

Chapter 3

High Tech, High Touch, High Context: Social Dimensions of Learning in Online, Hybrid, and Learning Pod Environments

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the challenge of maintaining a “high touch” learning environment in online and hybrid adult graduate degree programs. The literature suggests that although online degree programs are popular, the retention rate in online classes is low, and online courses may not meet the social needs of adult learners. Few interventions thus far have been successful. The authors used learning pods, small, geographically-oriented teams of students working on individual learning projects as self-directed communities of scholars, as an intervention. Student perceptions of learning pods are explored in this chapter, and suggestions for practice based on student feedback are offered.

INTRODUCTION

As the demographics and face of higher education change, colleges and universities must also evolve. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 42% of the over 20 million people enrolled in college in the fall of 2011 were 25 years old or older. Over 60% of those students were enrolled as part-time students, meaning that

a large percentage of the current “face” of higher education belongs to nontraditional students (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). NCES projects similar or higher percentages of nontraditional students participating in higher education through 2021 (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). These students may be re-entry students, older adults, married or single with dependents, and entering the context of higher education with a wealth of life and work experience

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(Jinkens, 2009). Considering the changing times in higher education, educators have to recognize these experiences to design courses and create learning environments that meet the needs of the majority of the participants.

One way to meet needs of busy, working adults is to offer courses and programs online. According to the eighth annual report on the state of online learning in the United States, in 2010 there was a notable increase in the number of institutions that listed online education as a strategic priority (Allen & Seaman, 2008, 2010). According to Parsad, Lewis, and Tice (2008), between the fall semesters in 2003 and 2007, total university enrollments grew at a rate of 1.5% while online course enrollments grew at 18.9%. During the same time period, online enrollment grew from 11.7% to 21.9% of total enrollment. Parsad, Lewis, and Tice (2008) point out that

In the 2006–07 academic year, 2-year and 4-year institutions reported an estimated 12.2 million enrollments in college-level credit-granting distance education courses. Of these distance education enrollments, 77% were reported in online courses, 12% were reported in hybrid/blended online courses, and 10% were reported in other types of distance education courses (as cited in Brau, Christian, Hill, McNair, Sandoz, & Taylor, 2010, p.1).

Although online classes are common, there remains a debate in the literature regarding the quality of courses delivered online. A common concern is the retention rates in online courses and the college completion rates for students enrolled in online programs. In other criticisms of online learning, students often reported feelings of isolation, intimidation, and neglect in online environments. It appears that few—if any—intervention strategies for online students have proven effective (Ali & Leeds, 2010; Leeds et al., 2013).

However, the literature does indicate that hybrid or blended approaches to learning boast retention and completion rates equal to their face-to-face counterparts (Hughes, Ventura, & Dando, 2007; Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2011).

Learning pods are a creative approach to confronting the challenges of online student retention and graduation by addressing the social needs of learners. The pods are a small, self-directed community, grouped by geographic location, working together on learning projects. This “high touch” approach humanizes the learning environment for adult and non-traditional online students and compliments the “high tech” approach of exclusively online delivery. In developing the learning pods approach, we consulted and drew upon the literature in the areas of adult learning theory, motivation, communities of practice, novice to expert, mentoring, self-directed learning, and distance education practices.

BACKGROUND

Adult learning in the United States was first theorized by Malcolm Knowles (1968; 1970). Knowles (1970) also introduced the terminology of andragogy as meaning “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Though it was Lindeman (1926) who first contributed to the literature of what adult learning entailed. Lindeman’s assumptions on adult learning were that adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy, the orientation to learning for an adult is life-centered, experience is the richest and primary resource of adult learning, adults seek self-directed learning experiences, where the teacher is a facilitator in the learning process, and that the individual differences among people increase with age. Zemke and Zemke (1984) provided a more detailed source of what we know about adult learning, focused

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