

Chapter 21

Adult Learner Characteristics Important for Successful Learning in Cross– Cultural Web–Based Learning Environments in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

For more than 40 years, cognitive psychological perspectives have dominated pedagogical frameworks and models for designing technology-mediated teaching and learning environments. Social learning perspectives are increasingly becoming viable or even desirable frames for research and practice as pertains to teaching and learning, particularly in web-based learning environments (WBLEs). The author considers these social learning perspectives and how they relate to the design and implementation of curricula that are delivered in web-based learning environments in higher education. The author further reviews the foundational theories of adult learning that enhance adult learners' experiences in cross-cultural web-based learning environments. This review and analysis of the research related to social learning perspectives on WBLEs have three implications for future research and practice: (1) examining learners' individual characteristics in WBLEs, (2) identifying strategies for promoting social interaction in WBLEs, and (3) developing effective design principles for WBLEs. The author presents recommendations for future research.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8598-6.ch021

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the social learning perspectives and their application in the design, development, and implementation of instruction delivered in web-based learning environments (WBLEs). For the purposes of this chapter, WBLEs are viewed as settings that enable online learners to interact and observe the results of their interactions while responding to and engaging with others, leading to a possible development of a more cohesive community of learners (Hill *et al.*, 2009). Although there are many other useful formats for online learning, the focus of this chapter is on Web-based learning environments that are interactive in nature and that transcend culture, nations, and regions. Several factors influence the teaching and learning process with regard to social learning perspectives: context, culture and community, and learner characteristics (Hill *et al.*, 2009). Some of these factors are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs. First, the author examines context as an integral part of the teaching-learning process, particularly in cross-cultural web-based learning environments. Second, the author discusses culture and community as an overarching factor that supports the teaching-learning process. Lastly, a detailed review of learner characteristics is provided. The author believes that learners' characteristics play a critical role in cross-cultural web-based learning environments. Understanding adult learner characteristics is a critical first step in the planning, design, delivery and assessment of instruction in higher education.

Context

Context is integral to how cognition facilitates understanding (Brown *et al.*, 1989). According to Pea (1993), cognition involves exploiting various resources in the environment (human and non-human) in order to develop understanding. Thus, human interactions within WBLEs, as well as WBLE resources, help to initiate, sustain, and support associated social learning processes. Such processes require clearly delineated contextual framework for successful teaching-learning process to occur.

Interactions

From a social learning perspective, knowledge is constructed while individuals are engaging in activities, receiving feedback, and participating in other forms of human interaction in public, social contexts (Henning, 2004). Because cognition is not considered an individual process, learning and knowing are shaped by the kinds of interactions a student has with others, and the context within which these interactions occur. The role of interactions has been widely studied in online learning and is considered central to a successful learning experience. For a student, these interactions may be with other students, instructors, or the content (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Moore, 1989). Further, the length of these interactions may be short and brief or long and sustained. The integration of tools and resources to support interaction within WBLEs has received considerable attention (e.g., Hill & Hannafin, 1997; Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005; Northrup, 2001).

Research indicates that students perceive greater social interaction when creating and sharing in-depth online messages (e.g., King, 2002). The question of how and when these interactions occur arises. Hara *et al.* (2000) analyzed online discussions conducted using a "starter-wrapper" technique in a graduate-level educational psychology course, where every student served at least once as "starter," who initiated weekly discussions by asking questions related to the readings, and once as "wrapper," who summarized the weekly discussions. Analysis of transcripts indicated that although students tended to post minimal

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