

Chapter 32

Using Technology in the Assessment of Adult Learners in Online Settings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter utilizes instructor experiences and reflections as the bases for framing assessment theory and practice of online learning in adult education. It begins with a general discussion of assessment in the field of adult education. Following that overview, the chapter describes ways to assess students by providing examples of methods, techniques, and technologies that can be utilized by adult educators as they endeavor to assess online learners. Lastly, the chapter concludes with an in-depth analysis of a specific assessment strategy and technology that utilizes software simulation to train and assess student skills in popular productivity software packages.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has taken the field of adult education by storm, changing our current realities as well as shaping our future possibilities. Adults are now able to participate in a myriad of educational opportunities simply by logging on to the Internet in the privacy of their own homes. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports

that in the 1999-2000 school year, eight percent of all undergraduate students participated in distance education, and of that number, almost one third were enrolled in entirely online programs (NCES, 2002). A more recent study conducted by The Sloan Consortium (2007) reported that approximately 3.5 million higher education students took at least one online course during the fall 2006 term. That number represents almost 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students, and is a 9.7 percent increase over the same time period in 2005. The

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study concludes that the number of online learners will continue to grow, although not at the strong pace seen in the past few years. The Consortium found that while almost all types of institutions of higher learning grew in terms of online student participation, the highest growth rates were found at two-year associate-degree institutions (The Sloan Consortium, 2007).

This move to online learning has meant many changes in the traditional roles of both educators and students. Instructors who teach online no longer have class during set hours of the week. They no longer have to be in certain classrooms during specific times to teach to their students. In the online environment, class is always in session, as students can log on, post comments and questions, and interact with fellow students at any time of the day or night. In the traditional classroom, instructors present formal, prepared lectures, whereas the online instructor functions as more of a guide or facilitator for learning.

Students who are used to attending traditional courses, in which the instructor lectures and they take notes, are finding that they must be much more self-directed in online classrooms (Schmidt, Dickerson, & Kisling, 2009). They must have the personal motivation to read assigned articles, participate in discussion, and complete assignments without having the structure of the traditional classroom as a guide or anchor.

One of the main differences in the online relationship between instructor and student is the lack of face-to-face presence between the two entities. Instructors may never actually meet, in person, the students they are teaching. Instructors who teach online are finding that many of the duties associated with teaching are different for online instructors. One aspect of teaching that is very different online is that of assessment. Assessment of students in online classrooms has changed in many ways. Two examples of the ways in which assessment is different are described by Bauer and Anderson (2004). "Classroom attendance as an assessment tool becomes extinct, whereas class

participation becomes quantifiable. Verbally acrobatic students in traditional classrooms are forced in the online classroom to showcase their wares in print to maintain their preeminence." (p. 65).

The issue of assessment of adult online learners will be addressed in this chapter. The topic of assessment in general will be presented, followed by a discussion of issues present in the assessment of online learners. There are a variety of tools that can be used in the assessment of online learners, as well as many suggestions, recommendations, and best practices for evaluating online learners. A connection between theory and practice will be made with a discussion of those practices, procedures and tools that practitioners can use in the assessment of online learners.

BACKGROUND

Why Assess Student Learning?

It is important to understand the overall purpose of assessment, as well as its value and its scope, if proper judgments about assessment are to be made. Everyone is familiar with assessment in the traditional classroom. It may be in the form of a test, quiz, project or assignment that the student must complete and submit to the instructor. Typically, the instructor provides guidelines for the assignment or subject-matter areas that are to be covered on the test or quiz. This subject matter is usually content that has been recently taught to the student, and hopefully there is a match between the subject matter covered and the content on the test or quiz, or the requirements for the assignment. The instructor assesses the work done by the students, and assigns them a letter or number grade on their work. This grade then becomes a component or element of the student's overall grade for the course.

Many would examine the above scenario and conclude that the main purpose of assessment is so the instructor can assess how well the student

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