

Chapter 67

Barriers to Adult Education Participation, Distance Education, and Adult Learning

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ABSTRACT

Volumes of research exist which explains adults' participation in adult education. Research suggests that adults participate in adult education for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, adults also face a variety of barriers to their participation. Whether in a traditional or distance education format, adults may confront barriers to their learning. Now that technology plays such an important role in adult learning, new and returning adults may find additional barriers. Some barriers are within learners' control. On the other hand, institutions can take measures to eliminate other barriers and enhance learning.

INTRODUCTION

Although adult education was professionalized in the United States in the 1920s, adults have participated in adult education for hundreds of years. At one point, formal adult education was considered elitist (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). Only those with the financial means could attend. On the other hand, many were legally prohibited from participating as a result of federal and state laws (Neufeldt & McGee, 1990). When formal education was unattainable or illegal, many adults participated in informal learning activities. Some

of these activities were clandestine in nature, while others were offered to the general public. Earlier in our history, adults participated in adult education as a means to economic status. Others simply saw it as an escape from oppression.

With the establishment of land-grant institutions, evening colleges, and extension programs (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994), adults were able to participate in education like never before. Today, education is available to all adults. With the advent of new distance learning technologies, more adults can partake in adult education. It has opened the door for adults with busy schedules and those in rural areas to participate in adult learning activities.

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However, despite our advances, adults face barriers to participation as well as learning. The terms barriers and deterrents have been used interchangeably in the literature relative to adults' lack of participation in educational activities. Darkenwald and Valentine (1990) indicate that a deterrent is a negative or positive force that works in combination with other forces that impact participation. On the other hand, a barrier is an "absolute blockage" (p. 30) which prevents an adult from participating in adult education. Silva, Cahalan, Lacierno-Paquet, and Stowe (1998) suggest that "Factors that inhibit or prevent people from participating in activities such as AE [Adult Education] are sometimes referred to as barriers, constraints, deterrents, impediments, or obstacles" (p. 1). The terms barriers and deterrents will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter. Knowledge relative to participation barriers can assist program planners in attracting and retaining adult learners. In addition, addressing learning barriers can enhance the learning experience of adults in the classroom. In this chapter, a review of the literature on barriers to adult education participation and learning in traditional and distance education formats are examined.

BACKGROUND

Adult Education Participation

Numerous researchers have conducted studies to explain why adults participate in adult education (Boshier, 1971, 1991; Boshier & Collins, 1985; Morstain & Smart, 1977; Fujita-Stark, 1999; Hawkins, 2007). In general, job enhancement/professional development is cited as a motivation for participation. Other motivations have included a love of learning, social interaction, social stimulation, and enhancement of communication skills, just to name a few. However, the context of learning also impacts motivations. For example, in her study of childcare workers, Hawkins found that they not

only participated for enhanced job performance, but they also participated to improve childcare programs. In an examination of African American churches, Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) reported that spiritual and religious development, support in facing personal challenges, and family togetherness motivated adults to participate in church-based educational programs. In a study of soldiers, Covert (2002a, 2002b) found that they participated to prepare for their transition to civilian life, to get a credential, and for self-efficacy enhancement. Some motivations of older adults' are consistent with that of their younger counterparts, yet others are distinctive. For example, they participate to keep up with new technologies and information, to be fulfilled, to learn new skills, intellectual stimulation or a love for learning, to escape boredom, for social contact or interaction with others, and to pursue new interests or hobbies (Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2007). Adults have a variety of reasons for participating in adult education. Some are consistent among adult learners. However, some are unique based on the learner and the context. Although some adults may be highly motivated to participate in educational activities, others are confronted with barriers that impede or deter their participation.

Barriers to Participation

In a landmark study, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) identified two major types of barriers—external (situational) and internal (dispositional). Situational barriers to participation include transportation or costs of engaging in an educational activity, whereas a dispositional barrier may be someone's negative attitude or perception. Costs and time continue to be major barriers to participation (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). Furthermore, family and work constraints (Manning & Vickery, 2000; Martindale & Drake, 1989) can deter adults from participation. Wlodkowski (1999) contends that

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