

Technology and Online Education: The Future of Adult Education

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There is much debate over the primary focus, or purpose, of adult education. For instance, Knowles states that the main purpose of adult education is to “satisfy the needs of the individuals, institutions, and society” (Merriam & Brockett, 18). Cotterill argues that education should focus on “motivating and inspiring students to learn rather than delivering a prescribed diet of what students are expected to learn” (405). Houle supports the idea that adult education is “planning by individuals or agencies by which adults alone, in groups, or institutional settings improve themselves or their society” (Merriam & Brockett, 8). Despite the various positions on the purpose of adult education, adult educators can find common ground by basing their ideas on a simple definition of adult education. Merriam and Brockett (2007) define adult education as “adult activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults” (8). Using this basic definition will allow us to agree to disagree on our varying viewpoints of the purpose of adult education and move forward toward a common goal.

Not only is it important to understand the purpose and definition of adult education, it is equally important to consider the motivating factors behind adults in education. Why do learners engage in adult education? It is even important to know why adults do not participate in adult education programs. However, for the purpose of this paper we will only approach the motivating factors for participation. Reasons varying from work training and promotion to learning for the sake of learning motivate adults to enter into adult education. Typically, adult learners are highly motivated and have a clear goal in mind when approaching adult education. These students are “motivated by career development, job security, upward mobility, re-careering, and other professional and personal reasons (Hashim, Tan, & Rashid, 384).

In addition to personal reasons, it is equally important to take note that historical factors play a large role in the direction of adults and adult education. Historically, adult education has “emerged in response to specific needs, and growth has been episodic rather than steady” (Merriam & Brockett, 9). For example, after WWII there was a shift in focus for the United States. What was once a heavy industrial market shifted to become a “service and information-based economy which displaced workers and created a need for retraining and new careers” (Merriam & Brockett, 9). This need for new careers and education was important because it allowed the United States to stay competitive in a global market (Merriam & Brockett, 9). Historical context is important because it provides an informative reference point but, more importantly, it gives adult educators the chance to predict future trends within adult education based on those past examples. For example, in 2015 we can see the effects of globalization. There is an overall need to create financial stability while maintaining a level of competitiveness in the market. Although, as Mouzakitis and Tuncay (2011) point out, “globalization is not simply a contemporary economic trend, but has considerable impact in education, industrial, cultural, ecological, and sociological sectors” (167). Globalization may affect numerous sectors but for the purpose of this paper the focus will be on education, specifically. The traditional face-to-face educational programs do not, completely, meet the needs of the global market so it became important to rely on technology to help meet educational goals (Mouzakitis and Tuncay, 167). Merriam and Brockett (2007) sum up this opinion well when they say:

“technology is a major partner in the globalization process. Multinational companies rely on sophisticated communication technology to run meetings, conduct business, and so on in an arena of collapsed time and space. This wedding of globalization and technology is also reshaping higher education...Students in all parts of the world are demanding online courses from institutions all over the world, and there is a discernible ‘rise of international and virtual organizations offering Web-based education and training’ to meet the demand” (293-294).

Technology, specifically shown through the manifestation of online learning programs, I feel, will have the greatest impact on the future of adult education. While adult education will still encompass more traditional forms of education (i.e. structured face-to-face instruction), there is a shifting trend that allows for more flexibility and removes situational, dispositional, and informational barriers that prevented certain groups of adults from enrolling in adult programs. Through the use of technology, more and more programs can and will be taught online. Dr. Steven Schmidt (2013) points out that “technology provides adult educators and learners flexibility in program delivery methods and access to formal education” (79).

Technology is becoming more and more accessible. The United States Census keeps track of Americans’ use of technology and provides interesting data from 1984—2012. In 1984 only 8.2% of all households had a computer at home. Compare that to the data pulled in 2012 where 78.9% of all households have a computer at home (Computer & Internet Trends in America, 2012). It is quite apparent that the use of technology in American households has significantly increased. This increase can be attributed to numerous factors including the ease of acquiring and the affordability new technology. In addition to the increase of computer usage, the Census tracks the increase use of internet in households. The Census reports that in 1997 only 18% of all households had internet. Fifteen years later, the Census reports an increase to 74.8% of all households having internet at home (Computer & Internet Trends in America, 2012). With data reporting that almost all American households are using both the internet and computers at home it is obvious how much technology has influenced society in general. What does the increase in home computer and internet usage mean for adult education? Patrick White notes that the “internet has certainly been viewed as a technology that has the potential to widen access to learning both through raising awareness of technology and through the delivery of e-learning” (166). It also means that people who might not have had access to formal education have the opportunity to engage in online learning activities. Gyurko and Ullmann reported on a grant, funded by the Purdue University Calumet School of Nursing, that one of its main purposes was to “increase recruitment of minority and economically disadvantaged graduate students” by using the distance learning programs (64). So through the increased availability of technology, this program was able to provide an educational service to an under-represented community. By providing educational opportunities to an under-represented group, those students will be able to return their communities and provide beneficial services thus improving society.

Higher Education institutions have also recognized the value of utilizing technology to provide online learning for their traditional students (ages 18-21), as well as, their adult learners. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education various colleges and universities are requiring a certain number of credits be taken online (Perry, 2010). This provides a benefit for both the institution and the learner. With increasing enrollment numbers colleges and universities are running out of space (Perry, 2010). Online learning alleviates the congestion (both people and vehicles) and the lack of classroom meeting spaces. As evidence of the increasing popularity of online learning, Indiana University’s “IU Online” reports growth in distance education from two years ago. According to IU Online 22.2% of all IU students are taking at least one distance education class and 7,165 students are taking all of their classes through distance education (<http://online.iu.edu/assets/docs/iuo-glance.pdf>). I work in a department on the Indiana University Bloomington’s campus where we provide both degree and non-degree online graduate programs. Since 2012, my department has seen a steady increase of student enrollment in our online programs. We currently use and have used various forms of technology to provide our students with a dynamic program. Utilizing online conferencing tools and online course management systems we are able to provide our students with both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. Each year we continue to learn from the previous terms and strive to improve the online student experience. Our students report positive experiences and appreciate the flexibility that the online program offers them.

In addition to institutional benefits, mentioned above, learners in can benefit from online programs offered through universities and colleges. Adult learners, typically, benefit from lower program costs, flexibility schedules, and personalizing their learning experience. Cathy Sandeen points out that non-traditional online students are not able to utilize all the services provided through residential programs and institutions should consider charging variable fees (<http://evollution.com/opinions/trends-worth-watching-continuing-education-leaders/>). Speaking from the perspective of an online student myself, one of the more attractive features of an online learning program is having a flexible schedule. Being able to incorporate an online program into a fixed “nine to five” job is incredibly important. Having tried taking face-to-face coursework and working full-time I can say from experience that online programs offer the opportunities to complete assignments at other times in the day that do not compete with a full-time job. Instead of running from work to class back to work, I can complete my job duties and shift focus when I get home and focus on coursework. Other students report using free time throughout the day to catch up on recorded classes and reading (Perry, 2010). Lastly, adults can benefit from personalizing their educations. Adult learners “need to find an opportunity to choose their own training content that would be suitable to their needs and desires” (Jakobsone & Cakula, 130). Adult learners want to maximize their time and effort and complete their educational goals efficiently. If adult learners were to participate in a traditional, face-to-face program they would, potentially, have to complete core coursework and additional student activities that might not be present in an online program. Online programs offer the adult learner the opportunity to select the program that best suits his or her needs and allow for a quicker completion.

Even within the growing popularity of online education, a newer subcategory has emerged. Online learning has become even more flexible with the introduction of mobile learning (m-learning). Recently, there has been interest from “academic and practitioner communities on the ability of mobile technology to carry out online learning activities” (Hashim, Tan, & Rashid, 381). In a time where a vast amount of information is available at our finger tips, education is still continuing to adapt in order to reach students by maximizing every technological channel. Within the past decade there has been a substantial increase in mobile phone usage and in the United States “85% of adults have phones in which 45% own smart phones” (Ranieri & Pachler, 62). Smartphones are “becoming increasingly affordable and learners constantly have at their disposal computing devices that are personally owned and very technically capable” (Ranieri & Pachler, 65). Although increasingly popular, m-learning is not completely limited to smartphones. Hashim, Tan, and Rashid point out that m-learning can also occur through “personal digital assistants, tablets, mobile phones, and portable multimedia players” (381). Adults often have busy schedules and having the mobile technology to support their online learning efforts is proving to be very important. This gives students the ability to efficiently use any amount of free time to devote to their coursework. Having the ability to check on assignments, view grades, submit responses, and read articles from anywhere through the use of a smart phone is an amazing benefit of technology.

Despite the benefits and the increased popularity of online education it is important to recognize potential complications and negative outcomes. Recognizing these issues will allow adult educations a chance to develop methods and design programs to minimize as many negative side effects as possible. One of the main downside of online education is the same as one of the benefits. A flexible schedule does provide learners with the opportunity to fit an education program into their busy schedules, however the lack of a strict structure may prove to be a problem for some. Mary Blackinton points out that “flexibility could spell trouble for procrastinators” (21). She suggests encouraging students to really take advantage of planners to stay on top of coursework (21). Another potential pitfall of online learning would be the learner’s level of comfort with technology on a whole. Adult learners who have “limited or inadequate computer experience or skills do not feel efficacious enough to participate in online learning, which can lead to anxiety or stress when using the internet” (62). There

is definitely a learning curve when approaching a new style of learning. Older adults may not have the same comfort level with technologies as younger adults might. Even then, younger adults may still have some difficulty navigating new course management systems. Providing online tutorials or resources would help students make the transition into online learning. Step-by-step instructions on how to navigate a new online course management program would be equally helpful. Lastly, with all the various forms of technology available today, it is important to recognize potential problems with communication. There is a delicate balance between too little communication and too much. Of course, the quantity of preferred communication will vary from student to student. Some students will prefer more communication and direction where others would prefer less. Keeping communication concise and in easily recognizable areas would be a helpful addition to a program. Schmidt suggests creating a communication strategy because “technology will continue to drive changes in education and communication but the key is to use it wisely and appropriately” (80).

Adult education is, certainly, a complex field. Due to its widespread nature there are varying theories, definitions, and focuses. These complexities make it difficult to narrow down a specific area, issue, or force that will have the greatest impact. However, after reviewing literature and drawing from personal experiences and observations, I feel that adult education will be greatly impacted by online learning and the advancement of technologies. Society will continue to change and programs will adapt to meet the change and the needs of individuals but technology will have its finger on every aspect. As we celebrate technological advances, online education will become more dynamic and be able to serve a wider population of adults and their corresponding needs. Without a doubt, there will be pros and cons to future of adult education in online form. However, judging by the potentials results, the positive benefits of online adult education will greatly outweigh the cons. By studying the history of adult education we can learn from past mistakes, analyze trends, and make note of what worked. Combining historical knowledge and current technologies we, as adult educators, can positively impact the future of adult education.

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