

Chapter 6

Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Settings: Focus on Team Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter intends to answer the question, “What are some guidelines for working effectively in virtual teams?” To further advance existing literature, the authors utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach with a randomly-sampled group of seven students who had completed master’s-level education courses that were conducted in an online format at a private Midwestern University. Students were halfway through their course completion at the time of data collection. In addition, a random sample of one program administrator and four faculty members were interviewed. Specifically, students who enrolled in online Master’s in Education courses are required to work in study teams to complete a certain portion of the course work. Study teams can often be difficult to navigate in person and with the added dimension that a virtual experience brings to developing trusting, successful working relationships, different working guidelines are needed. Findings revealed that managerial and social aspects of online learning and teaching were critical for online students’ success.

INTRODUCTION

“The single most important factor, the substrate, which will determine the success (or failure), of any organization in the 21st Century: TRUST.” – Warren Bennis

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Adult learners once considered a non-traditional population in higher education have established a firm normalcy. The research of Knowles (1980) proposes that adult learners are motivated by learning experiences that are directly applicable to their lives, tend to be self-directed, and want to feel that they have a definite sense of purpose in a learning experience. These foundational elements of adult learning are well-documented and understood by successful adult learning practitioners. The authors use Chao's (2009) definition of an adult learner as someone who "is a self-directed person, 24 years of age and above whose engagement and readiness to learn is based on the immediate applicability to the development tasks of his/her social role incorporating his/her reservoir of experience" (p. 906).

What is lesser known is how adult learners thrive in an online learning environment. As online learning expanded in higher education, much of the research emphasis focused on the undergraduate experience, as well as the experience of students who are typically not considered adult learners (students ranging in age from 18-22). Early research into the experiences of adult learners in online environment found less than promising results. Adult students tended to be less academically successful in online learning, were retained at a lower rate than their non-adult peers and found online learning to be a less attractive learning option.

The authors investigate how these adult online students finding success? What strategies are instructors using to offer students the best chance at success in this learning environment?

For the sake of this chapter, the term "adult learning environment" will reference any adult learning experience purposely designed to occur in the face-to-face classroom environment, a blended format with instructor providing instruction prior to the classroom experience (e.g. flipped teaching model), or a synchronous or asynchronous online format as frequently found in distance learning. The adult learning environment term seeks to encompass the number of learning modalities adults engage in today.

The new normal in business and education today is using technology to aid colleagues and students communicating and working together collaborative in virtual teams to complete tasks. Over 80% of all businesses today utilize virtual collaboration as they compete in a fast-paced global marketplace. Virtual meeting and team collaboration thus become more evident and imperative. In 2006, more than half of all higher education organizations offer online courses (Hoffman, 2006). This landscape has changed dramatically over the last decade. Allen and Seaman (2016) noted that as online learning has proliferated, so has its success among adult students. The 2015 Babson Survey of Online Learning reports a 3.9% increase in the number of distance education students, a slight increase over the 3.7% increase in 2014. In 2015, there were 5.8 million distance education students accounting for 28% of all enrolled students. Of this total, 2.85 million were taking all their coursework toward a degree at a distance; while 2.97 million were taking some, but not all their courses at a distance (p. 4).

Indeed, the online format is one of the most popular formats for adult learners, ranking third in preference for students at private institutions. According the 2015 *Noel-Levitz Adult Learner Marketing and Recruitment Practices Benchmarking Report* Among private institutions with adult programs, online or blended formats are in place at over 60% percent of those institutions. Further, The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET) reflects that 28% of all college students now take at least one distance education course, and that 14% of all higher education students took all their courses exclusively at a distance (Poulin & Straut, 2015). They further note that 28% of students enrolled in at least one of their courses via distance education in the fall of 2014.

These reports show that distance education enrollments continue to grow, even in the face of declining overall higher education enrollments. Public institutions continue to enroll the largest portion of distance education students, with 72.7% of undergraduate and 38.7% of graduate-level distance students. While

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