


Chapter 37

Enabling Adult Learning Advantage in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners tend to have specific educational goals, are more career-focused, task and intrinsically motivated, and more concerned about application of knowledge. Most adult learners are employed or attending school to advance their careers, so ideally, adult education should comprise educational activities, at least in part, focused on improving knowledge and skills relevant to the workplace. This requires a systematic and integrative approach that will guide students toward becoming reflective practitioners. Case-based education is an important tool that can provide the educational experiences that produce effective practitioners but only if its use is guided by a sound theoretical and research-based framework. This chapter will provide a framework for the design of case-based instruction that incorporates teaching and learning affordances derived from the theory of situated learning and cognition.

INTRODUCTION

The world and the workplace have changed dramatically in the last decades. New technologies, new media, new industries and new professional practices have changed the way professionals in virtually all industries conduct business. A Wall Street Journal article (Hufford, A. Dec. 9, 2019) reported that due to advances in technology and the demand for more skilled workers, more than 40% of manufacturing workers have a college degree, up from 22% in 1991. To adequately prepare students to enter the technologically sophisticated, media-connected, culturally diverse, 21st century global workplace educators need to help students develop a professional perspective that is more ethical, reflective, integrative, situationally aware and able to create effective, evidence-based solutions to professional problems. Adult

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and professional educational programs must help students develop a more sophisticated, civic-minded professional competence that allows them to effectively integrate skilled “know-how” and ethical professional judgement in real-world settings.

The basic premise of this chapter is that adult education must deliver a combination of knowledge, cognitive and hands-on skills and professional comportment that requires a unique teaching/learning methodology with a sound theoretical foundation. This chapter will provide a framework for developing and delivering case-based education that capitalizes on the type of contextualized learning that is critical for the development of reflective practitioners. As a number of educators (Benner, 1984; Berragan, 2013; Noone, 2009) have pointed out education for the new world of work requires education for practice. Curricula and instruction must be designed to deliver education in a contextualized fashion that links knowledge, skills and ethical, reflective practice behavior to real-world problems.

This chapter then, will present a conceptual framework that will guide the design of a case-based teaching model and will provide an overview of a relevant theoretical perspective, situated learning, that is derived from the learning sciences. Situated learning techniques, especially when combined with educational technology that extend classroom learning and provide a larger repertoire of learning activities can be used to design a case-based model that will be more effective in class-based, online and blended education for reflective practitioners.

BACKGROUND

Many if not most adult learners are employed and either looking for further educational credentials to help them to find new employment options or higher levels of employment in their current organization. As such, they can benefit from instruction that helps them develop professional practice skills, knowledge and behaviors. The learning sciences have developed several lines of research that provide useful concepts and theories to assist in designing instruction for professional practice skills and knowledge. Using situated learning theory as a foundation, this section will discuss how this learning perspective provides guidance for designing instruction that can produce learning advantages that assist in developing adult learners’ practice skills and knowledge.

Situated Learning

According to this perspective, learning and cognition are thought to be the products of activity occurring in situations or communities of practice, and knowledge, learning and thinking are distributed among the members and components of these communities (Greeno & van de Sande, 2007). Situated learning theory or what some (Greeno, 1997) have called the situative perspective views learning and cognition as distributed over activity systems and communities of practice rather than residing strictly in the head of individuals. The situative perspective looks at learning, cognition, motivation and achievement as social activities (Turner & Nolen, 2015).

Greeno and van de Sande (2007) have outlined the main issues in situated learning as it applies to education. Their main points include:

- Knowledge and cognition are distributed among individuals who interact within a social system
- Knowledge and cognition function as a capability for participating in activity systems

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