

Chapter 4

Baby Boomers and Online Learning: Exploring Experiences in the Higher Education Landscape

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ABSTRACT

There continues to be a significant increase in the number of post retirement employees (i.e., baby boomers/older workers) in the workforce, either having remained in the organization after retirement or having returned to the workforce in different capacities for varying reasons after their initial separation. A resulting accompaniment to this labor force increase is the increase in the number of boomers who will seek higher education to equip themselves with the skills needed to remain competitive in the workplace. With the advent of online learning, however, the higher education landscape is different from when baby boomers first attended college. This chapter explores the experiences of baby boomers who are pursuing graduate studies in an online environment and will discuss appropriate learning strategies for baby boomers to facilitate academic success for this group of learners.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-0437-6.ch004

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has mushroomed as a key tool for supporting distributed education (Berge & Collins, 1995; Gilbert & Moore, 1998; Santoro, 1995). As the traditional “brick and mortar” learning institutions increasingly yield to learning in online environments, distance education continues to grow in popularity for learners of all ages. According to an Ambient Insight (2011) market analysis report, more than 2 million pre-K-12 students take some form of schooling online. Web-based learning also continues to gain popularity both nationally and internationally, in many academic disciplines, and in training and higher education in particular (Bonk & Zhang, 2006). The strategic plan by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) noted that, students will learn in a broad range of settings as new technologies open new ways of teaching and learning (HEFCE, 2005). Indeed, there continues to be a rapid rise of education programs and degrees that are being offered in fully online formats (Licona, 2011). There is no question that online learning is now a prominent player in the field and practice of adult and higher education.

Accompanying this change in the educational landscape, is the increase in adult learners who are returning to the classroom- specifically, baby boomers who are opting to “go back [to school] and continue the educational journey they began so many years ago when they were the first wave to become college educated.” (CNN Library, 2015). Baby boomers refer to those individuals born between 1946 and 1964 during the ‘baby boom’ at the end of World War II. In 1946, in the United States alone- 3,411,000 babies were born, and by 1964 that number had increased to 4,027,000 babies being born in that year - leading to an era popularly known as the “baby boom” era and babies born during that period dubbed “baby boomers.” (History, n.d.). At the beginning of the 21st century, there were approximately 79 million baby boomers in the United States, accounting for 25% of the nation’s population. (Encyclopedia of Aging, 2002). College campuses welcomed the first set of baby boomers to their doors in the fall of 1967, while the youngest set of baby boomers were freshmen in 1982.

Being mindful of the need to go back to college, for various reasons ranging from career advancement through to self-actualization, higher education enrollment among the baby boomer population has seen significant increases in recent years. According to Palazesi & Bower (2006), when compared to other generations “baby boomers... have a propensity for lifelong learning,” and where college enrollment is concerned, older adults increasingly represent a larger population in post-secondary education, mostly due to the return of the baby boomer generation.” (p. 45). In 2013, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), forty-nine thousand (49,000) baby boomers had enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs across the United States. Upon their return to college however, baby boomers will find that the academic landscape

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