

Chapter 55

Engaging Adult Learners Online Through Technology, Andragogy, and Flexible Course Design: From Theory to Practice

Curtis L. Todd

Atlanta Metropolitan State College, USA

Kokila Ravi

Atlanta Metropolitan State College, USA

Harry A. Akoh

Atlanta Metropolitan State College, USA

Vance Gray

Atlanta Metropolitan State College, USA

ABSTRACT

Distance educational courses and programs, either fully online or hybrid, have been a major contributing factor in the shift that is felt in the academic landscape which now offers a variety of instructional modes, welcomes adult and non traditional learners, and offers a wider variety of curricular offerings reflecting current market trends. While a high percentage of students take classes online, adult learners particularly benefit from the flexibility and accessibility offered by online education. Yet, adult learners are more likely to be intimidated because of their lack of familiarity with this new learning paradigm. This chapter examines online and adult learners programming as well as strategies to address their needs, and presents the results of an evaluation that examined the effectiveness of an Online Adult Learner-Focused Program. The results of the study found various levels of student satisfaction with online adult learner-focused courses and as it relates to meeting the objectives of the program. Implications and recommendations for instructors, program coordinators and administrators are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of distance education has been revolutionary and transformative, changing the way instruction is provided, students learn, and institutions position themselves in order to remain competitive and relevant (Barak, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2014). Further, online courses that are adult-learner focused address some of the complex needs facing institutions of higher learning and students: access, convenience, quality and rigor, and enhanced pedagogy. Increased demands for online degree programs and courses, and the added focus on adult learners must be met with evidence-based practices designed to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Once courses and programs are designed and launched, it becomes imperative that they are appropriately and accurately assessed for effectiveness (Wang, 2006; Koenig, 2010). How do we know if students are satisfied in important areas such as engagement, interaction, resources and workload? Are we meeting the unique needs of adult learners with their reentry into academia? Are our programs meeting their objectives? Also, how are these students performing in comparison to peers in face-to-face courses?

The goal of this chapter is to address the aforementioned questions, and contribute to the expanding literature involving adult learners and distance education, as well as offer strategies to improve program goals, policies and assessments. Objectives are met through the inclusion of an empirical case study that demonstrates the effectiveness of a technology integrated adult learner program at an urban, public undergraduate institution in the United States; the clarification of key concepts and terms central to adult learners and distance education; the identification and development of focus areas for academic success which include faculty training and robust course design; and by demonstrating how incorporating Quality Matters course design standards improves student engagement and learning. Finally, recommendations for instructors, program coordinators, and college administrators are provided.

THE ADULT LEARNER REVISITED

The definition of an adult learner will vary depending on the situation and setting. There are, however, many commonalities that exist in higher education. Generally, they are undergraduate and graduate students ages 25 and older (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012). They are not a monolithic group, rather each individual is unique with varied abilities, educational backgrounds, family and job responsibilities, as well as life experiences (Southern Regional Education Board, 2015). In response to the shift of having more adult learners in the classroom, campuses are seeking and implementing strategies to address their needs. Central to these efforts, which inform practical and theoretical approaches to learning, are six assumptions about adult learners delineated by Knowles, Swanson and Holton (2005, p.4):

1. Learner's Need to Know
2. Self-Concept of the Learner
3. Prior Experience of the Learner
4. Readiness to Learn
5. Orientation to Learning
6. Motivation to Learn

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