Chapter I

Online Education for Lifelong Learning: A Silent Revolution

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Abstract

The term lifelong learning (which has played an important role in policy discussions as well as in studies of the sociology and economics of education) is increasingly important in the 21st century for college graduates to be able to take their place in the changing world scene and to be adaptable and creative within the organization that employs them. Lifelong learning has increasingly been cited but there is no shared understanding of its usage at the global level. The objective of the present chapter is to provide an extensive overview of the current literature to inform the shared understanding of lifelong learning in general and the concept of online lifelong learning specifically. The overview is represented in six themes: lifelong learning, self-directed learning, technology and globalization, open and distance learning, online learning assessment, and higher and adult education.

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Introduction

In the UK government’s white paper, titled *21st Century Skills, Realizing Our Potential*, information and communication technology (ICT) was acknowledged as a “skill for life” along with good reading and math skills (NIACE, n.d.). ICT is a powerful and indispensable tool to enable education to face the challenges for lifelong learning. The term *lifelong learning* has played an important role in policy discussions as well as in studies of the sociology and economics of education; yet, the relationship of this term to the rapidly changing world of ICT has been considered much less frequently (Friesen & Anderson, 2004). Lifelong learning has increasingly been cited but there is no shared understanding of its usage at the global level (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001). As one example, the economic interpretation of lifelong learning “in the last ten years has become problematic for many practitioners who have come forward with such terms as Lifelong (L)Earning and Learning to Earn as their succinct criticism of the way the term is being promoted” (Medel-Añonuevo et al., 2001, p. 1).

It is more and more important in the 21st century for college graduates to be able to take their place in the changing world scene and to be adaptable and creative within the organization that employs them; and higher education has been through enormous change in the last 20 years (Peat, Taylor, & Franklin, 2005). In addition to a diversified student population in terms of ethnicity, social status, and expectation, the proportion of nontraditional older adult re-entry students is increasing significantly. In this environment, higher education has a mission to provide older adult learners with re-education or retraining such that they are able to remain competitive in the workforce of today’s technologically sophisticated society.

The objective of the chapter, therefore, is to provide an overview of the current literature to enlighten the concept of online education for lifelong learning in the information age. This overview is represented in the following six themes:

1. Lifelong learning
2. Self-directed learning
3. Technology and globalization
4. Open and distance learning
5. Online learning assessment
6. Higher and adult education
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