

Chapter 11

Rethinking the Right Teaching Methods that Work for Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the phenomenon of why andragogical instructional approaches should work for online learners in the 21st century. As some senior faculty members and institutional administrators are reluctant to embrace education delivered via web 2.0 technologies, this article reveals discussions that will change these misconceptions. This article prompts readers to rethink their instructional strategies that will work well for online learners in particular. Even for face to face courses, instructors should incorporate an online component, as the principles of adult learning lend themselves well to an online environment.

INTRODUCTION

No one has imagined that it was the adult learning professionals who had pioneered the use of information communication technologies to deliver programs to online learners, especially to those referred to as “returning students” or “non-traditional learners” or even “adult learners” in the new century. In fact, it was the father of adult education, Malcolm Knowles, who made

the prediction in the early 1970s that education in the 21st century would be delivered electronically. Indeed, his predication came true when universities worldwide began to offer their courses online. Now it is not surprising if a university is teaching most of its courses online or in a hybrid delivery mode, combining elements of both face to face and online learning, not to mention those universities offering exclusively online coursework such as the University of Phoenix or Northcentral University in Arizona, USA. Because of information communication technologies, or web 2.0 technologies,

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university courses know no boundaries. Although the exact definition of the term Web 2.0 is widely debated, in essence it refers to the interactivity of the Internet. Users no longer passively digest content; they can easily upload their own text, pictures, and video as well as comment on those of others. Consumers can not only skim a book's table of contents and first few pages on a seller's website, they can also express their own opinion about the book publically. Regarding the power of web 2.0 technologies, King (2006) vividly gave examples of its impact on adult learners, such as the working mother in rural Nebraska completing her bachelor's degree online through her local state university while her children sleep at night or

The retired bus driver engaged in a collaborative webinar for his class through a University of Beijing class on the Eastern perspective of global issues (p. 16). Geographic location is no longer an obstacle to continuing education as it once was. Professors of even face to face courses are utilizing the technology of online learning, even just to post handouts or turn in assignments electronically to save paper. "Hybrid" courses, utilizing some face to face meetings and some online activities and assignments, are also becoming increasingly popular, as they blend both types of delivery methods.

While online learners enjoy the flexibility and convenience of learning anywhere, any time via information communication technologies, scholars have begun to pay close attention to the changes stimulated by the rapid growth of the Internet, the increasing of globalization of higher education, and the ever-pressing question of institutional and instructional quality. While new modes of educational delivery in the new century through virtual networks are breaking the traditional mold of instructional provision, very few people realize that it is the adult learning principles that drive effective teaching methodologies for online learners or returning students. Knowles would not have made such an accurate prediction without the basis of the principles of adult learning or andragogical

instructional methods. Because some universities have effectively used andragogical instructional methods, they have been able to expand their educational programs for online learners. Writing in 2003, Bash noted, "In 2002, the University of Phoenix, part of the Apollo Group, saw its enrollment surpass 100,000 students—making it the largest institution of higher learning in the United States" (p. 50). While popularity does not necessarily equate to effective learning, there is no doubt that traditional universities are also attempting to capture a piece of the online learning marketplace. These courses are cost effective since they do not require a physical classroom with all of the upkeep and expenses that go along with being on campus. The skills learned when negotiating an online learning environment may be another draw for some adult learners. "State of the art technical skills and subject matter expertise are the keys to better jobs and new careers for professionals" (Worley, 2000, p. 94). To be successful, online courses and degree programs must utilize the andragogical instructional delivery methods advanced by Knowles and others. Online learners of any age must be self-directed to a certain extent, since there is typically no official class meeting time like with a face to face course.

However, to effectively teach online, the professor's instructional philosophies must be examined. Traditional methods of instruction, especially lecture, do not necessarily translate well in an online environment. As with any course, preparation for the first implementation of an online course is often time consuming for the instructor, but subsequent semesters are easier since usually only minor modifications to the course website are necessary. "Instructors must account for the fact that they are not in the presence of live students, able to gauge reactions, and make small adjustments on the spot on an as-needed basis" (Dennen, 2005, p. 128). In an online environment, most communication occurs through text, either email, discussion boards, instant messaging or chatting, and even wikis,

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