From Digital Exclusion to Digital Inclusion for Adult Online Learners

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INTRODUCTION

In this second decade of the new millennium, it is becoming clear that nations are pressuring their citizenry to become more technologically skilled in order for them to compete globally in the quest for political, economic, military and scientific success. Educational leaders are also aware of the need to provide more "tech savvy" students who can be successful academically, socially, and professionally in the international arena (Garland & Tadeja, 2013). Adult learners are taking a greater role in that process of becoming better academic and digital citizens. For instance, "Goal 2020" of the United States Department of Education is a higher education reform policy initiative focused on the United States leading "the world in the proportion of college graduates" with "at least 8 million additional adults [who] will need to return to college and earn associate and bachelor's degrees by the year 2020" (Gast, 2013, p.17). But the goal of digital literacy for all the world's people is hampered by many factors.

There are wide disparities in Information Science and Communication Technologies (ICT) skills between digitally excluded and digitally included online learners both nationally and internationally. There is an enormous and even widening gap between Internet users in developed versus developing nations (Pick & Azari, 2008). There are also digital exclusion issues in the United States and in other economically advanced countries. Secondary level students in the United States are increasingly taking online courses; but those public school students who live in low socio-economic areas, who speak a language other than English, who are considered minorities, and who are disabled are more likely to lack academic technology skills (Garland, 2015).

In addition, a significant number of adult learners across the globe are a new group of "digitally excluded" students. Distance education courses are increasingly being taken for academic, professional, and personal reasons by students who are over twenty-five, yet many are struggling to compete with their "digital native" peers. According to one study, "Expanding adult digital literacy is essential for confronting vulnerable adults' issues of exclusion and marginalization that are increasingly being amplified by the digital mediation of modern social life." (Jacobs et al, 2014, p 626) Adult learners also need full inclusion in the technological demands of online education.

This chapter focuses on current trends in digital exclusion of adult learners and provides some solution strategies for ICT directors, higher education administrators, online instructors, and the older students they serve.

BACKGROUND

The most recently available statistical data indicate that online degree programs have a significant impact on adult learners. Over one fourth of all higher education students are taking online courses. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report, "Distance Education," 25.8% of all undergraduate and graduate students were "enrolled exclusively" (12.5%) or "enrolled in some" (13.3%) distance education courses in 2012 (NCES, Distance Education,

para 3). NCES indicated in its "Back to school statistics" report that "In 2013 there were about 12.2 million college students under age 25 and 8.2 million students 25 years old and older" (NCES, Back to school statistics, para 16). By the year 2024, these enrollments are projected to almost double, with over 23 million "total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions," the majority of which, over 13 million, are expected to be women (NCES, Digest of Education Statistics, table 303.40). In addition, the number of adult students taking non-degree online programs is also increasing. McCallum (2012) states that there are over 90 million students over 25 years old who are taking post-secondary studies in the United States alone. To put a human face on these statistics, consider the case of an online adult learner named Rosa.

In the fall of 2015, the author was introduced to Rosa (identifying information removed) in Texas at a national leadership conference, which focused on the accomplishments of undergraduate and graduate students. Rosa, whose primary language is Spanish, is the first in her family to go to college. Despite her academic success in being awarded a partial scholarship for her undergraduate studies, Rosa confided in me that she was struggling with financial and time management issues in trying to complete the online courses of her program. Rosa is a recently divorced, single mother of two young children. She spends most of her time working and taking care of her family. Rosa and her children have had to move back in with her parents. She does not have the resources to afford a smart phone and the latest computer upgrades. Although she is working part-time and saving money to make the tuition payments of her current degree program, Rosa feels that she might have to discontinue her undergraduate studies. It is likely that this academically talented adult student will drop out of college.

Digital exclusion of adult learners is associated with technology, socio-economic and gender factors. Sadly, Rosa fits the profile of many digitally excluded online adult learners. She is a mature student, over the age of twenty-five, who does not have the requisite technology skills and tools to be able to easily access the Internet and to effectively use the information and communication digital tools prevalent in online courses. Rosa is also a non-traditional student, a single mother who was drawn to the flexibility in her schedule promised by the lure of distance education programs.

Why do adult students like Rosa want to take online courses? They find that online courses are appealing because of their "anytime, anywhere" access. Britt states "students desire more control over their education along with a flexible schedule in the learning process which is a distinct advantage of online education" (2015, p. 400). But some mature students are "digitally excluded," unfamiliar with and perhaps unable to afford the newer technologies that are used as instructional tools in online courses (Garland, 2009).

Non-traditional students need not only technology training but also access to current digital tools in order to be successful online learners and more effective professionals. According to Gast (2013), the reasons for adult learners' desire to take online programs include "the need for updated skills to compete in a knowledge based economy, a change in demographics due to immigration and higher retirement ages, technological advances bringing the classroom to the student, and a globalization of the higher education system. Most recently, online and for-profit institutions have been a primary beneficiary of this growing enrollment trend among adult learners" (p. 18). Indeed, online degree programs have almost doubled in a recent ten year period, "62.4% of colleges offered online degree programs at the end of 2012 which is up significantly from 32.5% in 2002" (Britt, 2015, p. 399).

Although the number of online degree programs at more traditional colleges in the United States is increasing, some previously programs in distance education universities are in decline. Two distance education giants, the University of Phoenix and Corinthian Colleges, have sharply decreasing enrollments and increasing public scru-

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