

Chapter 106

Adult Learners Online: Cultural Capacity Assessment and Application

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ABSTRACT

The current chapter describes how adult learners of different cultures experience and respond to online learning, and what different instructional strategies and personnel in higher education can do to develop an appropriately delivered online experience. Adult learners approach formal education differently than younger children (Olsen & Clark, 1977), namely the utilitarian functions of education and the application of learning to personal experiences, and personal needs are paramount to the learning experience (Peters & Associates, 1980). This foundation has a limited element of cultural differentiation and is complicated by using one-size-fits all online courses. Instructors, administrators, and instructional designers must all collaborate to re-think and re-build the effective online course experience: an experience with a hallmark of flexibility and diversified instructional techniques. Effective cultural responsiveness can greatly improve adult learning and potentially respond to a unique group of learner motivations.

INTRODUCTION

The role of distance education is evolving at a rapid pace, as online courses are being offered with increasing popularity. Higher education institutions have begun using online course platforms to both reduce physical facility costs, and to provide efficient, revenue production through tuition and fees. Online course enrollments have surged, and similarly, the ability of technology to change, grow, and evolve has brought an entire new generation of online learning programs to the learner. The offering of online courses and programs have been driven in part by the potential for revenue generation, in part by the new availability of technologies, and in part by the need, interest, and ability of institutions to meet unique learner needs. The current chapter is designed to explore how learner differences, particularly cross-cultural based differences, impact online instruction, and what different actors in the teaching and learning process can play to facilitate better learning.

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By 2006, at least 20% of all college students were taking at least one online course, and the online course enrollment trend has exceeded on-campus enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2007), and, as the demand for all higher education increases, the need to offer courses in non-traditional formats has grown as well. The premise of online course instruction holds that if a student has a computer and an internet connection, then higher education through an online course can become a reality. The concept may be simple, but many student populations are unable to participate in online programs based on circumstances beyond their control. For example, some traditions and cultures place working to support a family above an interest in formal education. Some individuals live in rural areas without broadband internet access. Some individuals have such a rudimentary exposure to technology that it is not even a remote option for them. Some come from school environments so under-resourced, that continuing education is hardly an option (Roehrig, Pressley, & Talotta, 2001). And for some adults, those often described as “digital immigrants” (Miller & Lu, 2003), the transition to a technology based and mediated world can be intimidating and greatly limiting, and this can lead to tremendous hesitation for engagement in technology-facilitated courses.

The role of online learning (distributed education) has changed how higher education approaches course delivery. Traditional institutions will continuously offer live, face-to-face classes in traditional classrooms, focusing their efforts on a developmental and training based collegiate experience, but the ability to offer courses anytime, anywhere has begun to fundamentally change how institutions create priorities for instruction. Evidence of this is the recent discussion by the California State University system to offer general education through massive-open-online-courses (MOOCs). General education programs were developed to provide a broad education for college students as the liberal arts content of many degree programs began to erode. The discussion by the California State University system does two particular things to and for higher education. First, the consideration legitimizes the role of online education as an element in meeting basic educational requirements and an effective way to provide basic education. Second, it minimizes the role higher education has in developing student social, civic, and human capital, reducing the collegiate experience to a series of courses rather than a program-based experience.

A further supposition of the legitimizing of online learning is that the same course can be taken and completed by a student in a residence hall and a non-traditional student 500 miles away. This ease of offering has lent strength to providing online graduate programs, particularly for working adults. Historically, these individuals would have been expected to quit their jobs to return to school to earn an advanced degree, such as a masters of business administration (MBA) or advanced teaching credential. A movement throughout the 1980s saw that these programs could be offered in executive, cohort models, for example, providing one weekend a month at a central location removed from campus. The advantage of these programs, in addition to providing easier access for a broader enrollment, was that instructors could specifically design their course content to be delivered face-to-face, and tailored to a professional body of workplace content. Similarly, many colleges and universities also opened international branch campuses in such locations as Japan, modifying programs and instructional techniques based on the characteristics of students in those classes. But, how adults learn in an online environment is different than a traditional classroom, and this topic has been rarely addressed.

In addition to how adults learn, the online course is made even more complex when considering learning styles and cultural behaviors in the classroom, prompting an immediate need for faculty instruction to reflect the diversity of learning styles and needs, and the incorporation of current and effective technologies. Faculty often use teaching methods that they have used in a traditional classroom to imple-

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