

Chapter 12

Designing Online Curriculum for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

The Digital Age has brought change and automation to almost every aspect of our lives, and learning is no exception. This chapter considers adult learners engaged in online higher education. The purpose of this chapter is to present a framework for designing adult learner-friendly eLearning in higher education settings. What pedagogy is most effective for facilitating eLearning? What emerging trends will influence eLearning? This chapter introduces the challenges of living and learning with technology, considers the impact of technology on teaching and learning, examines the characteristics of online learners and online learning, offers strategies for designing and facilitating eLearning in higher education, and muses about future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Think about the past 24 hours. How have you consumed news? Communicated with friends and family? Completed transactions? Looked up information? Presumably, much if not all of that activity was accomplished using technology. “These days, being connected depends not on our distance from each other but from available communications technology” (Turkle, 2011, p. 155). Technology has become an extension of ourselves with 68% of us sleeping with our mobile device next to our beds and 44% of us consulting them first and last thing every day (Time, 2012).

Seventy-one percent of U.S. households had an Internet connection at home and 80% accessed the Internet either at home and/or via a mobile

device (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Internet usage by race is nearly 88% in Asian households, 82% in White households, and 73% in both Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). As of 2010, 55% of all adults had made online purchases and 80% had sought health or medical information. Technology mediates our relationships, transactions, and learning.

Our growing reliance on technology has corresponded with increasing demand for eLearning. *Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011* (Allen & Seaman, 2011) is the ninth annual report on online learning in higher education based on over 2,500 colleges and universities. The report documents the growth of online learning enrollments with over 6.1 million

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students taking at least one online course in 2010, increasing by 560,000 students compared with 2009. Online enrollment grew by 18.3% from 2002-2011 as compared to just over a 2% growth of the overall higher education student population. The rise of for profit online universities such as Capella, Strayer, Walden, and the University of Phoenix have created ready access to higher education for a wide, international audience. According to their 2010 Academic Annual Report, the University of Phoenix had 470,800 students, a faculty of more than 32,000 and almost 600,000 alumni (http://www.phoenix.edu/about_us/publications/academic-annual-report/2010.html).

Demand for online education is high, although its effectiveness may be low since technology advances outpace pedagogical changes (Sonwalker, 2008). “The computer as a learning platform is proving to be an ineffective and boring medium” alleges Sonwalker (p. 45). Problems with online learning include poor course management systems that facilitate information exchange but lack appropriate pedagogy, unrealistic expectations for faculty be available 24/7 to respond to students, the absence of a pedagogical framework for effective online teaching, delays in feedback from faculty to students and vice-versa, and the difficulty in evaluating student progress (Sonwalker, 2008).

Corresponding with the growth of eLearning is the use of social networking. Sixty-six percent of adults using the Internet belong to one or more social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, and 53% of American cellphone users now have a smartphone such as an iPhone or Android (Pring, 2012). In one day on the Internet, for example, enough information is consumed to fill 168 million DVDs, 294 billion emails are sent, 2 million blog posts are written (enough posts to fill TIME magazine for 770 million years), 172 million people visit Facebook, 40 million visit Twitter, 22 million visit LinkedIn, 20 million visit Google+, 17 million visit Pinterest, 4.7 billion minutes are spent on Facebook, 532 million statuses are updated, 250 million photos are

uploaded, 22 million hours of TV and movies are watched on Netflix, 864,000 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube, more than 35 million apps are downloaded, and more iPhones are sold than people are born (Pring, 2012).

Our instant access to information brings learning to our fingertips. Electronic learning or eLearning is particularly apt for adult learners because it is just-in-time, relevant, and self-directed. Yet, how do we ensure that eLearning is designed in a way that best supports and facilitates adult learning? The purpose of this chapter is present a framework for designing adult learner-friendly eLearning in higher education settings. Key topics include the chapter’s theoretical framework, the impact of technology on teaching and learning, characteristics of online learners and online learning, designing online learning for adult learners, facilitating eLearning with adult learners, and future research directions.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter is based on a theoretical framework grounded in adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) that draws on constructivist principles for the design and facilitation of learning. eLearning is impacted by the dynamics of adult learning in terms of informal learning, self-directed learning, experiential learning, and contextual learning. The chapter is also grounded in technology in terms of its use and impact on the learning and teaching process. Below are some definitions that help describe the landscape of eLearning.

Web 2.0: Web 2.0 refers to a collection of online tools available that support interaction, community building, collaboration, and democracy in new and wide-ranging ways through wikis, blogs, social bookmarking, and social networking sites. These tools are dominated by “user-generated content” (USG) in that the users of the tools create the text, images, audio, and video shared electronically.

Social Media: Social media are Web-based Internet sites that support social exchanges of

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