

Chapter 5

Motivating the Adult Learner in Online Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Online learning in higher education has presented opportunities as well as challenges for both instructors and students. The availability of online learning has made a significant difference for adult learners in higher education. This chapter discusses the challenges of online learning and how online discussion can be an effective tool to overcome the challenges. The focus is on adult learners, whose motivation and priorities may differ from typical college students. This chapter presents strategies for the instructor to provide an online learning environment that engages the adult learner, with an emphasis on strategies that build a community of inquiry among adult learners. By establishing cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, online discussion can motivate and engage the adult learner.

INTRODUCTION

The number of adult learners in higher education has been increasing over the past years (Lee et al., 2019). Also known as non-traditional students, these learners are typically older when they begin their higher education. They may have work experience or may have dependents (Singh et al., 2021; Urban & Jirsáková, 2022). The availability of online learning has made a significant difference for the adult learner in an academic or degree program of a higher education institution. Online learning provides flexibility and gives adult learners the opportunity to pursue their education at a time, place, and pace that could fit their time constraints (Lu et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth and acceptance of the online mode of teaching and learning. Even though the abrupt shift to online teaching, better known as emergency remote teaching, is meant to be a temporary solution during the pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020; Ng, 2021), teaching and learning especially in higher education may never be the same again (García-Morales et al., 2021; Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). Indeed, online learning has presented various advantages as well as opportunities, even for adult learners (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Singh et al., 2021).

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Adult learners may have different learning styles and preferences compared to younger students (Holyoke & Larson, 2009). Adult learners may also have a different motivation from the typical 18-year-old student who is fresh out of high school (Wolfgang & Dowling, 1981). Christensen et al. (2016) described typical adult students in an online degree program as “juggling work and family, and trying to squeeze in an education... They’re not looking for social activities or a campus scene” (p. 61). Though this may not be representative of all adult students, it is clear that the motivation and priorities of adult students differ from those of younger college students. How then do instructors tailor their instruction methods to help adult learners, specifically in their online learning? While various websites, blogs, and articles offer useful tips and sharing from the personal experience of online educators, this chapter aims to present recommendations based on studies as well as peer-reviewed publications, with a focus on strategies that are applicable and specific to teaching the adult learner through the online mode of instruction.

Engagement is important for online learning to be effective. Student engagement can be understood as “the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution” (Trowler, 2010, p.3). Student engagement is important as it is correlated with positive outcomes of student development, success, and achievement of better learning outcomes (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In online learning, student engagement is critical as students may not have other engagement or physical interaction with the institution (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). However, student engagement may be influenced by various factors such as the student’s background, motivation, and learning style (Kahu, 2013; Lear et al., 2010).

To further explore how adult learners can be engaged in online learning, it is important to understand how adult learners can be motivated. Motivation and engagement are closely related (Ferrer et al., 2022; Lee & Reeve, 2012; Reeve, 2012; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Reeve (2012) explained that “motivation is a private, unobservable psychological, neural, and biological process that serves as an antecedent cause to the publically observable behavior that is engagement” (p. 151). In other words, learners’ motivation is reflected in their engagement in the learning environment (Gopalan et al., 2017). Motivation is often seen as a prerequisite for student engagement (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). An instructor who understands student motivation is in a better position to provide a more conducive learning environment for students, which in turn motivates students further (Reeve, 2012; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). As such, online instructors have to understand the motivation of adult learners and employ strategies that are effective for this group of learners. This chapter will review the theoretical foundation of motivation as well as the challenges of motivating adult learners, and recommend strategies to provide an effective online learning environment that can motivate adult learners.

In particular, this chapter will review strategies based on the Community of Inquiry, which is “one of the few theoretical frameworks that attempts to systematically describe and explain the underlying processes and dynamics of student engagement and learning in online environments” (Shea & Bidjerano, 2008, p. 340). The Community of Inquiry framework identifies elements that are critical for higher education in a computer-mediated communication environment. Specifically, learning within the online community happens through the interaction of three components: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999). Together, the three components form a framework that guides the understanding and study of online learning in higher education (Garrison et al., 2010).

One of the most important tools of online learning is online discussion, which is designed to promote student-to-student interaction thus increasing social presence (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016). However, given the busy adult learner who may not appreciate the importance of student-to-student interaction, how does

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