

# Adult Learners Need and Expect Structure in a Chaotic Virtual World

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**Abstract.** Due economic reasons and personal needs, many adults have decided to return back to institutions of higher learning for additional education and training. While these adult learners have been seeking additional education and training either for professional advancement, career development or personal growth, some have found that one degree is perhaps not enough for them to excel both personally and professionally. As a result, we are seeing more adult learners starting to examine this type of long-term investment in terms of whether or not this additional education and training will help them during their lifelong learning endeavors. Knowles (1980) noted that “adult [learners] see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life. They want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill they gain today to life more effectively tomorrow.” Thus, this does raise the question of whether or not our educational institutions are offering enough learning opportunities to help satisfy the needs of today’s adult learner, as well as meeting the growing workforce needs of society’s business needs. This paper will help to examine the learning style, learning activities, and social interaction that adult learners face in today’s educational institutions in terms of whether they prefer teacher-centered versus student-centered approaches to learning.

**Keywords:** Student-Centered Learning; Teacher-Centered Learning; Adult Learning; Online Learning

## 1. Introduction to Adult Learners and Online Learning

While economic times have changed, the typical adult learner and his or her learning needs have also changed. In the past several years, more and more adults have had to take upon one or more jobs in order to survive. However, they have also found it a bit impossible or self-defeating to work several jobs and rush to a college campus to take courses in order to better themselves and/or obtain a degree in order to advance in their field or another field of career choice. Thus, they are looking at alternatives to their educational and career pursuits in the area of distance education or online learning. Neal and Miller defined distance education as “education that takes place independent of location, in contrast to education delivered solely in the classroom, and that may be independent of time as well. [1] In addition, ASTD, an education/training & development professional organization, noted that “distance education can be characterized as an educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses can be delivered to remote locations via synchronous or asynchronous means of instruction. [2] Therefore, we can see that more non-traditional students are taking advantage of online course offerings/programs. It should be noted also here that online learning may not be a viable solution for all adult learners, but it appears that more adult learners are now considering and acting upon the possibility.

As online learning continues to grow, technology has also changed to meet the many needs of both academia and business. These difference forms of technology have allowed educational institutions, educators, and instructors to provide education on a much higher playing field – in a virtual online learning environment. Thus, the business world has also worked with technology in this venture to help assist educational institutions in becoming more modern and adaptive for change. However, we have to wonder whether or not if these changes have signified to the educational and learning communities that technology recognizes a need for change or do we, as educators, recognize the need for change completely? Finally, we need to understand why many educational institutions, as well as the corporate world, are focusing on the learning process and its impact on their organizational structure and employees.

Consequently, we need to realize that the bottom line is that many adults are considering online learning to be a new academic outlet or option. Thus, one must also consider the next step for college graduates – the world of work. In general, the corporate business environment does differ from the academic setting, and

more employees from both settings will always need some additional education or training. Even though online learning has been concentrated more on the academic setting, many organizations are learning that online learning has a varied of benefits to offer. Thus, many companies and organizations are focusing on the “learning” element of their employees’ daily assignments and tasks, as well as helping to build their knowledge management with a concentration on helping the organization learn from previous and current experiences. As a result, many educational institutions are starting to examine their business curricula. However, in order to understand all of the changes that might need to be made to any schools’ curriculum might be improved with an understanding of adult learning in general, as well as understand the needs of today’s adult learner.

## 2. Adult Learning Theories and Strategies

We need to realize that not all adults learn in the same way. Also, instructors need to make some adjustments in their teaching style in order to meet both accreditation and student learning problems and expectations. Brookfield (2005) commented on critical theory’s relevance for adult learning. Two important questions that we, as educators in the context of providing online instruction, must consider are:

- How do adults learn to interpret their experiences in ways that emphasize their connectedness to others and lead them to see the need for solidarity and collective organizations?
- How do adults learn to think critically by recognizing when an embrace of alternative views is actually supporting the status quo it appears to be challenging? [3]

Rather than just relying on previous learning experiences, all adult learners should view education as another challenge in their lifetime to work towards another goal and prove that learning is a necessity and away to improve oneself. Mezirow (2000) noted that: “Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of references (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may general beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.” [4] Therefore, as student populations continue to change in the online learning environment, there will be a growing need for adaptation and modification of current frames of references to be done. Finally, Mezirow (2000) stated: “Transformation Theory’s focus is on how we learning to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others. – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers.” [5] Each of us need to realize that as technology transforms our learning environment, perhaps we, too, need to transform various components of our teaching and learning styles. Thus, we need to realize that there are also barriers in the online learning environment that need to be addressed.

While many educational institutions realize that online learning offers fewer barriers for many students, there are certain barriers that still exist and need to be addressed. Drummond-Hay and Saidel (2004) commented on several barriers to knowledge sharing that could be applicable to the online learning environment.

- There is no recognition or reward for sharing knowledge.
- People are competitive and believe that their knowledge increases their power.
- There is no vehicle for storing and categorizing knowledge, or the existing vehicle is difficult to use.
- They don’t know anyone would be interested in what they know.
- They don’t share knowledge because they are not aware of what they know (pp. 293-295).

If we consider the various barriers noted above, the author does note and strongly recommends a change of the status quo in order for the educational profession to move forward. Even though there are some educators who may still cling to the Socratic method of teaching, methods do and need to be changed and evaluated on a regular basis. We can learn from Socrates’ example – that teaching does not have to occur inside a physical classroom – rather learning can occur in an open space (perhaps virtual?). Finally, rather than being focused on one form or style of teaching and learning, we, as educators, need to focus on our

audience. Has the demographics of our student population changed over the past decade? If so, are we meeting the needs of our virtual learning communities – or just meeting the needs based on past teaching experiences? Thus, this leads us to our next area of discussion on the topic of teacher-centered versus learner-centered approaches used in various educational institutions and learning environment.

### **3. Teacher-Centered versus Learner-Centered Approaches**

Traditionally, most educational institutions and instructors used the teacher-centered approach to education. Most students were indoctrinated with this approach, but due to fashionable changes and published students, there was a change in the educational approach towards a more learner-centered approach. Weimer (2002) noted that “in student learning is the focus of the class. On the other hand, in teacher-centered approaches, teaching practices are the focus of the session. [7] From another perspective, Hara (2009) that the “use of these strategies (positively or negatively) can affect student learning, teaching evaluations, or even tenure and promotion decisions. [8] Now let us look at some historical and legislative factors that have helped to support the learner-centered approach.

If we look at the passage of key education legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind, ADA, etc., there has been a growing need for documentation/evidence of academic achievement. This movement has been transforming today’s classrooms from a teacher-centered approach to one of a learner-centered approach – the instructors are instructed to facilitate and guide the student through the various learning activities in order to help them achieve the learning objectives, as well as understand how they can contribute to the learning process. For example, one learning activities that some instructors have used is the e-portfolio process. With this learning activity, it is the student that ultimately selects their best work and begins his or her journal to develop his or her own e-portfolio. Therefore, e-portfolio serves not only in the academic achievement process, but they can be used as interview portfolios for students to share with potential employers.

### **4. Applications for Use in Learner-Centered Approaches to Education**

We can see in the literature and academic conferences that more educational institutions have started to use portfolios. In essence, we are seeing a new generation of portfolio approaches, but even more in a technological sense in terms of being more technically presented and displayed. Electronic Portfolios (e-Portfolios) have been defined in many different ways in terms of how they are designed and developed, as well as implemented and evaluated. According to the University of Berkeley: “An e-Portfolio functions like a file cabinet with file drawers and file folders. Students store personal, educational, career, skill assessment, non-academic/work experience, certification, and rewards information in their portfolios. The information placed in an ePortfolio is referred to as an artifact.” [9]

Even though only a small percentage of educational institutions are quick to embrace and use extensive and developed e-Portfolio software systems, other educational organizations may want to contemplate their own creation and implementation of an e-Portfolio system (evaluative project). Goldsby and Fazal noted that student-created portfolios are commonly “used in teacher preparation programs to demonstrate teaching skills and expertise. This practice was introduced as test scores alone lack the comprehensive scope needed for effective assessment and evaluation, portfolios can be implemented to interpret/make decisions regarding learning of teaching competences”[10] In addition, eportconsortium, noted that the role and function of an E-Portfolio was: “. . . [to] facilitate[e] and captur[e] the evolution of concepts and ideas through revisions of work and interactions with instructors, mentors, classmates and friends, electronic portfolios can be much more than a Web site that simply organizes and presents final projects. They can foster learning spaces where the author can gain insights and a better understanding of him/herself as a learner.” [11]

With this considered, educational institutions can expect that there may be many different factor and needs to be considered here in terms of determine how an e-Portfolio system/project can be created, implemented, and eventually evaluated. Nonetheless, it is ultimate role of the educational institution to determine if there is a need and how it can be met in terms of an e-Portfolio approach.

### **5. Reality with Returning Adult Learners**

We need to consider what adult learners know and feel comfortable with in order to understand their learning needs and how to help them to become successful. For many new adult learners, they equate learning to what they know – how they were taught and supervised in their previous educational endeavors. For some new learners, they may have only experienced the teacher-centered approach. As a result, the movement towards entering the world of academia once more may be quite stressful and traumatic for some. While many educators advocate a learner-centered approach, especially with online studies, this may not work successfully in all cases. Just like best practices, even they are not fully applicable in all cases. In fact, some schools are rethinking their approach. In fact, some educational institutions may not support certain learning activities and/or approaches, but rather they may want to base their teaching and grading on how they were educated. Even though many of today's online instructors were educated with the teacher-centered approach, even they may be slow in implemented the best practice of learner-centered approach. After considering both the needs of current and previous adult learners, all instructors need to step back and examine whether or not if they could learn better with either one of these approaches or not.

## 6. Conclusions

Returning back to school can be a daunting task for many adult students. For some they focus on how they were taught years ago and expect the same approach. However, for some the former teacher-centered approach was one of the key reasons why they left their dream for a better education. In fact, some believe that if more educational institutions would adopt and implement the learner-centered approach, their enrollment numbers may increase. On the other hand, many online schools are offering the learner-centered approach in order to change the “status quo” of education and make more education try this system and forget about the old system. However, many current instructors are realizing that many of their adult learners realize and expect the old way of teaching to be used; namely, they expect the teacher-centered approach. Why? Well, they can relate better to this formal method of teaching, because they were exposed only to this approach over the years. Also, sometimes after a long day of working and thinking of other time commitments, they do not want to expand any more thought and time to the course focus on learned-centered approaches. In any event, this is an individual educational institutional decision that many schools have started to realize that needs a plan of action and a team to oversee its activities. Nonetheless, the key aim of this paper has been to note that not all adult learners may or may not be willing to embrace the new learner-centered approach, but rather they may only want the option of the teacher-centered approach. The key dilemma is for a school to select one method of approaching learning for its students and to evaluate later on its' effectiveness.

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