Chapter 5
Adapting Informal and Formal Learning Skills for Success in the Virtual Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Learning in itself is not done in a vacuum. In today's competitive worlds of academia and business, students and current workers struggle daily to compete and remain competitive in a vastly changing world, market, and technological evaluation. What one prepared for prior to joining the job market has probably changed greatly in only a matter of a few years, and technology is still evolving. However, two items have remained constant over the past several centuries, the use of formal and informal learning. While not all people have the luxury attending college and university, informal learning has served as a tool in which a variety of stakeholders have helped others to learn and grow from each other. The key emphasis of this chapter is to focus on these two types of learning, but with a concentration on their relevance in the virtual learning environment. The topics of time management, group interaction, communication skills, and social media are examined in terms of how these skill sets can be useful to the virtual learner.

INTRODUCTION

As economics and technology change, adult learners are presented now with even more reasons to return back to school (Croix, 2013). For many of them, the time span between their last set of formal learning courses to that of today may be a substantial amount of time. Regardless of how long it has been since their last "formal" learning situation, they are now returning back to school as a result of necessity, desire or combination of both factors. Knowles (1984) noted that "adult [learners] see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life. They want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill they gain today to life more effective tomorrow" (p. 44). However, sometimes due to a long span of time of not at-

tending courses, along with many personal and work-related factors, some students are not able to maintain their studies and grades. Knowles (1984) stated that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Adult learning programs must accommodate this fundamental aspect. Let us look at some of the assumptions that andragogy makes about learning in terms of design:

- Adults need to know why they need to learn something.
- Adults need to learn experientially.
- Adults approach learning as problem-solving.
- Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value (Knowles, 1984).

Some of the andragogical principles include the following:

- Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
- Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
- Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life.
- Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented (Knowles, 1984).

Thus, students taking online courses have to develop even more self-discipline and dedication to their studies in order to be more academically prepared. As a result, two key areas, or skills set, that many adult learners have identified as being lacking in is good time management skills and self-confidence as learners again. While this may viewed by many as a basic skills sets, for some adult learners, they have not been faced with a need for strong time management skills – even with informal learning in the workplace. Further, while they may have various reasons for returning back for additional education, some may be still

very apprehensive about such a return. One additional problem faced by many adult learners is the prospect of transitioning from a live classroom environment over to a virtual one (Coen, 2003). Such a transition may be overwhelming for many of them, and the need for additional reassurance, along with development a new type of self-confidence, or virtual confidence, may be a key element to their success in this endeavor. Finally, adult learners may feel that they are approaching this new educational pursuit by themselves, rather with the support of others. Therefore, it is important to view how educational institutions approach the new learner and offer support in both the formal learning environment, as well as supporting the use of informal learning as a vehicle for more creativity, innovation, and support in the students' academic pathway.

BACKGROUND

One key aim of this chapter is to explore and examine the "psyche" of the new adult learner in the area of virtual learning. While many adult learners do face a variety of personal, work, and career factors that affect their decision whether or not to return back for additional education, many are now being faced with the decision of whether to attend a live classroom environment or to explore this new approach to education in the virtual learning environment (Coen, 2003). Traditionally, the live classroom is what everyone has been brought up to understand as the only method of learning – and this has been a standard and beacon for all to focus their learning interests towards over the years. However, due to many people needed to work several jobs, family obligations, and sometimes work overtime obligations, the live classroom is not an option any more. Rather, many people have been forced with the decision of either attending an online course or not go onward for additional education (EdTech Staff, 2012). With this in mind, many people are hesitant

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