Meeting Adult Learners Needs and Goals through Distance Learning

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Abstract. Modern world demands deep changes and deep evolution within multiple spheres of human beings and certainly in education niche as the very start point of any progress. In the situation of strong demand to be educated from one side and total lack of time for attending ordinary educational establishments from another distance learning provides lots of undoubted benefits and meet the needs of so-called non-traditional students, i.e. those ones with responsibilities for career and family that normally keep them from taking conventional college courses. Distance education has a lot of advantages in the context of modern educational environment, though there are also definite disadvantages present if take into account means of studying, quality of adopted skills and knowledge, control for educational process and the side of upbringing. However exactly distance learning as a modern phenomenon and real-time process has much more perspectives if we speak about adult learners' audience when in many cases distance learning is totally irreplaceable and do not have analogues deserving special attention. The current paper discusses the importance of distance learning to adult learners and the various distance learning methods that they can use to achieve educational goals in order to receive degrees and diplomas and gain practical professional competence.

Key words: distance learning, adult learners, adults, distance education.

Introduction

Distance learning is gaining popularity among adults who are keen to upgrade themselves for better career opportunities. This newer approach provides a source of revenue for public universities that are experiencing shortages in financial support from the state and can ease the tension of body count in classrooms to generate full-time equivalence (FTE) to avoid canceling classes (Maguire, 2005). As a result of this success, the benefits of distance learning have led many higher education institutions to implement distance learning classes, even if on an experimental basis, just to keep the flow of revenue going. Some are hybrid in format and some are completely online. In general, society benefits most from an overall increase in technology literacy through greater access to education (Belanger & Jordan, 2004: 217-219; O'Lawrence, 2016a). The growth of nontraditional adult enrollment in higher education demands a different and more flexible delivery system to meet students' needs (Chun and Hinton, 2001: 890). Distance learning is designed to ensure compatibility with the characteristics and needs of the adult learner. By retaining their jobs while attending school, adult learners are able to continue to gain in work experience while pursuing educational goals (Nafukho et al., 2004: 82-95; O'Lawrence, 2016b). Distance learning provides an alternative for people to further their education without having to undergo the traditional classroom learning. Nowadays, more adults are becoming interested to pursue higher education in order to compete more effectively in the job market. In response to this growing interest in higher education, education providers are creating new courses using new technologies to meet the demand. Many distance learning online courses are developed to meet this increasing need (Gibbs, 1998). Formal online learning is becoming more commonplace among adults, although the Pew project has not published numbers on the penetration of formal online learning for seniors. In a 2000 survey they found that 5 percent of adult Internet

users of all age groups had taken an online course for credit. A 2005 report from the Oxford Internet Institute in the United Kingdom indicates that one-fifth of UK Internet users have used the Internet for distance learning. The Sloan Foundation reports an 18.2 percent growth in online enrollment higher education classes from 2003 to 2004; it was also reported that "two-thirds of all schools offering face-to-face courses also offer online courses". And in 2007, Michigan became the first state to require all high-school students to take at least one online class in order to graduate (Notess and Lorenzen-Huber, 2007).

Adult learning

Organizations regularly need to provide mandatory training sessions on policies, procedures, job skills, preventive behaviors and so on (Notess and Lorenzen-Huber, 2007). However, there are other ways to teach these requirements than implementing a one-size-fits-all-ages training program. Applying the principles of adult learning theory into course development can help employees to learn faster and more effectively as well as to retain their newly gained knowledge for a longer period. It also capitalizes on the adult's interest in the learning experience (Applying adult learning principles, 2017).

For a number of reasons, not every e-learning program for adults follows adult learning principles. Some trainers simply aren't aware of them or don't know how to implement them successfully in an e-learning course (Distance Learning, 2013). Moreover, it requires a higher degree of creativity and insight to provide curriculum in a challenging and interactive manner; therefore, it takes more time and money to develop than the deadline and budget might allow. In addition, incorporating the principles into training must be done before an online course is developed, and an organization might already have a legacy program available that doesn't follow adult learning principles (Applying adult learning principles, 2017).

Most adults will move quickly through the modules of an e-learning course, and they may do well on the final exam. But unless the instruction follows many of the key adult learning principles, over time they may gradually forget what they've learned (Applying adult learning principles, 2017). The real goal of applying these principles is not to make training easier for adults (although it can make training seem almost painless) or more enjoyable (although it will likely have that effect). Instead, the principles should be implemented to maximize the effectiveness of the online experience so that adults actually succeed in learning the knowledge and skills and retain them longer (Distance Learning, 2013).

E-learning courses for adults that do not incorporate the principles can and do succeed (Notess and Lorenzen-Huber, 2007). However, they do not take into account the unique learning needs of adults and sometimes fall short in ensuring utmost performance (Distance Learning, 2013). First, adults have a wealth of experience to draw from (and may actually know more about the subject matter than they learn in the course). Second, adults learn best when they can solve problems or think about decisions to make in real-life scenarios. Third, adults believe they're getting sufficient value from their training time if they can (Applying adult learning principles, 2017):
- master knowledge that is relevant, as well as challenging, to them;
- always feel certain about their progress;
- provide input into the direction of their learning;
- seek out opportunities to direct their own learning;
- put their new knowledge to practical use immediately (Azipline performance group)

Distance adult learning

Henry O'Lawrence (2016b) reviewed the related literature to distance learning, the following is a direct quotation from his review due to the importance of his discussion, as he stated. Distance learning provides many benefits, including meeting the needs of nontraditional students with responsibilities to career and family that keep them from taking traditional college courses. In fact, this new approach provides a new source of revenue for public universities that are experiencing shortages in financial support from the state and can ease the tension of body count in classrooms to generate full-time equivalence (FTE) to avoid canceling classes (Maguire, 2005). As a result of this success, the benefits of distance learning have led many higher education institutions to implement distance learning classes, even if on an experimental basis, just to keep the flow of revenue going. Some are hybrid in format and some are completely online. In general, society benefits most from an overall increase in technology literacy through greater access to education (Belanger and Jordan, 2004).

Because of the rapid growth in distance learning, the use of technology has overcome many of barriers to higher education by providing traditional universities with an opportunity to meet the changing worldwide demand for education (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 2001). The demand for higher education is expanding throughout the world: by 2025, as many as 150 million people will be seeking higher education (Gibbs, 1998). This growth in demand will result in a change in the type of students undertaking higher education. Educational needs are becoming continuous throughout one's working life, as labor markets demand knowledge and skills that require regular updating (O'Neill et al., 2004). A recent report by the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (2001) indicated that more than 50% of higher education students were mature students (someone who starts a degree at age 21 or older). This figure is expected to increase as people realize the importance of education and how convenient it has become to have access to online learning and virtual universities that allow educational experiences to be tailored to the needs of individuals or groups.

The distance-learning environment has a major contribution to make to the educational requirements of the 21st century by encouraging general acceptance of the concept of knowledge as a vital element in social development and economic growth. The authenticity, quality, and competitive standards of such programs should come from reputable institutions so that those in higher education can confidently say that it will eventually lead to economic growth (O'Lawrence, 2016a).

Adult learning principles are transparent to the delivery platform. They can be readily applied in instructor-led training, primarily through the use of role-playing, informal discussions and self-directed learning. However, adults can often achieve an even higher degree of retention and long-term performance with an e-learning course designed with adult learning principles. Not every adult is alike, and individual adults differ in their learning needs. E-learning accommodates these unique needs. In many cases, adults can advance through an e-learning course at their own pace or to fit their work schedule and suit their personal learning requirements.

E-learning also expands opportunities for an adult to be fully engaged in what they're learning. Adults are normally interactive while on the Web, whether googling the name of a friend, clicking on a journal article to read, or playing an online game. These and other activities can be transferred to the e-learning environment, such as downloading PDF documents or entering a 3D virtual world to seek answers to an avatar's dilemma.

An e-learning course can tap into the need for self-direction by letting learners choose, in a nonlinear fashion, the first of several learning modules to begin, then routing back after that module's exam to choose the next module – until all modules have been

completed. After each module, the learner can click on further training links to be studied later as time allows and the need arises (Azipline performance group).

Because adults learn best by doing, the online environment is suited for presenting a scenario to solve or analyze (Mafa and Sakala, 2016: 3-16). Instead of always dispensing the exact content they need to learn, a screen can introduce a scenario, such as a common situation that a learner may confront on the job, and ask what to do. In addition, immediate feedback in the form of suggestions can be provided on the completion of an exercise, as shown in the example below. After typing in procedures in the space provided, the learner can click on the feedback button to open a list of suggestions that might validate, expand upon or move in a new direction from what the learner already knows. This automatic feedback provides positive reinforcement and does not penalize for wrong answers.

Keeping pace with changes in technology and meeting the increasing demands of the knowledge-based economy will require a highly skilled and educated workforce capable of working collaboratively to find solutions to diverse economic, social, and environmental problems. The key to success is, in large part, continuing education, which means that online learning, with its open access and opportunities for active collaboration in an egalitarian environment, will have an important role to play in meeting the challenges of the future (Stansfield et al., 2004: 173-188; O'Lawrence, 2016a). Kuhlmann provided some considerations when building e-learning courses for adults they are as follows (Kuhlmann, 2011):

- *set clear expectations and objectives*. Let them know why they're taking the course and what they should be learning. People like to get oriented and know what's expected of them.

- *adult learners don't like to fail*, and they don't like to fail publicly. Make it clear when they are being tested and when they aren't.

- *create an environment where they have as much freedom as possible*. Let them click around and explore. I know that many customers want to lock navigation so that they "get all of the information." This is faulty thinking. If they need to confirm their grasp of the information, then give them exercises to practice applying it so they can demonstrate their understanding in a real way.

- *give them ways to collect information*. This is a great way to counter the locked navigation issue. Create situations where they need to make decisions and then free up the navigation to collect the information needed to make decisions. This is a much better way to assess understanding than viewing a screen full of text.

- *focus on relevance*. I've worked on plenty of projects where the learners are never considered. I recall one company I worked for that wouldn't let me talk to any potential learners, even though we were rolling the training out to 3500 people across the country. If your content isn't relevant to the learners, they'll just tune out and you're wasting time and money. You can guarantee that little learning will happen.

- *create a visual design that is friendly and inviting*. This helps with the initial engagement and sets the tone of the course. I've had customers tell me that they can't do that because the subject matter was real important and serious. So they needed to have a very serious tone (read boring). If it's important, it makes sense to create a course that's as visually inviting as possible.

- *e-learning is a multimedia experience* so it makes sense to leverage as much of the multimedia as you can (in context though). You don't want to add multimedia for the sake of it, but you do want to use all of your resources to create the best course possible.

- *free Willy*! People are like orcas with floppy dorsal fins. They yearn to be free. One of the worst experiences in e learning is when the course navigation is locked. There are better ways to help people learn. Focus on relevant, decision-making scenarios. And if you're building a compliance, click-and-read course with no performance expectations, then make the course as simple as possible so that the learners can get in and out. Don't frustrate them or waste their time with a bunch of extra branched scenarios. Tell them what they need to know and let them go.

- *do you need to test everything*? Every day we take in all sorts of information that is critical to meeting our goals. When my boss sends an email detailing new plans, he doesn't follow it up with a quiz. Assessing a person's understanding is an important part of learning, but do we need to always have a test? In many ways it retards the learning process. As soon as people find out they're being tested, they quit learning and focus on how to pass the test. If you don't need a test, don't include one. If you do need to assess their understanding, perhaps there's a better way to do so (Kuhlmann, 2011).

To make it even more convenient, distance-learning courses can take place in hybrid form, which combines various technologies for communicating via networks and which allow the instructor to evaluate students who undertake such programs or curriculum. According O'Lawrence (2016b), hybrid courses are a blend of face-to-face instruction and online learning that satisfy students' need for convenient course offerings while making the best use of facilities, faculty resources, and online teaching technologies as the amount of classroom seat time is reduced. Even though traditional classroom methods continue to be important in learning, the use of technology helps to refocus how student needs are met (O'Lawrence, 2016b).

Conclusion

Talking about techniques and best practices for delivery of distance education the scientists and practical pedagogues argue that teaching online can be quite different from teaching in the classroom. Although not all distance education has a teacher – self-paced courses being an example – when they do the teacher needs to be adept at using the delivery technology and at interacting with students effectively without the physical presence and visual information that are so abundant in the classroom. It is not enough for an instructor to be expert in the content being taught – instructors must be adequately prepared to ensure their online courses will be a positive experience for students. This reaches beyond familiarity with the technology itself – an understanding of how teaching practices and behaviors need to be adjusted to succeed online is required. For example, adjustments might be needed regarding the number of assignments and due dates, given that text-based interaction and coordinating coursework and feedback between peers and the instructor often take longer than classroom-based situations. The role of an online instructor is to be pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical and points out that these may not all be carried out by the same person; in fact, they rarely are. Each type of medium (e.g., print, audio, video, Web based) requires specific instructional skills for effective use. For example, those teaching in video-based environments must learn on-camera behaviors and adapt to lack of learner feedback, while those using Web-based technology must adapt to the absence of nonverbal cues and learn to interpret online communication nuances. It is crucial for instructors to understand how to use technology, apply it to the discipline, generalize it to learn new applications, and guide students in applying the technology. Ideally, m instructors should try to identify opportunities to improve learning via technology by developing a variety of teaching strategies and understanding how technology shapes new teaching roles and student roles. This

understanding and ability to leverage technology in teaching is a learned skill – it does not come naturally to most people.

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