

Chapter 72

Adult Learning Influence on Faculty Learning Cycle: Individual and Shared Reflections While Learning to Teach Online Lead to Pedagogical Transformations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to share results of a qualitative research study that investigated how faculty members learn to teach adult learners using online course delivery. In this study, experienced faculty members needed to learn anew and rethink pedagogical strategies when designing and teaching online delivery formats. Faculty members who are learning to teach are also adult learners who learn through experience. Research themes emerged from interviews regarding how instructors learned to teach adult learners online: (a) adapted to market demand, (b) anchored by adult learning strategies, (c) experimented in online laboratory, (d) evolved from trial and error to collaboration, and (e) rethought pedagogical possibilities. Understanding how faculty members learn to teach adult students online offers great potential to identify the challenges that faculty members face and how they meet these challenges to improve teaching practice. Implications for online professional development practices are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Faculty demands in higher education are changing dramatically because of the growing adult student population. To increase access to that population, many colleges are offering online courses and

programs. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reported that nontraditional students (56%) are more likely than traditional students (21%) to participate in distance education. The 2010 Sloan Survey of Online Learning of more than 2,500 colleges and universities nationwide found that approximately 5.6 million students were enrolled

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in at least one online course in fall 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Online enrollment rose by almost one million students from a year earlier, representing a 21% increase over the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). To meet the demands of students who need more flexibility, especially adult learners, more instructors are being required to teach online courses. Allen, Seaman, and Garrett (2007) found that core faculty members teach online courses (64.7%) about as frequently as they teach face-to-face courses (61.6%). Yet many instructors do not receive training in the fundamentals of teaching or how to teach online (King & Lawler, 2003; Knapper, 1995).

This chapter reveals how faculty members learn to teach online through experience and provides practical guidelines for helping faculty members to learn how to meet the needs of adults, as well as other students. This information will benefit instructors who seek to master online design and teaching skills, as well as faculty developers, instructional designers, and administrators who assist faculty members in this process.

BACKGROUND

As of fall 2009, 42% (8.6 million) of the 20.4 million students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (academic, career and technical, and continuing professional education) were 25 years of age or over, and 61% (5.2 million) of those students were female and 39% (3.4 million) were male. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010, Table 119), enrollment of students age 25 and over rose 43% from 2000 to 2009, while enrollment of students under the age of 25 rose only 27%. Nontraditional students, especially women, who are not able to fit courses into their schedules due to work and family commitments, are not able to complete a degree (Brown, J. A., 2004; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002; Kramarae, 2003). Belanger

(1996) noted, “The question is no longer whether adult learning is needed, and how important it is. The issue today is how to respond to this increasing and diversified demand, how to manage this explosion” (p. 21). The top reason cited by institutions for moving to online courses and programs is improved student access to education (63% said that this was *very important* and 30% chose *important*). Two thirds of institutions cited growth in continuing and/or professional education as an objective for their online offerings, chiefly due to the appeal of online instruction for nontraditional students (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

The instructor’s ability to provide positive learning experiences is a major factor in adult student retention and degree completion (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Flint, 2005; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Lau, 2003; Mancuso, 2001; Pearson, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 1991, 2003). Factors that have been found to have positive influence on student retention when teaching via online formats include

- Enhancing students’ comfort level with technology;
- Developing sensitive online instructors who know how to generate trust, collaboration, and credibility; and
- Creating a safe environment for students to communicate (Hiltz & Shea, 2005).

In addition, students are often not prepared to learn online and faculty members may know little about how to assist students to be successful (Rodriquez & Nash, 2004; Schrum & Hong, 2002). Hiltz and Shea (2005) explained, “Interaction with the teacher is the most significant contributor to perceived learning” (p. 155). This interaction includes being flexible, respectful, and caring of adults’ special circumstances, as well as the ability to provide quality, meaningful instruction that includes utilizing interactive learning strategies to develop a community of learners and foster critical thinking and communication skills

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