

Chapter 30

Online Adult Education: Policy, Access, Completion and Equity

Victor C. X. Wang
California State University, Long Beach, USA

ABSTRACT

To serve a significant portion of the student population, adult learners, in the academy in the 21st century, this chapter argues that online education (e.g., e-learning) has the potential to open wider the door to greater access and advancement for learners across their life spans than the traditional four walled classroom. Some of the major issues revolving around online education and adult learners such as policy, access, completion and equity have been addressed in this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to show how we can rely on practice and research to harness the great yet untapped potential of online education to promote online education programs especially among adult learners. Policy, access, completion and equity must be well addressed if online adult education is to be employed effectively and efficiently.

INTRODUCTION

As King (2006, p. 15) reflected upon online education, she indicated, looking at online education for the last 20 years, one cannot help but realize that the field has expanded dramatically. We have lived through a time of great advances in technology, policy, educational readiness, and societal technology adoption, but at the same time we have also struggled with great challenges in these same areas.

The bright side of online education is the simple fact that it reaches learners anywhere, any time and that learners enjoy the flexibility online education can provide for them. In addition, proponents of online education promote it in any imaginable, innovative ways in order to maximize learning on the part of learners. Even though online education has been in use for 20 some years, it is still in its infancy. What makes the picture rather bleak is the fact that some faculty, policy makers, practitioners including some scholars do not buy into the notion of online education. It is these people who challenge the very existence, popularity, and

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effective use of online education. It is these people who refuse to buy into the research results about the effective use of online education. It is these people who fail to see the benefits and value of online education.

In addition to assisting with learning anywhere, any time, online education by nature is omnipotent (Wang, 2008). It is omnipotent in the sense that it affects online education program development and delivery. It extends the reach of online education through partnerships. It increases higher education opportunities. It prompts researchers to study its instructional effectiveness through online education.

Online education increases access and completion and equity. Online education can assist with professional development. The benefits and influence online education can provide go beyond the above list. One important and prominent benefit online education can provide is that adult learners in particular have been relying on online education to complete their college degrees and to accomplish their educational goals for the past 20 years. Adult learners by nature have multiple work and family responsibilities (Wang, 2007; Wang, 2008, p. 76).

By no means can they become full time students just like pre-adults or children. While children enjoy the benefit of full time students, adult learners have to come to college campuses in the evening or on the weekend to receive their education and training. When this does not work out for them, adult learners simply depend on online education which can ensure that learning occurs not only in the classroom, but also at home or at work. It is no exaggeration to say that online education and adult learners have become inseparable in this digital age (Wang, 2005). Online education has become a vehicle of instruction in adult education. It is not surprising if we hear that a university has put one third of its courses online in order to accommodate the needs of adult learners on campus. Towards this end, giant online universities have emerged to promote adult education online.

For example, in 2002, the University of Phoenix, part of the Apollo Group, saw its enrollment surpass 100,000 students-making it the largest institution of online higher learning in the United States (Bash, 2003). No need to say that this enrollment figure must include students from overseas. Walden University, Northcentral University and Cappella University (all online universities) have never stopped promoting their educational programs among potential adult learners in order to catch up with the University of Phoenix's enrollment.

In short, both traditional universities and pure online universities have realized the potential educational market among adult learners and have started promoting online education programs. Indeed when we compare online education with traditional classroom education, we cannot help but realize the following advantages that online education has over traditional four-walled classrooms:

- Instantaneous (synchronous) and delayed (asynchronous) communication modes.
- Access to and from geographically isolated communities around the globe.
- Multiple and collaborative among widely dispersed individuals.
- Ultimate convenience, when and where you choose.
- Interaction with and among individuals from diverse cultures.
- Ability to focus on participants' ideas, without knowledge of age, race, gender, or background. (Shrum, 2000)

To echo the above advantages of online education, King (2006, p. 16) in her award winning book *Harnessing Technology in Higher Education: Access, Equity, Policy, & Instruction* defined online education by using interesting comparisons:

- The working mother in rural Nebraska completing her bachelor's degree online

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