Chapter 59

Increasing Adult Learner Engagement in E–Learning Courses through Learner Case Writing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes learner case writing (LCW) as a case-based method that has been successfully used to increase adult learner engagement in an online asynchronous environment. LCW is a response to the expressed need identified in the literature for increased incorporation of experiential activities in e-learning environments. A critical discussion of the theoretical base and learning principles that underpin this method (such as experiential learning, action learning, authentic learning, and situated learning) is also provided. Phases of the LCW process are outlined and key challenges the authors encountered while using the LCW process online are presented. The authors describe their responses to mitigate the challenges experienced and make general recommendations for online learning using experiential approaches. This chapter concludes with final thoughts on future trends.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we address learner case writing (LCW) as a way to increase the engagement of adults in e-learning courses. We base this on two concerns expressed respectively in the e-learning literature and the adult education literature. Firstly, the concern from the e-learning perspective is that

learners can easily become passive (Chen, 2006) in the online asynchronous course environment even in discussion forums which is arguably one of the more dynamic features of an asynchronous e-learning course. Secondly, adult education espouses the value of experiential learning as a key component of the adult learning process (Knowles, 1980; Boud, Cohen, & Walker 1993) although what comes under the tent of "experi-

ential learning" has wildly different implementations from "ropes" courses to problem-based learning (Fenwick, 2000). Unfortunately, there is no strong empirical evidence that experiential learning (problem-based or otherwise) contributes to increased cognition (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

A particular challenge arises in determining how to incorporate experiential activities in an e-learning environment. Using problem-based learning approaches, especially case studies, has been one extremely appealing way to employ experiential approaches with adult learners online; in this chapter we discuss a way to do this using learner developed case studies. In 1986 in the medical field, Barrows identified six types of problem-based learning: "lecture-based cases," "case-based lectures," "case methods," and "modified case-based," "problem-based" and "closed loop problem based learning." Learner case writing is not in Barrows taxonomy. And although cases of various types are regularly used in the professional fields of business, law and medicine there is primarily only empirical evidence that learner enjoyment may be enhanced (Closson, 2009). In other words, learners will report that they very much "like" the course when case studies are employed. But then in online environments that may not be insignificant given that many adult learners who, as much as they are attracted to the convenience, regret the loss of many context rich elements present in the face-to-face classroom (Stodel, Thompson, & McDonald 2006).

Learner case writing is an iterative process where adult learners choose and research a meaningful incident that happened to them or that they are intimately familiar with in their workplace. In our course students identify a critical management incident. Collaboration with a small group of class colleagues allows for learners to gain ongoing feedback throughout the term as they write their case. Interviews with individuals knowledgeable about the management incident are conducted by the learner. Each learner produces a full case study where they have analyzed the case and applied

pertinent management principles. The learning goal is for all learners to gain insight about how management concepts, principles, and strategies operate in the real world of their organization.

The objectives of this chapter are addressed in the sections that follow where we broadly outline pertinent learning theory that provide support for the learner case writing process as a viable activity in asynchronous learning environments. We then discuss problems relevant to learner case writing online followed by our responses to the problems and our recommendations to those who might choose to use the LCW technique. We close this chapter with a discussion of future trends for adults learning online and implications for learner case writing as a meaningful contribution to the repertoire of those who educate adults online.

BACKGROUND

Our premise is that learner case writing (LCW) engages online learners with course content through an explication of one of their own meaningful experiences, collaboration with classmates, and reflection through iterative reviews and revisions as they research and write their own case study. We suggest this is an especially appropriate task that enriches online learning for adults because it grows out of assumptions about the nature of adult learners. Learner case writing is experiential, encourages reflection, and allows learners to collaborate. As we discuss relevant background theories and principles that inform learner case writing we use the following terms interchangeably: online learning, e-learning and asynchronous learning.

Adult Learners

Malcolm Knowles (1980) distilled several key assumptions about the adult learner which have become almost more significant now, because of the rise in e-learning, than at the time he wrote of

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