



RETHINKING THE SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR ADULT STUDENTS IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Adult students enrolling in online courses are confronted with a different to conventional learning environment which they have to adapt to immediately. New learning mode presents unique situations, initiatives and motivations which are inherently reflect on learners' academic performance. Scholars argue that adults may feel lost in the educational transition and it is critical to consistently encourage and provide a supportive learning environment for them (Dahan and Baba, 2005).

In online and distance learning adequate support named among main factors that determine students success and findings stress that adult learners who feel unsupported may decide to withdraw from the program (Park & Choi, 2009; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

There is an assumption that adult learners have a clear goals when returning to schools and, as a consequence, tend to be independent and self- directed in their educational journey. However, high drop- out rates indicate that adults' perceptions of and experiences in online programmes are not well understood and it is not very clear how to address the difficulties students' might have in order to support them better.

Keywords: Adult learning, support, online education.

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of online programmes is continuously increasing with the major demand coming from "adult learners who have no opportunity to access traditional education" (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015; p. 171). It is stated that the main advantage of online education is that it allows adults who might not have otherwise been able to complete a college degree program to get a "second chance" (Dwyer, Thompson & Thompson, 2013).

The increase in number of adult students, also known in the literature as "non-traditional" (Dwyer et al., 2013), "returning" (Ladell-Thomas, 2012), or "back door" (Lee, 2017) students has resulted in a need for colleges and universities to look at the various factors and attributes of this population and what institutions need to do in order to serve their unique needs (Wyatt, 2011:10).

Recent studies recognise the diversity of adult learners population due to "dissimilar life experiences and academic backgrounds" (see Malinovski et al., 2016; Hsu et al., 2015). However, in the literature there is still a simplistic view on adult learners' characteristics, which is mainly based on Knowles' theory of andragogy (Lee, 2017), and on difficulties adults' have or may have in online programmes. Little is currently known regarding the successful support practises that proved to work for adults with various personal and learning backgrounds in a unique online environment. And, unfortunately, adults who feel unsupported, facing additional barriers such as work and family commitments, may discontinue their enrollment in the course (Park & Choi, 2009).



ADULT STUDENT POPULATION

Cross referred to the term "non-traditional" more than twenty years ago (Cross, 1981). The reasons that led to increased enrolment of adult students into online courses and expectation of that group of "non-traditional" students since then had changed to some extent. As Cross noticed in the early periods mature students tended to be more grateful for the opportunities educational institutions offer to them, pointing out that current students are "client- service oriented, resources-stressed, and credential-oriented"; have higher expectations and less patient when encountering forms of inconvenience; see their education as "an investment of time and finances" (Cross, 1981).

Despite the recently emerged discussions on variations in adults' perceptions, experiences or needs (see Kim and Frick, 2011; Baloyi, 2013; Dwyer, Thompson & Thompson, 2013; Kuo & Belland, 2016) in an online learning environment in the research literature actual differences of adults and difficulties they may have in online learning environment are not clearly understood (Taylor and House, 2010). There are debates on barriers faced by that particular population in online environment and what kind of support system is better for adult students but those discussions are mainly built on the basis of andragogical assumptions (see Merriam, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) with a simplistic view on diverse adult population (see Lee, 2017). Taylor & House (2010) argue that "previous research has been simplistic in viewing differences among adult student population" and emphasised the need to analyse the varieties of that particular group of students (Taylor & House, 2010: 48).

There are also debates on what approaches in leaning and teaching are more appropriate for mature students. Some scholars state pedagogical, even andragogical, educational methods are no longer fully sufficient in dealing with adult learners, and a more self-directed and self-determined approach is needed (Kamenetz, 2010; Blaschke, 2012) while other argue that less mature learners require more instructor guidance and course scaffolding (Canning & Callan, 2010; Kenyon & Hase, 2010).

Today, several theories and models attempt to explain adult learning. However, there is no one theory that explains how adults learn (Brookfield, 1995) as every adult is different, "shaped by his or her history" and influenced by many variables (Cercone, 2008: 145). Existing theories provide frameworks or models, "each of which contributes something to our understanding of adults as learners" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999: 271). Andragogy is one of the most well-known theories on adult learning that had been designed to address the particular needs of adults. It is based on the idea that there are significant differences in learning characteristics between children and adults (Knowles, 1980) and presents crucial assumptions about the characteristics of learners that consider the whole-person perspective in terms of the diagnosis of needs, learning climate, and the role of the learners' experience. The assumptions of andragogy contrast sharply with the assumptions of pedagogy, which are that learners are dependent personalities who bring little or no experience to the educational activity. However, there is an evidence that assumptions developed by Knowles are not always true for adults. Scholars criticized the assumption about self- directedness of adults, stating that not all adult learners are self-directed (Cheren, 1983; Brookfield, 1995; Robinson, 1992; Schapiro, 2003). Robinson (1992) reported that learners do not prefer to be self-directed because they specifically indicated a desire for clear instructions as well as precise information from the course facilitator .

While andragogy has been widely criticized by scholars this framework is one of the most enduring and widely cited theories of adult learning (Merriam, 2001; Ross-Gordon & Jovita, 2011). Andragogy is not a perfect theory and it does not give the total picture of how adults learn. However authors pointing out that andragogy can be used as a starting point for approaching the adults in online learning environment (Brookfield, 1995). Andragogical assumptions can be viewed as a "goals for educators and might be used to guide the online course facilitator" to understand the realities of adult learners (Blondy, 2007). On the other hand, current technological changes pose important challenges to adult learning principles and some scholars argue that there is a "need to develop new



andragogical principles that are more relevant to the requirements of adults" (Ahedo, 2010: 240) and that learners with different characteristics may not only prefer, but benefit, from different instructional features and goals (Ausburn; 2004).

THE ISSUES OF LEARNING SUPPORT

The importance of learners' support was named among critical factors that determine students success in an online program (Baloyi, 2013). For the purposes of this research, the concept of the learning support in an online and distance learning will be defined as "all activities and elements in education that respond to a known learner or group of learners, and which are designed to assist in the cognitive, affective, and systemic realms of the learning process" (Brindley, et. al, 2004).

The issue of support provided for adult students is broadly discussed in the literature. Niemann (2017) argue that the limited or no face-to-face interaction in distance education needs to be overcome by providing meaningful learning support focused on content and learning facilitation, while acknowledging the need for some personal advice and guidance (Niemann, 201). Kazis et al. (2007: 17) states that adult learners need a wide range of online support services, including "tutoring, financial aid advising and personal counselling" as well as career counselling. Rinear (2003: 5) reports that services provided to distance education students should minimally consist of a "technical support system, online library services, online administrative support (such as registration and financial aid), and instructional support (such as online tutoring)". Study exploring adult students experience of learning support often report feelings of isolation, "little sense of connection and belonging" (Baloyi, 2013: 555) among learners, stress the difficulty to maintain engagement in, and motivation for, learning (Boyle et al, 2010; Baloyi, 2013).

Although studies suggest that adults' profiles are unique and differ from one another (see, for example, Bates, 2005; Miller & Lu, 2003; Wyatt, 2011) there is not much discussion on what actual difficulties adult students have in online learning programmes and how these difficulties can be addressed.

METHOD

The Pilot study was developed to explore international adult students' perceptions of, and experiences in, UK-based PhD distance programmes.

The learners received invitation to participating in one semi-structured interview (35- 60 mins in length). Potential participants who responded to the invitation email, were contacted, and convenient dates/times and the format of the interview (face-to- face, online, by telephone) were discussed. Eventually, the interview schedule was created. The interviews were held between April 2017 and July 2017. The students in total number of 22 from E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning programme, Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement programme and Health Research programme in Lancaster University were recruited to participate in the project. Interviews were conducted by author via Skype, telephone call or face-to-face using a semi-structured protocol where students were asked about their experience in online environment. The interviews were later transcribed after being completed.

The pilot study was used as a tool for a 'soft' research, allowing author to become aware of the differences in perceptions and experiences of each and every learner and test the feasibility of research methods before committing to a full-blown study. Participation in the pilot project helped researcher to determine the design for the further research study with a particular focus on adults' differences in perceptions of and experiences in online learning, difficulties faced by learners and on support that may be provided to address these difficulties.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It was argued that online education is a perfect educational mode for adults who are usually work and have family commitments. But recent research shows that attracting students is not enough and emphasises that adults may be "lost in the educational transition" (Dahan and Baba, 2005) It is believed that in order to facilitate effective learning instructors should solicit and act upon the expectations of students (Houser, 2005; Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). But as Lee (2017) pointing out the provision of the learning opportunities that serve learners' diverse needs is a more challenging and complex task than just letting learners to enrol in the online program (Lee, 2017).

For the current article Moore's interaction framework (1989) was used as a lens to look at the meaningfulness of different types of interaction for students: learner-learner interaction, learner-tutor interaction, and learner-content interaction. Kuo and Belland (2016) named learner-tutor interaction among the main factors influencing positive experience of students in online setting (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Overall the results of the pilot study correspond with the Kuo and Belland's suggestion and showed that those of students who had a good connection with and a timely feedback from tutors were generally reporting more positive personal learning experience.

While stressing that in fully online learning programmes, learner-content interaction and learner-tutor interaction appear to be the significant factors for student satisfaction Kuo et al. (2014) argue that Interaction among students themselves does not usually have much influence on learners (Kuo et al. 2014). However, pilot study findings showed that for some students learner-learner interaction might be critical as well. Student 1 reported that connectedness with other learners and their support influenced her decision not to take the intercalation:

"..in November I hadn't done much and I was feeling, oh like it's just too much work and maybe I should just defer to take an intercalation...But then I was encouraged by everybody [in Whats App chat group] saying, oh don't bother with intercalation..."

Literature analysis showed that assumptions developed by Knowles are not always true for adults. Scholars often argue that not all adult learners are self-directed (Cheren, 1983; Lam, 1985; Brookfield, 1995; Robinson, 1992; Schapiro, 2003). Robinson (1992) reported that learners do not prefer to be self-directed because they specifically indicated a desire for clear instructions as well as precise information from the course facilitator. Although pilot study results also showed that in general learners prefer clear instruction and timely feedback from tutors, it is too early to make any conclusions or to open discussion about adults' learning behavior in online environment. Moreover, it might be dangerous to criticize andragogical assumptions. The fact that adult learners prefer tutors or online institutions to give them clear instructions does not necessarily mean adults' lack of self-direction or independency.

CONCLUSION

Scholars argue that many non-traditional students view online education as "an opportunity to shift to a different occupation", coming back to school to invest in their future or because they "felt stuck with their current jobs" (Chao & Good, 2004:8), while others state that they enter or return to college after having faced a significant change or transition in their personal lives (Brickell, 1995; Haynes-Burton, 2003). The non-traditional students enrolled in these programmes have a distinct demographic profile from traditionally aged students, typically work full time and struggle to balance competing priorities. Thus effective support system is critical for their successful learning (Dahan and Baba, 2005). Many scholars highlight that understanding the perceptions, experiences and needs of learners is important in order to support learners better and emphasizing that negative experience in learning may cause frustration, loss of confidence, social isolation and economic loss (Ausburn, 2004; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Poellhuber, Chomienne & Karsenti, 2008).



Cheren (1983) stated that while learners may express a desire to be self-directed in their learning, most lack the required understanding of learning necessary to be self-directed. It might be true that some adults need directions and encouragement in the learning process and that it is especially critical in the online environment (Cheren,1983; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

Despite potential difficulties, online learning environment allows adults to have input into their own learning goals and this can enhance the value of education for them (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Scholars suggest that facilitator must encourage learners to become as self-directed as possible through the use of creative assignments and projects, encouraging their input and suggestions, while being available to provide guidance when needed (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Blondy, 2007). But as it is also true that current technological changes and educational paradigm shift pose important challenges to adult learning and some authors argue that there is a "need to develop new andragogical principles that are more relevant to the requirements of adults" (Ahedo, 2009: 240). Adult learners with different characteristics may not only prefer, but benefit, from different instructional features and goals, and we tend to agree with Hsu and Hamilton (2008) that diverse adult learner population has a need for the use of varied and focused pedagogical approaches (Hsu and Hamilton, 2008).

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