

Chapter 67

An Exploratory Study of the Experiences of Older Non-Traditional Students in an Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of non-traditional students in an online educational technology course using a qualitative method. Three participants were interviewed about their experiences with online computer technology learning. The results suggested that non-traditional students were motivated to return to college but some experienced the feeling of anxiety due to an unknown method of learning. Initial learning of technology could be intimidating and frustrating for non-traditional students. The findings indicated the importance of technical support in enhancing their online learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of new technology, online education has grown substantially in the last decade and offered new opportunities for people who want to obtain a degree because of its flexibility (Means, Toyana, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). Online education overcomes time and space constraints, giving students the ability to access learning

anytime from almost any location. Although both traditional and non-traditional students are taking advantages of online learning, it is considered to be particularly appropriate for non-traditional students because of its convenience and flexibility (Mason, 2006).

In a landmark study for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Choy (2002) found that an ever-increasing number of (non-traditional) adult learners are participating in higher education. Non-traditional students return to college for

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various reasons (Hardin, 2008). Some may want to finish a degree they started in the past (Reeves, Miller, & Rouse, 2011); some may need a degree for personal development and career advancement (Miller, Ritter-Williams, & Rouse, 2010); still some are taking classes to pursue lifelong learning (Hardin, 2008). Whatever the reasons, non-traditional students represent the fastest growing population in higher institutions across the United States (Choy, 2002). The landscape of higher education is changing (Ballantyne, Madden, & Todd, 2009; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000).

To serve the ever growing number of non-traditional students on college campus as well as to remain competitive in the market, colleges and universities are creating more online programs and courses to meet the changing needs of students (Means et al., 2010). Online learning has become an important part of higher education for both institutions and students. Non-traditional students may differ from traditional students in many ways because of their prior experiences and the multiple responsibilities they have; they place a high level of importance on their experiences as students and their satisfactions on how well their expectations are met (Choy, 2002). Therefore, it is important for educators in higher institutions to have a better understanding of this group of students.

The main purpose of this study is to describe non-traditional students' experiences in an online educational technology course, and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how non-traditional students learn in an online environment. Gaining insight into their online learning experiences will help educators design and create a favorable environment for these learners.

BACKGROUND

The last decade has witnessed many changes on college campuses as students with varied life experiences and responsibilities have entered or

re-entered higher education. Non-traditional students have comprised a large part of the student body at colleges and universities (Choy, 2002; Reeves et al., 2011). The increasing number of non-traditional students on college campus requires educators to understand their beliefs, prior experiences, their unique needs, as well as the barriers they are facing.

Non-Traditional Students

NCES defines non-traditional students based on the following characteristics:

- Delayed college enrollment;
- Working full time;
- Financially independent;
- Having dependents;
- Single parent;
- Attending college part time; or
- No high school diploma (Choy, 2002).

Students who have one or more characteristics listed above are considered non-traditional; seventy-three percent of undergraduates in 1999-2000 were somewhat non-traditional (Choy, 2002), and in 2007-2008, approximately seventy percent (Reeves et al., 2011). Based on the characteristics listed above, non-traditional students do differ from traditional students in several ways. Non-traditional students often struggle to balance work, family and school commitments (Pusser et al., 2007); and their lives are more complicated than those of traditional students—some may be forced to return to college due to changes in their life such as losing jobs or divorces, etc. (Hardin, 2008). Moreover, many of them may have been separated from formal education for a number of years, thus they may be unprepared for a college system designed to serve younger, full-time students.

Adult learners are often referred to as non-traditional students in the literature, although “not all non-traditional students are adult learners”

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