

Leveraging Adult Student Value in E-Learning Environments - A Pedagogical Shift

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Abstract: Adult students bring myriad experiences, knowledge, and expectations to our virtual classrooms today. This challenges us as educators to reexamine our pedagogical constructs. Many adult students who engage in e-learning have limited time, are responsible for dependents, are part-time students, and work full time. At work, their modern organizations are evolving quickly. They develop new expectations in those environments and bring them into our e-learning courses. Their organizations expect more of them. As a result, they come to expect more of themselves. In the academic setting they expect to have a more integral role, be dynamic in their participation, and incorporate their lived experiences. We must be prepared to shift our pedagogy in order to be most effective in educating adult learners. This paper will briefly characterize nontraditional students, describe the evolving workplace environment, outline the core components of adult learning theory, and suggest how pedagogical shifts will enable and encourage more effective adult learning.

Nontraditional undergraduate students outnumber their traditional counterparts today. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly three quarters of all 1999-2000 undergraduates had at least one of the nontraditional student characteristics as defined by Horn (1996) in an NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) study. Briefly, these characteristics include:

- Delaying college enrollment
- Attending college part time
- Working full time
- Having financial independence
- Having non-spousal dependents
- Being a single parent
- Lacking a traditional high school diploma

One third of our undergraduates work full time and think of themselves as employees first, i.e., they consider themselves to be students second. Horn found that 73% of these “employees” sought personal development, interesting subjects, additional skills, and either a degree or certificate in their undergraduate programs. Unfortunately, another study finding was that far fewer nontraditional students persist and achieve degrees than their traditional counterparts. As nontraditional students struggle with the challenges listed above and to find courses that represent meaning and value to them, e-learning opportunities may represent a viable alternative.

In 1999-2000 fully 8% of all undergraduate students participated in distance education. Those who did so tended to be those with dependents and limited time, and attended part-time while working full time (Sikora, 2002). Since most consider themselves employees first and students second, understanding the evolving workplaces in which our students work, may assist us in providing more meaningful courses or facilitating our courses in more meaningful ways. In their workplaces today, these individuals face evolving roles and the challenges that they bring. In many cases, their organizations have been reorganizing, *reengineering* themselves into flatter configurations. This results in fewer reporting levels in many organizations but heightened expectations that employees take on additional responsibilities. In these settings, employees are more often involved in *self-managed teams* where they have increased autonomy, power, and control. Further, they are more *empowered* as employees within their organizations, while *participative management*, another emerging concept, enables more men and women to determine what decisions they should make, with little if any supervisory intervention. Throughout all of this, managing and orchestrating *change* in organizations encourages the involvement of workers from all levels in initiatives both early on and throughout change processes. Finally, these men and women find themselves working in what Senge (1990) termed *learning organizations*, where new ideas are needed, knowledge must be transferred, and behaviors must change.

Though there are myriad other workplace factors and changes impacting our “employee students”, these substantive organizational developments represent considerable challenge to us as educators. We are suddenly faced with a rapidly evolving set of student expectations. Failure to shift our pedagogy may exacerbate the persistence

problem highlighted by the U.S. Department of Education. Further, in *The Condition of Education 2002*, the NCES detailed findings relative to undergraduate students' satisfaction levels with distance education classes. While 47% were equally satisfied with these and their regular, i.e., F2F classes, more were less satisfied, 30%, than more satisfied, 23%, with distance education classes (Sikora, 2002). These figures should give us pause and incite us to examine our pedagogical constructs. At work, these individuals are taking charge of their own careers within their organizations on a broad-based, multi-dimensional, and escalating basis. They may expect to be able to do the same in their virtual classrooms. Organizations are not merely *enabling* employees to participate in new ways. They are *expecting* these men and women to embrace new roles and perform in myriad evolving initiatives. Hence, when these individuals engage in e-learning as adult students, we as instructors need to determine how to participate most effectively with them. Moreover, when we examine key theories on adult learning we can become better prepared to address student persistence and satisfaction level issues.

When designing and delivering courses for adult learners we can consider the work of Knowles (1990), and many others, by:

- Incorporating learner experiences
- Focusing on problem-based approaches
- Prioritizing intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivators
- Designing application-based approaches
- Appreciating learner self-directedness

Incorporating that which nontraditional learners bring to our virtual classrooms will enrich the experience and enable them to bring their real world knowledge into the e-learning environment. Focusing on problem-based approaches enables learners to see how the subject matter can be utilized in actual settings and to address real issues and challenges. Recent workplace developments increase levels of self-efficacy and enable these individuals to draw meaning from personal growth. If we understand this we can leverage the new learner vision of where real meaning-making originates. Application-based approaches will enable learners to solidify the learning by using course content and theories both during and after our distance learning courses. Learner self-directedness is fostered by workplace changes described earlier. After long, often challenging workdays the last thing these nontraditional students need is an academician who is going to unilaterally direct their learning.

In our e-learning settings, we as educators can, instead, leverage the workplace experiences that these individuals have just had, building upon them across our e-learning courses. Adult learning theory highlights the need for nontraditional learners to participate in the formulation of their learning in order for that learning to be most effective (Brookfield, 1986). This concept aligns with the experiences these nontraditional students have throughout their workdays. Houle (1996) described education as a *cooperative* rather than an *operative* art that functions in a facilitative way. Rachal (2002) investigated concerns regarding learner control. Solomon (2001) observed that negotiated content and activities were integral to learner-centered pedagogy. Brookfield (2000) stated that learners and facilitators cooperate in the learning enterprise on curriculum, practices, and objectives. For many educators this requires significant pedagogical shifts.

In their careers today, "employee students" are often expected to assume more control in order to improve their workplace performance. They are *empowered*, *self-managed*, and integral to *reengineering* and *change* processes within their new *learning organizations*. Simply put, they are more *involved* and *engaged* than they were in traditional command and control settings. It is likely that this trend will continue, even escalate in future years. Workplaces continue to evolve while the number of nontraditional students in our various institutions continues to grow. As educators, designing and delivering e-learning courses for adult students, we can leverage the strengths that these students develop during their workdays. According to Sgroi (1998) it is the students' responsibility to direct their own learning, while Peters and Armstrong (1998) referred to the teacher as a member of the group of learners, a participant in collaborative learning. We can utilize adult learner experiences to enhance both the e-learning environment and its outcomes, for ourselves and our students.

In practical terms, how do we accomplish this in our e-learning courses? Boettcher (2003) feels that many of our students will arrive in our courses with their own knowledge structures, aware that they still lack the level of understanding of the material that we possess. In response, we can assemble multiple resources from which our students can choose. Working more as facilitators and co-learners, we can design e-learning courses that are highly flexible and responsive to individual learner needs. Collaborative teaching and learning (Conti, 1978) has been found to be a significant component of adult learning theory. Instructional models formulated by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) included both student self-direction and control of their own learning. Adult students can participate in determining how learning will take place and be enhanced. Designing a Syllabus that details and describes many course dimensions and features provides options that adult learners are prepared to select from and incorporate into their own learning strategies. Providing learners with options wherein they choose how to

demonstrate their learning will enable them to blend their workplace and personal goals and challenges with the subject matter. Boettcher illustrated an advanced level of content selection that presents students with problems that have less structure, increased complexity, and unknown solutions. Knowles (1990) envisioned shared learning enmeshed with shared authority. Leveraging what adult students bring to the virtual classroom enables them to contour the content and course approach to meet their needs. Blending both synchronous and asynchronous components into our e-learning designs can provide for rich and meaningful exchanges across our course timelines. Topics that pose open-ended questions, i.e., have no “right answers” challenge learners to link what they are learning with their own knowledge. Again, learner-directed topic selection and discussion focus can increase interaction and enhance the learning process. Encouraging and enabling adult learners to envision how the new learning can actually be applied in their workplace or personal settings will serve to solidify their learning and make it more meaningful. We can enable learners to share their experiences and knowledge beyond the discussion areas by providing additional mechanisms whereby they exchange valuable learning objects and materials that they have found and deem relevant within the current learning context. Group work, presentations, and assignment opportunities provide settings that many adult students are comfortable with and consider valuable in their organizations. Opportunities to work with their academic colleagues in similar fashion can serve to ground their learning through synergistic effort, discussion, and co-learning. Finally, our own flexibility, availability, and participation provide another key. Adult students are energized by and can find value in an instructor who is responsive and participates in the e-learning environment in a timely, focused, and rigorous manner.

We must strive to first understand where our nontraditional learners are coming from relative to both the characteristics that define them as such and the workplace experiences that they are having during the day. Then we can proceed to leverage all of that in order to orchestrate pedagogical shifts that enhance what is learned by our students and what is experienced by all of those involved. These pedagogical shifts may prove most meaningful when we understand the characteristics of nontraditional students and what current workplace evolutions represent, consider the concepts of adult learning theory, and then leverage what these students bring to our e-learning environments by enabling them to become an integral part of the process. What they bring is of tremendous value. Their experiences are expanding. Their knowledge is more broad-based. Their expectations are evolving. This should not threaten us as educators. This represents both an opportunity for us and a challenge to us that will make us more effective e-learning participants – given pedagogical shifts.

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