

Chapter 8

Building Interaction in Adults' Online Courses: A Case Study on Training E-Educators of Adults

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ABSTRACT

Integrating the principles of adult education in online environment -an environment which empowers the engagement of learners and their active participation, promotes interaction and immediacy between educator and learners, as well as between learners themselves, and improves learning outcomes- is a very important task. In this task the role of the educator is crucially important and simultaneously very complicated and demanding, as the integration of adult education principles in an online environment is not an easy issue and forms a big challenge for each online educator of adults. This chapter focuses on building interaction in adults' online courses by integrating the principles of adult education in an online environment, and presents one case study on training e-educators of adults. This case study concerns a one-month intensive seminar addressed to e-educators who teach adult courses, demonstrating that online interaction is both possible and effective by integrating the adult education principles in online educational environment.

INTRODUCTION

More and more adults attend educational programs online, taking advantage of the potentialities of learning technology in 21st century, overcoming time and space limits. Adults as learners have specific characteristics, which set them apart from

children and must be taken into consideration for the successful creation and development of attractive and effective educational programs addressed to them.

Given that technology should not be considered a panacea for teaching and learning, but rather as a tool to be used appropriately and serve spe-

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cific educational objectives within a pedagogical framework, adult education principles should be integrated in an online environment in order to maximize educational outcomes. An online environment – synchronous or asynchronous – which empowers engagement of learners, active participation and interaction and immediacy between educator and learners as well as between learners themselves, can promote learning satisfaction for participants and improve learning outcomes.

The role of the educator is crucially important and simultaneously very complicated and demanding, as the integration of adult education principles in an online environment is not an easy issue and forms a big challenge for each e-educator of adults. Educating adults' educators on how to integrate adult education principles in their training is a very effective way of providing quality training. By becoming learners themselves, educators will realize all the benefits of this kind of learning because they can, at a later stage, apply the same principles in their own teaching methods.

In the first part of this chapter we focus on the prerequisites of effective adult learning in online environment and on the role of the e-educator of adults. In the second part we present a case study on training adults' educators online, a one month intensive seminar addressed to adult educators who teach adults within the framework of general adult education courses, implemented by the General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning in Greece.

The chapter provides useful guidelines and proposals to designers, developers and educators involved in adult education on how they can integrate adult education principles in order to promote interaction in their online courses and programs.

ADULT EDUCATION

Theoretical approaches agree that adulthood is not based on the age criterion, which anyway differs

from one society to another, even within the same society, overtime (Brookfield 1986; Knowles 1980; Rogers 2002, 2007; Jarvis 1995). The elements, facts and conditions by which each society considers a person to be an adult vary depending on cultural, social, and biological factors. Evidently any group of people in a specific time and place may not share all the elements by which a person is considered an adult, therefore from the educational point of view we have to establish general criteria by which the status of adult will be defined. Among the criteria accepted by theorists are maturity, responsibility and autonomy (Rogers 2002, 2007; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Connecting the theme of adulthood with the educational process, Rogers (2007) supports that Adult Education consists of all those forms of education where learners are treated as adults – capable, experienced, responsible, mature and balanced people. He states that all forms of teaching adults should respect and enhance the adulthood of those who have voluntarily become students.

Adults' Learners Characteristics

Defining the specific characteristics which adults present as learners and which set them apart from children is very important, as the educator can use these useful elements for his teaching task. As one might expect these characteristics are varied.

Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984), who is considered the father of Andragogy, worked on identifying the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the characteristics of children, on which traditional pedagogy is based. His five assumptions refer to Self-concept, Experience, Readiness to learn, Orientation to learning and Motivation to learn (Knowles 1984).

From the time of Knowles all the way to our days, the literature on adults' learning seems to exhibit a general consensus on some common characteristics that have an impact on adults' learning efficacy and the overall classroom experi-

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