

Chapter 13

Online Education Programs for Adult Learners in Higher Education

Victor C. X. Wang

Florida Atlantic University, USA

Valerie A. Storey

University of Central Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

To serve a significant portion of the student population, adult learners, in the academy in the 21st century, this chapter argues that online education (e-learning) has the potential to open wider the door to greater access and advancement for learners across their life spans than the traditional four walled classroom. Some of the major issues revolving around online education and adult learners, such as policy, access, completion, and equity, are addressed in this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to identify future technology trends, and then show how we can rely on practice and research to harness the great yet untapped potential of online education to promote online education programs, especially among adult learners. Policy, access, completion, and equity must be well addressed if online adult education is to be employed effectively and efficiently.

INTRODUCTION

As King (2006) reflected upon online education, she indicated, looking at online education for the last 20 years, one cannot help but realize that the field has expanded dramatically. We have lived through a time of great advances in technology, policy, educational readiness, and societal technology adoption, but at the same time we have also struggled with great challenges in these same areas.

The bright side of online education is the simple fact that it has the potential to reach learners anywhere, any time and that learners enjoy the flexibility online education can provide for them. In addition, proponents of online education promote it in a multitude of imaginable, innovative ways in order to maximize learning. Even though online education has been in use for 20 some years, it is still in its infancy. What makes the picture rather bleak is the fact that higher education research

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institutions have been laggards in understanding the transformational potential of communication technologies (ICTs), and only now are beginning to understand how technology is reshaping and redefining our accepted notions of what it means to teach and learn in a higher education environment. In some higher education institutions there is evidence of entrenched organizational cultures which may be a hurdle to the evolution of online education, as some academic faculty members accustomed to traditional modes of instruction may be disinclined to change (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). Such faculty fail to see the benefits and value of online education. They not only challenge the very existence, popularity, and effective use of online education but may also refuse to buy into the research results about the effective use of online education.

Increasingly, online education has become a vehicle of instruction in adult education as degree programs and distance learning have gained a firm foothold in universities around the world (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). Adult learners by nature have multiple work and family responsibilities (Wang, 2007; Wang, 2008). By no means can adults become full time students just like pre-adults or children. While children enjoy the benefit of full-time students, adult learners have to come to college campuses in the evening or on the weekend to receive their education and training. When this does not work out for them, adult learners either take no classes at all or depend on online education which can ensure that learning occurs not only in the classroom, but also at home or at work. It is no exaggeration to say that online education and adult learners have become inseparable in this digital age (Wang, 2005).

In addition to assisting with learning anywhere, anytime, online education by nature is omnipotent (Wang, 2008). It is omnipotent in the sense that it affects online education program development and delivery. It extends the reach of online edu-

cation through partnerships. It increases higher education opportunities. It prompts researchers to study its instructional effectiveness through online education.

Many academic institutions, and especially those with a public-service mandate, consider online learning the key to advancing their mission, placing post-graduate education within reach of people who might otherwise not be able to access it. A case in point is the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, which has a long history in distance education. In 2008, the university launched the University of Illinois Global Campus—an integrated online program created in collaboration with the colleges and academic departments at the university's residential campuses.

Five years later, we find that not only online for profit universities such as the University of Phoenix, Walden University, North Central University, and Cappella University have realized the potential educational market among adult learners but also traditional universities have entered the online market place, and both are vigorously promoting online education programs. Indeed when we compare online education with traditional classroom education, we cannot help but realize the following advantages that online education has over traditional four-walled classrooms:

- Instantaneous (synchronous) and delayed (asynchronous) communication modes.
- Access to and from geographically isolated communities around the globe.
- Multiple and collaborative among widely dispersed individuals.
- Ultimate convenience, when and where you choose.
- Interaction with and among individuals from diverse cultures.
- Ability to focus on participants' ideas, without knowledge of age, race, gender, or background. (Shrum, 2000)

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