Chapter 21
Developing and Managing Digital/Technology Literacy and Effective Learning Skills in Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

The needs of adult learners are different from those of traditional undergraduate students, and programs must be designed to meet this need. In particular, digital and technology literacy needs, including general computing skills, computerized communications, online and distance learning, and Web 2.0 tools make navigating coursework an additional challenge. In this paper, the authors examine the technology and digital literacy needs and backgrounds of adult learner students and discuss research on the interaction between technology and adult learner education. Using the features of intensive weekend classroom sessions, on-line distance learning, and specialized teaching methods, an improved learning environment tailored to unique needs and career goals can be offered to business undergraduate adults. An important component is the development of technology and digital literacy skills to "fill the gaps" of students who may have extensive business or working experience, but are less than proficient in the use of technology. More depth and analysis is given to the following areas: digital and technology skills and knowledge improvement, pedagogical features, the use of intensive weekend and evening sessions, and the role of distance learning to supplement the classroom sessions.

INTRODUCTION

To meet the needs of students in the 21st century, it is critical to examine not only the state of the educational market in terms of student type, but also to isolate the unique needs of each population who will be enrolling in and graduating from degree-based programs. Since the dynamics and demographics of college students are changing, the need to change and adapt to meet their needs and requirements is paramount.

Adult learners are forming an important segment of the educational market, and their increasing numbers now comprise a solid portion of the overall undergraduate population. It has been noted that almost 50% of undergraduate students can be classified under the categories of "non-traditional" or "adult learners" (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). The number is growing, and it is conceivable that very soon the majority of students will fall into this category, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; Horn, 1996). Some of the core characteristics of non-traditional students are that they delayed enrollment (did not enter college after high school), are likely to attend part time, have full-time jobs, and are likely to be married with dependents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

There are a number of characteristics common to adult, non-traditional students. While many possess significant professional experience and knowledge (many are or have been working full time), adult students may frequently lack a firm grounding in a variety of business and other theoretical knowledge areas which an undergraduate college business degree provides. In addition, work and home responsibilities often make it more difficult for adults to attend classes scheduled in the daytime or on weekday evenings. Many may also have had negative experiences in their previous educational work which may impact new attempts at completing their educations (Knowles,

1984; National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1987).

Because of a more highly developed career focus, adults tend to view their studies as being more closely linked to career-oriented goals and orientations. As a result, adult learners are generally more engaged and involved in the learning process and seek to master a subject (especially the applied and practical aspects) because they understand the benefits provided by enhanced knowledge towards improved career performance and advancement. For instance, adults tend to ask more questions, demand more class discussion, and seek connections between the material and practical applications from work. The result is a need for more dynamic and real-time learning, focused toward specific goals or agendas related to improving careers and lives (Hamilton, 2002). In fact, 73% of adult non-traditional students attend college for the purposes of career advancement, to improve their knowledge in a subject area, and/or to complete a degree to add to their credentials (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

This is in stark contrast to traditional undergraduates who are more focused towards social aspects of college life and strive toward better grades more often to maintain satisfactory standing, and to meet the expectations and demands of parents. To compensate for youth and lack of experience, one of the important benefits of a traditional undergraduate education is to create context using social and professional experiences from which young students can attach and build the educational knowledge learned. As a result, many traditional students exhibit a more passive approach to learning; with emphasis on absorbing and memorizing what "experts" (teachers) profess (Huang, 2002).

The number and influence of adult learners has brought about the development of a different set of teaching skills and methodologies, including andragogy which is defined as the "method of teaching adults." This contrasts to the more common and widely-used term, pedagogy, which

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