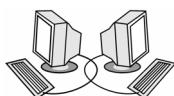## Chapter V

Engaging Adult Learners and Fostering Self-Directedness

Making Connections

It is clear that educators rely on a variety of instructional methods to change learners' behaviors. What is less clear is how distance learning educators can foster deeper and more meaningful learning by taking into account a learner's unique background, experiences, competencies, learning styles, personality type, and levels of self-directedness. This is a challenge for those educators wishing to create a learner-centered instructional environment at a distance. How can educators avoid the trap of "teaching to the middle," providing materials that are too challenging for some learners and too simple for others? How can educators identify learners' dependency level/self-directedness?

Introduction

There are many benefits of distance education enjoyed by learners and educators. Some benefits are more obvious than others. An obvious benefit, for example, is that learners that are time and/or place bound can benefit by taking courses at times and places that are convenient for the learner. A less obvious benefit may be the ability of the instructor to tailor the instructional sequence to take advantage of the learner's unique competencies (Dooley & Lindner, 2002; Lindner & Dooley, 2002). Consider the following example. For a particular course the instructor has developed two learning tracks. The first track allows learners, who prefer more direct experiences, to complete authentic learning activities related to the content. The second track allows learners, who prefer more abstract experiences, to read and write about the content. By providing learners the option to navigate the course, based on their unique competencies, the instructor maximizes the potential for learning. To often, instruction offered at a distance does not take into account learners' unique competencies, resulting in learners that are not actively engaged and learners that are unnecessarily dependent on the instructor (Lindner, Dooley, & Murphy, 2001). Some of the issues addressed in this chapter that affect learning, engagement, and self-directedness include learner temperament and personality, gender, attrition, learner responsibilities, rigor, satisfaction, quality, delivery strategies, and the role of the educator. We will provide a brief overview of some of the factors that impact learning in distance education settings, recognizing that much more research is needed to fully understand how to maximize learning at a distance.

Learner Characteristics Impacting Distance Learning

The possibility that distance education learners' personality may play a role in predicting satisfaction and achievement has resulted in numerous studies. While some research suggests differences in learner satisfaction with distance education courses based on the learners' personality type (Daughenbaugh, Ensminger, Frederick, & Surry, 2002) other research suggests that learners' temperament does not have a major impact on satisfaction or learning outcomes (Stokes,

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