

# Distance Learning: Preparation & Practice for the Adult Learner

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## ABSTRACT

*The current research contextually explored distance learning practices as related to the adult student learner. Beginning with a review of technology integration and distance learning in higher education, the author focused upon adult learning practices and learner preparation within distance education. After an assessment of current literature, significant variables were discovered in the literature indicating challenges and supports provided for the adult learner. Findings supported the increased level of preparation the learner has invested will directly affect the students' comfort level with distance learning technology, such as online learning systems employed by higher education institutions. This will result in a decreased level of anxiety and intimidation from the adult learner. Discussion provided concluding awareness of distance learning and the adult learner at a distance, including accessibility along with familiarity to technology as variables of implication.*

**Keywords:** *Distance Learning, Distance Education, Adult Learner, Adult Education*

## INTRODUCTION

Interactivity is a term referring to the interaction we have with each other in a classroom setting. Interactivity can be achieved through the integration of technology in course design and course content. In education there is a myth that teachers generally teach the way they were traditionally taught. In accordance, Matzen and Edmunds (2007) investigated this myth. Results of their investigation indicated, that teachers were more likely to integrate technology in their lectures if they received training through professional development opportunities. The integration of technology has been debated among educators in higher education for a number of years. How to implement and infuse technology in course design and content has become a major research topic (Neiderhauser & Lindstrom, 2006). As student demand for distance learning increases in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2007), the need for professional development and distance education training will increase. During this process it is expected that educators will become more familiar and require necessary interaction with this method of teaching.

Distance learning has increased significantly across the United States. As such, higher education institutions have supported teachers with technology based professional development opportunities in order to adequately provide and deliver instruction to students. As training for teacher's increases, academic and technology based supports for the adult learner must in turn increase in order to maintain the learning dynamic at a distance. The current research contextually explored current literature related to adult learning practices and adult learner preparation within distance education; beginning with a review of technology in higher education including distance learning practices.

## TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

To begin, the author explored the history of technology infused in society. As a result, higher education practices in accordance with distance education appeared more prevalent in related literature. According to Lundberg (2000), computers were introduced into the home and workplace in the 1980s. Much like outside the education field, computerized learning was received with varying degrees of success. By the 1990s, computer usage had a much higher success rate in education due to the rapid advancement of technology. Usage of the computer was implemented into the home and education and became more user-friendly. Research on technology integration implemented in higher education has been a popular topic. A review of the current literature revealed a trend toward usage and implementation of technology in higher education curriculum (Javeri & Persichitte, 2004; Foulger, Amrein-Beardsley, & Toth, 2011; Moran, Hawkes, & El Gayar, 2010; Eberwein, 2011). Yet, in order for higher education programs to meet student demand MacKeogh & Fox (2009) state that instructors should accelerate the use of technology in instruction. According to Roberts (2008), the International Society for Technology in Education described the National Educational Technology Standards, established in several disciplines. Current integration of technology includes university management systems, such as WebCT or Blackboard. Management systems allow student access to course material outside of the traditional classroom. The Enhancing of Education Through Technology (EETT) program, of the United States federal government, encourages the integration of technology in all classrooms. The EETT program is funded through the federal government in support of management systems and professional development ([www2.ed.gov](http://www2.ed.gov)) in higher education.

Too often the instructor's outlook towards the integration of technology is characterized by 'cynicism and derision' (Eberwein, 2011 p.61). Unfortunately, instructor attitudes and faculty readiness influence the implementation of technology in the classroom, affecting instructional delivery (Roberts, 2008; Cowan, 2012). Perhaps instructor unfamiliarity using technology creates this uneasiness among faculty minimizing the use of technology integration in higher education (Javeri & Persichitte, 2004; Eberwein, 2011). Several universities appoint their Instructional Technology (IT) departments with the task of providing professional development opportunities for instructors. Peterson (2011) including Harvey and Carlson (2003) strongly support IT training for faculty, stating in order for instructors to provide students with the option of distance learning, professional development opportunities need to focus on technology knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge. Peterson (2011) states, "...instructors who learn how to integrate technology and pedagogy can improve the way they teach providing a student-centered approach that instructs and develops higher order thinking skills." (p. 4). Peterson's statement emphasizes the benefits of incorporating technology in higher education. Instructors utilizing technology in their teaching effectively change their course design, course content, and the overall distance learning curriculum. Professional development activities that focus on design and pedagogical strategies (Peterson, 2011) integrate knowledge and technology (Moran, Hawkes & El Gayar, 2010, p. 80). Surry, Ensminger, and Haab (2005) reported, "... a college's technology infrastructure is the single most important factor in integrating technology within the curriculum." (p. 328). Surry and Land (2000) expanded on the Awareness, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction model (ARCS). This instructional model provides a methodological framework to increase instructor attitudes toward adopting technology integration in distance course design.

According to Foulger, et al., (2011) students are more apt to enroll in traditional courses infused with technology due to the increased flexibility in obtaining course material. As a direct result online

course programs have increased in demand. Distance learning has become more desirable in recent years due to the flexibility in the adult learner schedule; whereas the adult learner is typically faced with not only higher education demands but with the demands of family and workplace obligations. Roberts (2008) described adult learners as “key stakeholders” (p. 4) as universities shift toward the integration of technology. Instructors infusing technology in course design offer greater flexibility among the adult learner population. Students experiencing financial, transportation, or health constraints are more likely to utilize online instructional design methods. Online instructional design methods allow the adult learner to overcome these constraints that otherwise would hinder their educational opportunities. Student attitudes toward the integration of technology, specifically distance learning, have recently been positive according to a study conducted by Foulger, et al., (2011). Results indicated the infusion of student and instructor communication and technology accessibility generally receded student hindrances. In addition, the authors found traditional instructional delivery least desirable in comparison to online instructional delivery. Long term support of technology integration occurs at the university level, where infrastructure changes permit technology infusion, promote professional development for instructors, and increase the number of technology courses for students (Surry, et al., 2005; Neiderhauser and Lindstrom, 2006; MacKeogh & Fox, 2009; Kopcha, 2010). According to Keeler (2008), instructors are “...rarely versed in instructional technology...” (p.23). As a result technology integration and adoption has been a daunting task (Moran et al., 2010). Keeler noted the strong need for educators to increase their familiarity with technology to improve instruction. Thus, attitudes toward technology in course content and course design becomes a more comfortable activity rather than an intimidating experience (Kopcha, 2010; Moran et.al, 2010).

## **DISTANCE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Research findings indicate variables that institutions accustom to traditional instructional methods are moving towards distance educational delivery (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Roberts, 2008; Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2011) due to student demand. University administration and instructors are more involved in transforming higher education to meet the needs of the technological age. However, barriers such as funding, administrative support, mixed agendas, and minimal instructor utilization still remain (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009; MacKeogh & Fox, 2009). Distance education programs require accountability of online course content, with objectives designed to meet the specific needs of the adult learner.

Roberts (2008) acknowledged the transition of many higher education institutions moving from traditional instruction to a more differentiated approach to instructional delivery. A differentiated approach to teaching includes distance learning through online instruction. Socially educational interactions were explored among higher education students using a networking community described as Cloudworks (Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2011). The authors were able to research interactions by drawing on a virtual medium used by adult learners and instructors to deliver and complete course assignments. University programs offering distance instructional delivery to students have reported an improved student access rate and higher degree completion rates (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Bolliger & Wasilik (2009) attribute the improved student success rate to the appeal of distance delivery to nontraditional students. Unfortunately, in accordance with funding dilemmas distance learning comes with high expenditures in regards to development and delivery to the adult learner (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Program development and program maintenance costs often deter university administrators in the

implementation of technology and technological access among instructors and students (Chen, 2009). Five areas of communication include: (a) spreadsheet use, (b) e-mail use, (c) word processing, (d) programs such as PowerPoint to develop presentations, and (e) Internet based searches. Learning exercises (Lundberg, 2000) benefited each learner in the use of computers. A study conducted by Wantz, Tromski, Mortsoff, Yoxtheimer, Brill and Cole (2004) stated that distance learning literature has focused on two variables: (a) computer-assisted training and (b) distance education. Both are encompassed by computer mediation and online communication. Distance learning encompasses online and hybrid courses. Blackboard and WebCT are perhaps the most utilized management system programs offered for the distance learner. As technology continues to improve, distance learning will continue to keep pace.

Hoffman, Novak, and Schlosser, (2000) addressed the challenges facing university administrators and instructors along with student hurdles. Nontraditional instructional delivery in distance learning exposes students to foreign technology and terminology. However, the separation between campus-based students and distance learning students is becoming non-existent through distance learning awareness, instructional technology training for students and instructors, funding programs at the local and state levels, and universities adopting mandatory online courses in most programs (Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2011; Kopcha, 2010; Roberts, 2008; MacKeogh & Fox, 2009; Venable, 2010). Online universities, such as Capella and Walden, offer degree programs aimed at a population that would otherwise not have access to higher education. Distance learning outlets are becoming more available to nontraditional adult student populations (Roberts, 2008). The greatest draw for the adult learner towards distance learning is educational access to course material from the comforts of home (MacKeogh & Fox, 2009) in accordance with a busy schedule accompanying personal and work obligations. This is greatly beneficial to the adult learner with long commutes or personal constraints. Although there has been university resistance towards distance learning in recent years, due to a strong student demand and an underserved population of students seeking higher education in rural areas distance learning programs have increased (Mitchell & Geva-May, 2009). Research findings supporting distance education are reasons higher education institutions have considered offering distance learning. Institutions reputations were enhanced through improved curriculum flexibility and the reduction of costs (Roberts, 2008; Cowan, 2012; MacKeogh & Fox, 2009; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). According to some, Albrecht & Jones (2004) there are minimal differences between the quality of learning in distance learning and traditional learning environments. However, through distance learning opportunities adult learners are graduating from higher education programs with increased technological skills. Distance learning institutions are generating more and more graduates entering and competing in the job market (Cowan, 2012; Chen, 2009).

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEA) 2008 [16] includes provisions noting the significance of online education as a method for delivering educational instructional (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009). Bolliger & Wasilik (2009) found that student-related, instructor-related, and institution-related factors affect faculty satisfaction with distance learning. According to a study by Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, and Marx (1999), the primary incentive found for faculty to adopt technology in their teachings was the intrinsic or the personal reward of learning new teaching techniques and improving their practice; in essence, improving their teaching traits or job techniques. An educator's intrinsic motivation may perhaps support their learning agenda. Faculty engagement with technology has been a slow process. To assist educators with the transition in education methods, Roberts (2008) suggested offering at least one online course per semester to ease into the progression of using distance learning. Rockwell et al., (1999) indicated that intellectual reluctance was a hindrance leading to poor staff attitudes and a general disdain towards educating students using distance education programming.

Attitudes were generally mixed (MacKeogh & Fox, 2009) ranging from skepticism to support of distance education. Empirical findings have supported faculty participation in distance learning adoption. Faculty collaboration, and workload reductions were cited as facilitating the movement toward distance education (Chen, 2009). Student and faculty satisfaction are critical areas in distance education (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). For change to occur, Roberts (2008) identified a four step process. Steps include: (a) strategic analysis, (b) strategy making, (c) strategic plan design, and (d) strategic plan implementation. Instructors are required to develop a clear plan in course design (Cowan, 2012). In summary, higher education institutions are in a transition period of providing students with new ways of learning.

### **ADULT LEARNING PRACTICES AT A DISTANCE**

According to Stacey, Smith, and Barty (2004), establishing online learning communities is perhaps one of the most important components in distance learning. For adults accustomed to traditional course format and interaction, this becomes especially important for successful opportunity and learning practices. There are various tools available for online offerings including technologies utilized, accompanied with proper training and support to ensure success (Venable, 2010). Prospective students are being offered a wider variety of degree programs due to the increased numbers of educational institutions offering online programs; this is especially attractive to the busy adult who may have several obligations outside the higher education classroom setting.

Quality, name recognition, and value are important variables when selecting an online degree program (Albrecht & Jones, 2004). Introductory graduate level courses are now incorporating studies in their curricula on online learning styles (Lundberg, 2000). These courses increase the adult learners' online competency by covering ways to integrate curricula into a distance education format. A revised pedagogical design aligned with current best practices, enhance the development of application and practice from a distance for adult learners. Fink (1999) emphasized that distance learner "netiquette" requires the use of fundamental traditional communication skills at a distance. According to Suler (2004) non-verbal gestures are missing when engaging in an online course. This creates an ambiguous relationship between instructor and student. Yet as noted within the literature, the growth of online-based education programs is substantial, as well as the demand for knowledge regarding advantages and disadvantages. The research findings indicated that adult student learner participants had concerns related to: technological barriers, connecting with their instructor, interacting without non-verbal feedback, and the pacing of sessions.

### **ADULT LEARNER PREPARATION AT A DISTANCE**

Within research findings, Huang (2002) applied adult learning theory using seven categories: (a) self-directed learning, (b) critical reflection, (c) experiential learning, (d) lifelong learning, (e) individual differences, (f) motivational to learn, and (g) readiness to learn. As in the traditional face-to-face setting of an on-campus course, it is imperative that quality is emphasized in the distance learning setting. Instructional support aligned with adult learning theory must also be available for adult students in the distance environment including library resources, and access to faculty in a timely manner. It is important that each adult learner be evaluated and meet standard set student learning objectives. A syllabus with specific course outcomes, along with distance delivery methods, must be explained prior to beginning the course; for the distance learner this is delivered electronically through perhaps recorded means such as

programs similar to Camtasia. Students and faculty should be oriented on policies regarding performance and attendance. There must be a sound structure to which the instructor and student will be held accountable. Support resources must be available at all times for the distance course. A grievance procedure should be available for students, including electronic faculty course evaluations.

According to Baltimore (2004) a comprehensive online program included establishing content, having knowledge of the technology required, and providing training for all participants. Although technology changes almost on a daily basis, the content of the program remains the centerpiece. The technology will advance so that the online delivery program will be molded to fit the new technology as it develops and improves over time. The Internet is integrated into one's daily routine. "Distance learning is creating alternative models of teaching and learning, new job descriptions for faculty, and new types of higher education providers" (Eaton, 2002, p.3). According to Venable (2010), the integration of technology must account for student confidentiality.

Although learning management systems are common, online teaching requires the instructor to develop new skills (Gautreau, 2011). One must demonstrate the ability to form an analysis for understanding patterns of behavior in networked learning contexts using the learning management system as a framework to house the information (Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2011). Using the learning management system can lead the way within the twenty-first century and must be considered by instructors and the adult learner (Layne & Hohenshil, 2005). Based upon the increased level of preparation the learner has invested, students' comfort level with distance learning technology has increased, resulting in a decreased level of anxiety and intimidation from the adult learner.

## **IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION**

Within the current research the author described the evolution of higher education as related to distance learning, with an emphasis upon practices and preparation for the adult learner. The author reviewed current literature based upon the integration of technology in higher education and related supports. Findings included Knowles, et al. (1998) adult learning theory, offered clear direction in terms of characteristics to include when preparing for the adult learner in the distance learning setting. The author discussed how higher education has integrated technology and presented a review of the literature in distance learning for the adult learner. Contrary to the scarcity of literature on preparing the adult distance learner, there is a moderate amount written about the usage of current technology in higher education as enhancing the distance learning dynamic capabilities of instructors in higher education.

Moreover in regards to the reviewed literature, there is a plethora of information related to technology integration in higher education. This includes, the initiative higher education has taken to accommodate the more technological based student in today's society. With distance learning in higher education becoming greater in demand for adult students, preparation for the instructor and adult learner is increasing in demand. Seemingly hand-in-hand, there is a dearth of significant data related to supporting adult learners in distance learning. Among the limited amount of research suggestions towards aligning with a specific model for success was heavily noted, such as Knowles, et al. (1998) adult learning theory or another authentic model of adult learning and educational development. Because of the biases associated with computer associated interactions students may be weary of the practice of distance learning.

Implications include accessibility along with familiarity to technology among adult learners. The author suggests beginning online interaction within the distance learning course by discussing with

students issues related to distance learning. Perhaps allowing for the planning of learners across ages, accommodating for the adult learner. Also suggested is to expose adult learners to distance learning perhaps through an online training for the distance learner, therefore becoming aware of strengths and weakness of this modality in education. Although traditional classroom delivery has been primarily based on the face-to-face format, the distance learning format has been emphasized in the last two decades (Belanger & Crossler, 2011). As more adult learners desire to engage in distance learning although not completely different, there are unique skills that need to be shared with future adult distance learners.

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