum feature to post detailed instructions (e.g., start and end dates, assignment due dates) at the beginning of each OHOA module and to post reminders and additional information as participants progressed through a module. The number of

required modules varied by cohort, ranging from 4 to 10. Each took approximately 2 weeks to complete.

Keeping participants engaged in online coursework requires regular interaction among participants and between participants and the host. The host supported these by:

- Connecting regularly with participants as they shared information on discussion boards
- Providing in-depth feedback on assignments, including questions to clarify a participant's ideas and facilitate further thinking
- Calling attention to portions of the module to which the participants should pay particular attention
- Previewing upcoming modules
- Encouraging participants to contact her whenever they needed help or had questions

Participants who had not started a module on schedule received an email encouraging them to begin work and reminding them of the deadlines. Strict due dates were provided, but the host was flexible if participants needed extra time due to extenuating circumstances. Nearly all participants submitted assignments close to the deadlines. Extra reminders around holidays or school breaks were helpful and appreciated.

The host would contact each participant's state project or coach midway through and at the end of each module to update them on their participant's status. For example, "Rebecca has completed 75% of the module as indicated on the progress bar and 3 of 5 assignments." This allowed them to stay informed of the progress of their participant and deliver extra encouragement if necessary.

After the Module

Once a module was completed, the host provided additional comments regarding discussions or assignments as needed.
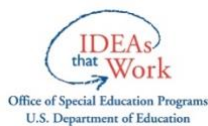
SYNCHRONOUS MEETINGS

One-hour synchronous meetings were held via web conferencing to supplement the online modules. The number of meetings varied by cohort (range 4 to 8). The topics were concept development, nonsymbolic/presymbolic communication, behavior, and NICE.

Each synchronous meeting also included additional resources and assignments. For example, when concept development was covered, participants were asked to read Developing Concepts with Children who are Deaf-Blind by Barbara Miles, watch a short video, and submit a written reflection. Participant's who were unable to attend a meeting were asked to watch the recorded meeting and submit questions and reactions about the content to the host. All participants indicated that the synchronous meetings were highly valuable and promoted engagement, peer support, and extended learning.

MODIFICATIONS

Modifications to the program were essential for participants with vision or hearing loss. They included allowing participants to submit assignments in ASL via YouTube, extended time to complete assignments, additional communication with the host and state deaf-blind project or coach, and extra meetings to provide language support. Captions and other accessibility features are already included in the OHOA modules.