

Chapter 61

Age, Race and Gender Issues Related to On-Line Learning

M. F. Stuck

State University of New York, SUNY Oswego, USA

Mary. C. Ware

State University of NY – Cortland, USA

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that demographic factors such as age, race, ethnicity and gender affect one's communication skills, learning style preference, and consequently, one's preferences for aspects of on-line learning. This chapter will explore the literature related to these issues (i.e., age, race, gender) as they affect students' preferences for and success with various styles of on-line learning (e.g., distance learning, hybrid or blended courses, mobile learning technology).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will review literature from a variety of sources concerning connections among gender, race/ethnicity, age and on-line learning and will focus on implications of these findings for designers of distance/on-line learning. In areas where research is lacking or inconclusive, needed research questions will be posed.

The authors are extremely interested and knowledgeable about these issues since they are both experienced on-line faculty and have done extensive work in the areas of gender and diversity.

BACKGROUND

For some time now, on-line learning has been seen as the panacea for various goals and dilemmas related to higher education:

- the early ideal of offering courses to students truly “at a distance” from the brick-and-mortar campus – ideally, adult students with busy lives and students not enrolled at one's own institution – a marketing tool
- the actuality of offering courses to one's own students who have difficulties attending face to face classes – “non-traditional” students, students working full or part-

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time, one's students still enrolled but serving in the military

- the reality of offering courses to any student on any campus at any time
- and the most recently noted positive aspect of on-line learning: the ability to continue delivery of courses in the event of disasters – natural (e.g., floods, H1N1 flu, blizzards) or man-made (e.g., biological or chemical attacks or other problems).

Despite these lofty goals, issues of age, gender, race, and social class have often not been explored sufficiently related to on-line learning.

Adult learners, sometimes called nontraditional adult learners, one of the first “targets” for on-line learning, express preference for on line learning and other forms of individualized credit-bearing instruction, given their busy schedules and demands of their lives. However, a mismatch between adult learners and distance learning has sometimes been predicted -- given adult learners' relative lack of technology experience (compared to younger students) and need for frequent communication with instructors (Ausburn, 2003). Despite these observations, the largest group of on-line learners today are nontraditional (e.g., 26 and over) students studying part-time. It must be noted, however, that the dropout rate for on-line learning is higher than that for face-to-face instruction – perhaps implying that some of those who register are not prepared for the rigors and requirements of on-line learning (Diaz, 2002; Filkins et al., 2001, Frankola, 2001)

Diversity concerns have broadened research on learning style differences between the genders, and research also has focused on differences in races/ethnic groups in terms of learning/communication style and preference. Since distance learning's effectiveness depends upon communication and learning style, developers of on-line instruction need to consider gender and racial differences as well as those related to age (Barrett & Lally, 1999; Proost & Elen, 1997; Sullivan, 2001).

GENDER ISSUES

The phenomenon of on-line/distance learning does not occur in a vacuum. The various contexts in which such learning resides (e.g., a student taking one course to learn a specific skill; a student taking a degree program on-line; an institution offering a selection of on-line courses) need to be recognized and articulated. It is in the social science realm that the ramifications of such categories as gender, race, and age (as context) are fully examined.

Thus, it is important to understand the term gender as used in most of the social sciences. Gender is a social construction of the expectations, rights and privileges that societies have decided that females and males should follow and have. As a child grows, those around him/her provide prescriptions, proscriptions, and models of behavior which are felt to be appropriate to the child's sex. This constant barrage of “gender rules” socializes the child into belonging to a culturally specified gender and there is a great deal of social pressure for an individual to follow these “rules”. One's gender then shapes the individual's opportunities for education, work, family, sexuality, reproduction, authority, and the individual's potential to make an impact on the production of culture and knowledge. (Lorber & Farrell, 1991)

Within those constructions are often built-in “limitations” to what each gender can or ought to be able to do, including accomplishments in education. While some people “push the envelope” and go beyond the constructions of limitations for their gender (e.g., CEO who is female) and others in fact “fulfill” the expectations for their gender (e.g., male becoming a pro football player), some are hampered by the gender rules.

In computing and technologically related activities, women have often avoided these areas, or been “helped” so much by males that the ability to develop skills has been hampered. It is difficult to realize, but personal computers have been around a relatively short period of time and within that

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