

Chapter 92

Students' Sense of Belonging in Online Classes: Does Age Matter?

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ABSTRACT

This study explored graduate students' perceptions of their sense of belonging in online classes, their comfort in participating in online discussions, and their technology skills. Differences in these areas among three different age groups were studied. Data were gathered via an online survey. The results of the data analysis showed that students, regardless of age, felt a sense of belonging and felt comfortable communicating in the online environment. The data also revealed that older students reported feeling more comfortable interacting with their classmates and disagreeing with their classmates while still maintaining trust than their younger counterparts. Such findings inform online educators in designing classes that meet the needs of all learners.

INTRODUCTION

Providing online education is a well-established practice across institutions of higher education with the number of online courses increasing on a yearly basis. As evidence of this trend, Allen and Seaman (2013) reported that online education is expanding at a faster rate than traditional face-to-face programs. As of 2013, 32% of the student enrollments in the higher education institutions studied by Allen and Seaman (2013) were in online classes.

Moore and Kearsely (2005) found that the majority of online students are in the age range of 25 to 50. This age group is attracted to online classes due to the flexibility it allows them to further their education while also fulfilling their employment and family responsibilities (Liu & Li, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009). However, class meeting format alone does not ensure satisfactory or successful experiences for

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students in online classes. In fact, without a proper support structure and a clear understanding of the relevance of the course, adult learners have been found to be more likely to drop out of online courses (Park & Choi, 2009).

As more students, particularly those in the adult age range, enroll in online classes, there is a need to examine how they respond to the online environment and what structures and strategies lead to success. In particular, learners of all ages have been found to function more effectively in online environments that are interactive and collaborative (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz, & Yang, 2005). Instructional strategies that require students in online courses to collaborate and interact with each other have been shown to increase students' perceptions of their learning and satisfaction with the course (Ruey, 2010).

Guilbaud and Jerome-D'Emilia (2008) outlined a framework for online learning called the Internet-centric Adult Instruction (IcAI) Framework. This framework places equal importance on the components of learner motivation, design approach, and creation of an online learning community. Specific to the online learning community, factors such as peer learning and feedback, a commitment to lifelong learning, and fluency with technology can contribute to students' overall experiences in the online course.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact age has on students' perspectives on a sense of community in online classes. Specifically, this study posed the following six research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of their sense of belonging in online classes?
- Is there a significant difference in students' sense of belonging in online classes based on different age groups?
- What is students' comfort level in participating in online discussions?
- Is there a significant difference in comfort level of participating in online discussions based on age groups?
- What are online students' perceived technology skills?
- Is there a significant difference in online students' perceived technology skills based on age groups?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult Learning Theory in Online Courses

Adult learning theory is recognized as an important consideration in graduate level education. Knowles (1984), the pioneer in adult learning theory, found that adults have intrinsic motivation to learn; however, that motivation is based on the relevance of the material to their lives. Adults tend to resist superfluous learning that is imposed on them.

The role of adult learning theory in online graduate level education is an emerging focus of study. Recognizing the increasing role of online education in adult learning, Milheim (2011) explains the importance of the instructor's adult education philosophy in shaping the experiences for students in the course. While it is typical for educators to hold distinct educational philosophies that inform their teaching, those educational philosophies may be understood or applied differently in online environments. An instructor who has adopted a humanistic philosophy in an online environment may include self-directed learning activities tied to specific goals based on the needs and interests of the learners. Student control of learning would be enhanced, while the instructor would adopt the role of facilitator. In contrast, a

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