

Chapter 8

Harnessing the Tiger of Emerging E-Learning Platforms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the evolution of E-learning, defines many E-platforms and discusses the relationship between contemporary Andragogical practices, and future technology trends, which key drivers for the implementation of new technology, play a significant role. This chapter argues that online education (E-learning) has the potential for greater access and advancement of knowledge for learners across their life spans than the traditional four walled classroom. The purpose of this chapter argues how we can rely on practice and research to harness the untapped potential of increasingly diverse modalities of online education. Some of the major issues revolving around online education and adult learners in the 21 Century include: processes of learning prevalent in E-learning platforms, issues concerning policy, access and program completion, barriers to online learning adoption for adult learners and assessment of online learning in the context for the 21st Century.

INTRODUCTION

Appropriating knowledge and skills for the global workforce puts web-based technologies at the forefront of any education learning environment. As King (2006) reflected upon online education, she indicated, looking at online education for over 30 years, one cannot help but realize that the field has expanded exponentially. We have lived through a time of great advances in technology, policy, educational readiness, and societal technology adoption, but at the same time we have also struggled with great challenges in these same areas.

The purpose of this chapter is to first explore the evolution of E-learning, contemporary Andragogical practices, future technology trends, and the key drivers for the implementation of new technology. Next, learning how and what processes of learning is prevalent and available in E-learning platforms is vital

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in order to implement relevant online learning modalities; there are issues that affect this which include: issues concerning policy, access and program completion and how these issues affect the learner; it is also critical to understand the barriers adult learners face to adopting online learning. Lastly, the assessment of online learning cannot be ignored in order to determine if relevant learning is taking place within the context for the 21st Century,

The spotlight on online education focuses on the potential to reach learners in real time, anywhere, which provide learners with the flexibility of reaching their educational goals. In order to maximize learning, proponents of online education have promoted it in a multitude of imaginable, innovative ways. Even though online education has been in use for over 30 years, aspects of it are still in its infancy. Unfortunately one of the challenges facing E-learning is its slow adoption in higher education institutions; research institutions have been sluggish in understanding the transformational potential of information communication technologies (ICTs), and only now are beginning to understand how technology is reshaping and redefining our accepted notions of what it means to teach and learn in the higher education environment. In some higher education institutions there is evidence of entrenched organizational cultures which may slow the process of appropriating online education, as some academic faculty members accustomed to traditional modes of instruction may be disinclined to change (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). Such faculties fail to see the benefits and value of online education. They not only challenge the very existence, popularity, and effective use of online education but may also refuse to buy into the research data claiming the effective use of online education.

Increasingly, online education has become a vehicle of instruction in adult education as degree programs and distance learning have gained a firm foothold in universities and colleges around the world (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). It is no exaggeration to say that online education and adult learners have become inseparable in this digital age (Wang, 2005).

Many universities have realized the potential of E-learning as a huge educational market among adult learners but also traditional universities have entered the online market place, and both are vigorously promoting online education programs. Indeed when we compare online education with traditional classroom education, we cannot help but realize the following advantages that online education has over traditional four-walled classrooms:

- Instantaneous (synchronous) and real-time (asynchronous) communication modes.
- Access to and from geographically isolated communities around the globe.
- Multiple and collaborative among widely dispersed individuals.
- Ultimate convenience, when and where you choose.
- Interaction with and among individuals from diverse cultures.
- Ability to focus on participants' ideas, without knowledge of age, race, gender, or background.

When we think of online education, the benefits are made possible with the innovations in information technologies. Indeed, E-learning has the potential to span: geographical boundaries; languages; learning styles; learning disabilities; physical disabilities; time and space limitations; technological limitations; and many more parameters. All these parameters can be advantages or challenges imposed on adult learners. Unless we are willing to learn to use information technologies to design and deliver innovative and effective teaching and learning in the online environment, we will fail to serve adult learners in the academy in the 21st Century.

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