Chapter 17
Engaging Adult Learners with Innovative Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter suggests and explores the need for a paradigm shift regarding the use of innovative technologies to engage adult learners. Some concerns addressed are: 1) The ways educational programs can be designed to improve the technical skills of adults; 2) The choices of technological, instructional methods, and materials and the subsequent impact on the success of educating adults; and 3) Elimination of the perceived feeling of disadvantage that some adult learners possess regarding their understanding and use of technology. Lack of exposure, access, and motivation to utilize innovative technologies combine to create a "glass ceiling" that is currently preventing adult learners from becoming competitive in the global marketplace. However, by applying motivational theories, embracing policies to ensure equitable technology access, and promoting efforts to seize the professional development opportunities available, adult learners and their instructors can shatter the glass ceiling and rise to new levels of skill and expertise.

INTRODUCTION

Adult learning needs and the ways that higher education approaches instruction have not always been synonymous. In the United States it was not until after World War II with the education of returning GIs that adult education became commonplace

(Clark, 1998). Distance education was initially achieved mainly through correspondence courses and has evolved to include television, videotape, and now computer and handheld devices. Adults have been asked to change their modes of acquiring and adapting to knowledge distribution through these methods. Thus the continuous nature of technological development forces paradigm shifts in the thoughts and behaviors of individuals who

want to acquire the education needed to compete in a global society.

Adult learners comprise an important and growing portion of students. Almost 50% of undergraduate students can be categorized as adult learners (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The number of adult students attending college increased from 2.4 million in 1970 to 6.9 million in 2006 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Digest, 2008, Table 190). The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that adult learners will soon be the majority (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; Horn, 1996).

But who are adult learners? Often, these are individuals who have left school earlier, may not have college qualifications, have been absent from college for a significant time period, do not have previous experience in higher education, and may come from low socio-economic groups (Correira and Mesquita, 2006):

The mature student, besides being older has not in general, followed, or has been excluded by the selective characteristics of the traditional non higher education route, and in most cases does not hold a certificate or diploma of secondary education. In general the mature student is either employed, or being unemployed has decided to improve the prospects of his own personal and/ or professional career, by obtaining a higher education diploma or degree (Santiago, Rosa, & Amaral, 2000, p.25).

However, adult learners do not arrive at their position in life without significant benefits. For example, Shankar (2004) lauds their singular focus and goal-oriented perspective. This intrinsic motivation appears in personal, social, and professional areas of life (Crawford, 2004, Jarvis, 1995). Adult learners appear to be genuinely accountable for their own learning, having a knowledge of both the purpose and use of the learning process (Dupond & Ossandon, 1998). They also appear

to have a more developed ability to visualize the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular idea, subject, or competency (Sewell, 2000; Rogers, 2002). In order to adapt to change in the workplace and to fully participate in society, adults need to learn throughout their life. This is a process of self-directed inquiry that is made more difficult by several unique challenges that face adult learners.

Some of these challenges include multiple work and home commitments; part-time university attendance due to limited study time and restrictive university course schedules; financial independence; and lack of a secondary institution diploma (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, n/d; Conrad, 1993; Rogers, 2002; Crawford, 2004; Shankar, 2004; Chao, DeRocco & Flynn, 2007; Hitchens-Smith, 2007; Baran & Maskan, 2011). How can these be overcome? One possible solution is the application of innovative technologies.

Innovative technologies can be used to help facilitate and inspire learning and creativity; design and develop digital-age learning experiences and assessments; model digital-age work and learning; promote and model digital citizenship and responsibility; and engage in professional growth and leadership (NETS Project, 2007). For example, barriers such as a limited geographical locale and availability can be overcome through the use of online, distance education (Hiltz, 1994; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; and Hiltz & Arbaugh, 2003). The abundance and cost-effectiveness of information technology has also provided easy access to the World Wide Web, through which adult learners can access course work at their convenience and location.

As the population of adult learners continues to grow, innovative technology can be used to provide them with needed educational opportunities. This chapter suggests and explores the need for a paradigm shift regarding the use of innovative technologies amongst adult learners. Some concerns addressed are:

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