

Chapter 63

An Examination of Educators' and Learners' Experiences with Technology from Both Sides of the Learning Landscape: An Autoethnographic Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an autoethnographic exploration of the experiences of three adult educators who have recently returned to the learning environment where they are now on the other side of the fence and are students. They confront new technologies within increasingly multi-generational classrooms and student-centered learning resources and dynamics far different from when they were first credentialed. As experienced educators, they currently teach within their own content areas and facilitate student learning using current technology. This chapter examines their experiences through an autoethnographic approach that describes their perceptions as educators and as learners given present technology.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades the learning environment has taken on a new face, it is the face of a computer monitor, be it a laptop, a tablet, a desktop or a smart phone – it is now the lens through which individuals physically interact to teach and

to learn. In tandem with this electronic interface, more student-centered teaching dynamics have entered the classroom, and older, more mature learners have returned to retool and to re-engineer their careers. The participants in this study are from highly technical fields, which in itself has proven to be an advantage for them as you will see

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from their narratives. As a result, they have varied levels of technological competence, yet they have all thrived in their current learning environments. This chapter begins with an overview of the adult learner, and demographic differences given the ongoing changes in technology. Next we explore the participants' backgrounds, and the research design, followed by participants' experiences using technology as educators, then as students. From a thematic analysis of their experiences, we arrive at implications to adult learning in light of ongoing technological change.

OVERVIEW OF THE ADULT LEARNER

In the adult learner classroom, individuals from a range of backgrounds, age groups, and professional arenas converge, and collaborate on projects and assignments. In today's classrooms, adult learners collaborate with instructors, and peers from various generations, through varied levels of interaction to complete their course requirements. Interestingly, many adult learners intend to continue their own teaching careers, as teachers of adults, and so their mastery of technology, and indeed all learning resources, is imperative. Hence understanding the challenges and issues they face, and how they handle or surpass these challenges is relevant to the field of adult education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991) and to the teaching and learning of technology.

A somewhat common myth that older adult learners confront is that others, peers included, believe they are unable to use technology, and so may hinder the learning process for the entire class. From my experience, often when the entire class is expected to perform a new task, younger students will typically be several mouse clicks ahead of even the instructor, while older students tend to need more help finding the correct links, and getting caught up to the instructor. Although the younger generation of learners in the 25 to 35

age range are up to speed with most technology, older learners have the advantage of being keenly dedicated to their fields, more professional and mature, more participative and academically engaged with discussions, able to allocate time and effort toward their studies, and extremely eager to learn new technologies (Pew Research Center, 2010). In fact, older adults are far more willing to learn new technology, particularly when the learning environment is low stress, and the instructors and respectful and patient (Kleiman, 2005).

Generational differences between Baby Boomers, Generation X and the Millennials lead to different perspectives within the learning environment, largely because motivators, communication styles and thinking styles differ (Pew Research Center, 2010). Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964, individuals born between 1965 and 1980 are Generation X, while those born between 1980 and 2000 are called the Millennial Generation (AARP, 2007). Both Baby Boomers and Generation X form the more prevalent generations currently enrolled in an effort to retool and further their education. Although the typical age for college falls within the millennial group, students from both the Baby Boomer and Generation X are enrolled in an effort to further their formal education, taking continuing education, in-service trainings and professional development certification programs (Kenamer & Campbell, 2011; Miller, 2013). They possess advanced degrees, doctorates and professional degrees, and are extremely engaged as lifelong learners.

Historically, older generations were viewed as more knowledgeable, however, given the technological shift, younger generations now have almost a natural advantage in that they were born in the digital age (Pew Research Center, 2010). Consequently, many become leaders and supervisors in the workforce, leading projects, designing strategic plans and products, and leading the older generations. Unfortunately, within the human resource development perspective, it could be that the need for older adults to learn about using technology

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