Chapter 6

Community of Inquiry in Adult Online Learning:
Collaborative–Constructivist Approaches

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ABSTRACT

The adult education literature emphasizes community building in order to increase effectiveness and success of online teaching and learning. In this chapter the Community of Inquiry Framework that was developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) has been introduced as a promising theory for adult learning in online environments. The chapter discusses the potential of the CoI framework to create effective adult online learning communities by utilizing the research findings from an online course. Overall, the research findings showed that students had positive attitudes toward the community developed in the course and that their perception of constituting elements of the community of inquiry was significantly related to perceived learning and satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The advances in information and communication technologies, changing needs of individuals, and globalization are the influencing forces for all societal endeavors - including adult learning (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). Training and degree programs and other continuing educational opportunities for adults are increasing. In today's world, learning occurs for adults in a variety of settings from formal institutional settings such as college or university to non-formal and informal contexts such as home or community at different times and for different purposes (Selwyn, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). However, adults are busy people and they have pressing responsibilities that often restrict participation in these learning environments. The main obstacle identified by adults is the lack of time, mainly due to work or family reasons (OECD, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). For these reasons, online learning environments have a growing interest and potential for widening access to education for adult learners.

Growing interest in online learning has shifted the research from its technical aspects to more pedagogical concerns (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). Adult educators are now giving increased attention to designing online learning environments to meet adult learner needs, expectations, and maximizing its potential. Poorly designed online learning environments often result in unsuccessful or unsatisfactory educational experiences. DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant (2005) indicate that problems with technology, instructor direction, building community, facilitating communication, or humanizing learning can sabotage educational efforts.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a community of inquiry develops and progresses for adult learners in terms of their perceived learning and satisfaction. The Community of Inquiry framework was used to guide this research in an adult online learning environment. The potential of the framework to illuminate adult learning in an online environment is also discussed in the context of the results of this study.

BACKGROUND

Merriam, Cafarella and Baumgartner (2007) classify adult learning theories into 3 groups as western theories, eastern theories, and modern approaches. They indicate that western theories are more individualistic with an emphasis on freedom and independence, whereas eastern theories are more collectivistic with an emphasis on belonging, harmony and family. For example, self-directed learning and andragogy claim that people learn on their own as they mature (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). Others have gone further in proposing that self-direction in learning is the distinguishing characteristic of adult learning (Knowles, 1973; Brookfield, 1986). On the other hand, examples of eastern theories such as the Confucian way of thinking, Hindu perspective, or Islamic perspective emphasize interdependence instead of independence.

The assumption of traditional western adult learning theories is currently being challenged by eastern and modern theories (Mackeracher, 1996). The transition from traditional western theories to modern adult learning approaches indicates the shift from seeing learning as an individual activity to a more collaborative activity. In recent years, adult educators began to emphasize constructivist approaches and community building for more effective adult learning environments. Merriam, Cafarrella and Baumgartner (2007) claim that some aspects of constructivism can be found in adult learning theories such as active inquiry or the central role of experience. Garrison and Archer (2000) also emphasize a constructivist and collaborative approach in adult and higher education. It is argued here that constructivist approaches and community are necessary to create and confirm meaning and are essential to achieve effective critical thinking and self-directed learning. Building a community to facilitate critical thinking is important because "construction of meaning may result from individual critical reflection but ideas are generated and knowledge constructed through the collaborative and confirmatory process of sustained dialogue within a critical community of learners" (Garrison & Archer, 2000, p. 91).

Yorks and Kasl (2002) discuss the potential of collaborative inquiry to be a theory of adult learning. The authors state that collaborative inquiry provides a systematic structure for learning from experience. Learners organize themselves in small purposeful groups to solve a question and construct new meaning by engaging in cycles of reflection and action while evoking multiple ways of knowing and addressing validity problems. Moreover, Vella (2002) points out that learning is enhanced by peers who have similar experiences. They can challenge one another in ways a teacher can not and create a safe environment for the learner who is struggling with complex concepts, skills or attitudes. Besides constructing knowledge, Bruffee (1999) identifies the function of collaborative

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