Chapter 4
Introduction to Online Learning and the Adult Learner

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ABSTRACT

Web technologies are changing old patterns of learning. Online learning is simultaneously a tool and a challenge in improving our learning process because working online is a fundamental competence for today's society. Rethinking needs and course design for online learning to be applied to all subjects at all levels (digital natives and digital immigrants as well) is, maybe, the biggest challenge in education. It is necessary to give teachers adequate training to teach using technologies in a way that supports specific pedagogical mode. Online learning for adult learners has both advantages and disadvantages. Research into online learning is an emerging field and all of this information has practical implication for design and tutoring online activities in the case of adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

The accelerated development of web technologies is changing old patterns of learning (Shank, 2008). The new type of environment created in this way requires special abilities to understand human dynamics, as well as abilities to efficiently use communication technologies (Duarte & Tennant Snyder, 2001). From this perspective, online education has a double role: a. it is an effective alternative to the traditional teaching-learning system, because students can complete coursework anytime they wish, and b. it allows adult students to develop skills needed to function in a virtual work environment.

Online learning is simultaneously a tool and a challenge in improving and promoting our learning process because working online is a fundamental competence for today's society with changing expectations regarding the job market (Martz & Reddy, 2009; Forrester, 2017).

The intensive introduction of formative technologies in educational processes has become a priority of modern higher education institutions around the world. The European Commission and the Council of the European Union have agreed on common priorities in the area of education and training for 2020. One of the EU's benchmarks for 2020 is that at least 15% of adults should participate in (ET, 2020).

BACKGROUND

Delivering instructional content online (or elsewhere) is insufficient to produce learning or usable skills. Getting desirable outcomes requires far more effort than simply building instructional content (Shank, 2008). The lower retention and completion rates for online courses has been attributed to several reasons including the fact that many online courses are taught at community colleges where students are not as academically and technologically prepared as 4-year university students (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). But the first barrier to success in an online learning environment for adults is the general familiarity with the skills necessary to participate. Without understanding software and hardware functioning, and having inadequate keyboarding skills, students may encounter difficulties during the learning process. A barrier or moderate impact is related to the individual's ability to use computers, more specifically, the most frequently reported problems refer to the confusion about how to use these kinds of technologies (Cartwright, 2000). Consequently, literature has strongly recommended that students should receive beforehand tutoring in online learning skills (Srichanyachon, 2014).

On the other hand, DuPraw and Axner (1997) identified fundamental patterns of cultural differences which are important in online learning, such as: a. different communication styles (language usage and the importance of nonverbal communication), b. different approaches to finding information through researching literature, c. symmetrical - asymmetrical social interaction regarding hierarchically-based relations when they refer to their status, or d. the preference to learn by talking to people who have experienced the same challenges. Cultural factors identified by Hofstede (2001) such as power distance, level of individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation may lead to differences regarding one's approach to online learning.

Reservations about putting thoughts in print, worry about perceptions by others, and lack of visual cues were also noticed (Shank, 2002). Another issue is that many students come into an online experience believing that such courses promote independent study and are resentful when asked to work with others. Differences in expectations or in willingness to collaborate may also interfere. High expectations for participation on the part of team members may cause problems (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Another barrier may be the case of those teachers who are not prepared to teach online and do not give timely feedback, or do not communicate clearly (Jaggars, 2014). Last but not least, feelings of alienation and a lack of collaboration appear to have an impact on student persistence throughout courses in online learning (Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Stanford-Bowers (2008) found that one of the factors that should be present in an online course is community. Community can be established in an online course through various methods including focused content interaction, involved and timely teacher interaction, and collaboration with other students through social interaction. When community is integrated into the online course through one or all of these ways, the result can be higher student satisfaction with the online course (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

For young people, the interaction is more appreciated in online environment than spontaneous reactions in the classroom because nonverbal communication is removed. Students do not see each other

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