

Chapter XXIII

Impact of E-Learning on Adult Education: A Changing Postmodern Approach

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ABSTRACT

In the present consumer educational market, educational institutions are rapidly incorporating more online opportunities. The various issues that learners and instructors cope with are addressed from the literature and our adult students. The key issue is creating a quality learning experience for adult students. Not only does the instructor need to incorporate what we already know about adult learning, but they must also approach the course development with a constructivist mindset. The major force in creating a quality learning experience is the discussion generated. Instructors must assist students in creating their own knowledge and develop the ability to discuss in a virtual environment.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have entered a new, postmodern global arena where they now must compete in an environment that negates most historical advantages associated with place and location. A university in Pennsylvania can and does offer its institutional prestige and degree

to anyone anywhere, and a rural university in Kansas now has access to students in Denver or Chicago. The Internet has become the portal to the global market, and with the rapid improvement of technology, online classes can be as sophisticated and eloquent as a face-to-face class, with the potential promise of increased profits for the host institution. Traditional public and private

universities now compete openly with proprietary for-profit universities for cyber students who in many cases will never visit their campus unless they wish to participate in graduation ceremonies. In today's educational arena, it is a buyer's market. Through e-learning and the Internet, globalization and turbo capitalism (Finger & Asun, 2001) are shaping and dictating the rules for engagement in higher and post-secondary education.

This chapter's focus is on the changing dynamics of adult education graduate programs and the trend toward online education. Yet what is occurring in adult education graduate education is also occurring in nursing, the arts and sciences, engineering and most every college and university discipline. In the United States, adult education has historically operated under Enlightenment ideals and modernistic views of human development as they contributed to the common welfare, economic opportunity, and social stability. This educational project framed within fundamental democratic ideals was viewed as a inalienable right for everyone, reserved for nor controlled by the elite or privileged (Bryson, 1936). Do on-line programs create more egalitarian opportunities for students who have previously been denied these opportunities? Or do on-line programs primarily serve only those students who have the financial means, thereby preserving the status quo between the haves and have-nots? Verner and Booth (1964) recognized that technology was the driving catalyst energizing the expansion of knowledge for both individuals and communities. Advancing the vision that knowledge and technological innovations "exert an ever-widening influence on social relationships, on patterns of behavior, and the overall structure and organization of society... Since such changes occur continuously, the learning necessary to adapt to them must also be continuous" (pp. 6-7). Their statement is as true today as it was forty years ago. Technological innovation is changing our perceptions of what constitutes a university

experience or a student's relationship with their professor and vice versa. Yet the question remains: are these technological innovations enhancing these fundamental democratic ideas viewed as a common right for everyone?

These historical trends set the stage for adapting e-learning within today's adult education graduate programs, yet there continues to be resistance to full adoption of these new and evolving technologies. This chapter examines access and barriers both learners and faculty face from historical, technological and cultural analytical frames. We juxtapose the strengths and weaknesses of face-to-face instruction with online instruction, and conclude the barriers to replacing face-to-face instruction with online instruction are far more complex than having access to a computer and the Internet. We illustrate these complexities with a small dataset collected at a traditional research university from student surveys, interviews, and personal experience. Specifically we rely upon this limited survey sample to better understand how students perceive the level of faculty attention, class participation, student interaction, and student satisfaction with online classes.

Finally this chapter will analyze the trend toward online education from a financial and institutional perspective. In our postmodern society we now are members of the global marketplace in an all-consuming culture (Alan & Turner, 2000), recasting students as commodities needed to sustain our business. Deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987) of a university's domain and student allegiance is changing the historical construct of adult education graduate programs, and new technologies in online learning is one driving force in that change. This chapter concludes that the same forces that are changing our definition of *community of place* to connected *community of interest* are also shaping the postmodern structure of adult education programs where students may never meet their instructor or fellow students face-to-face.

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