

Chapter 15

Adult Learners Learning Online: A Case Study of a Blogging Experience

Danilo M. Baylen
University of West Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study in which an online experience for adult learners facilitated improved understanding of blogs and its applications to K-12 classrooms. Data were primarily derived from archived documentation provided by students as components of several completed course assignments. The case study illustrates and examines how the online experience, specifically the creation and maintenance of a blog, supported student learning about use and application of a specific technology. The chapter discusses processes and results given the contexts of adult learning and instructional technology as well as suggests directions for effective practice.

INTRODUCTION

The blogging experience was one of the assignments I enjoyed most because it is one that is applicable to both my personal and professional life. Watching the blog grow, with contributions from my classmates and our acquaintances, was both interesting and educational, and I feel that our blog turned into a good source of information and resources on our topic, nutrition for students in the middle grades. I also enjoyed the opportunity to work cooperatively with my group mates; one of the disadvantages

of online classes is the lack of interaction with others taking the course. Since completing this assignment I have read and contributed to others' blogs outside of this course and have also started working on my personal blog, with poems, images, and musings about life in general. (School Library Media Student B)

Adult learning is a vast frontier for those who want to enhance access and promote success in one's professional development. The literature identifies that adults are physiologically, psychologically, and sociologically more diverse than children and with varying needs (Lieb, 1991; Long, 1998). They learn best when prior learning is tapped and

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content learned is meeting their needs. Motivation is high when learning activities are supported by interaction or dialogue and opportunities for self-direction. Also, mistakes are seen as opportunities to further one's learning. For many adult learners, instruction becomes engaging when critical thinking and problem solving have become part and parcel of the process of gaining practice experience.

Given hectic schedules and multiple demands to an adult lifestyle (AASCU, 2006), getting an education online has become an industry within higher education. Course management systems (i.e., *Blackboard*, *WebCT*, *Angel*, etc.) have provided delivery platforms to private entities as competitors of traditional institutions of higher education by offering educational opportunities to those who have difficulty taking on-campus courses in the past.

Online learning, in this context, means all or the combination of the following characteristics: "knows no time zones, location and distance"; "access the online materials at anytime"; "real time interaction between students and the instructor"; and "use the Internet to access up-to-date and relevant learning material; and communicate with experts in the field" (Anderson & Elloumi, 2004, p. 5). Stokes (2008) argues that online learning can support working adults in their pursuit for an education by the ability to go to school despite their busy schedule.

Online learning has the potential of meeting the educational needs of adult learners. Literature about online learning identifies increased participation by adults on web-based activities like content creation and interactive conversations (Courtney, 2007; Madden & Fox, 2006). Also, emerging technology-based tools (e.g., blogs, wikis, podcasts, etc.) provide new ways to support adult learners in 1) learning content; 2) communicating and collaborating with peers; 3) facilitating critical thinking and problem-solving; and 4) producing creative and appropriate outcomes for target audience (Egbert, 2009). For example,

blogs could provide new spaces to learn and share information on variety of content and for different audiences. However, this technological innovation presents enormous challenges for many educators and administrators providing educational experiences for adults due to lack of experience and understanding the potential of this technology-based tool in various contexts.

As a case study, this chapter focuses on how the creation and maintenance of a blog has enhanced the understanding of adult learners on how it can support teaching and learning processes. Blogs began as "web pages that were created and maintained by individuals who made it their practice to monitor the Web" (Warlick, p. 25). However, blogs are about posted entries, not web pages. Solomon & Schrum (2008) explains a blog as "a set of personal commentaries on issues the author deems important" (p. 55). It is a user-generated website that uses texts, images and links to other blogs, web pages and, other media related to its topic. Readers reply to posted entries, promoting open dialogue and community building, that are displayed in a reverse chronological order (Hurlburl, 2008). The literature identifies many applications of this tool in the writing process like maintaining a writer's journal or keeping a daily log of activities (Windham, 2008).

Blogs are natural tools for writing instruction, from brainstorming to organizing to writing, revising, and peer review, they are tools that lend themselves to the writing process. Since there's a comment box, blogs are important in peer editing and sharing thoughts on the ideas presented (Solomon & Schrum, 2008, p. 81)

The case study discusses how adult learners acquire new knowledge on specific content areas through the blogging experience. It discusses how a blog and a blogging experience become an appropriate and effective online learning tool and activity to support the delivery of a professional development program. It discusses practical challenges of working with adult learners in an online learning environment. The goal of this chapter is

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