Project Manuscript: Evaluating Best Practices for Adult Online Learning

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This is an outline of the presentation titled, “Best Practices for Online Adult Learning.” It has been submitted in partial completion of the course EDUC 6023 of Southeastern University titled, “Learning and Cognition,” as taught by Dr. Patty LeBlanc in the winter of 2015. This outline contains notes and reference material from the presentation.

# Introduction

Welcome to a discussion about adult and online learning. My name is Brent Colby and today we will focus on the question, what are the best practices of digital andragogy? Part one of our discussion will determine what online learning is and how it works. We will also examine the context and qualities of adult learning. Part two focuses on how each of these disciplines work independently of each other. Part three will tackle the assessment of adult online learning and integrate other theories of adult online learning. Finally, part four will suggest best practices for this field of study.

Ready to get started? Lets jump into Part One and answer the question: what is online learning?

# What is Online Learning?

Let’s provide some context to the idea of online learning. Online can be defined as, “a learner’s interaction with content and or people via the internet for the purpose of learning” (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014a, pt. 312). Much of online learning is informal (Merriam & Bierema, 2013) but today we are going to focus on online learning from an institutional point of view.

Scholars argue that we are experiencing an educational renaissance when it comes to learning online (King & Alperstein, 2014). Massive Open Online Courses, access to high bandwidth internet, and inexpensive content hosting are a few examples of changes that are making online learning prevalent today. Palloff and Pratt (2013) note that the cost of teaching online has been greatly reduced. However, they warn that the ability to train and support teachers, students, and the environments necessary to lead online education can be substantial.

Types of online courses can be defined in several ways. One of these is modality, or the amount of interaction between students and instructors that take place online. Means, Bakia, and Murphey, use the terms “web-enabled” to describe courses which take place 1-29 percent online, “blended” 30-79 percent, “online” 80-99 percent, and “fully-online” 100 percent online. Another distinction between online courses can be measured by the types of interactions which take place. These may include, “student-content,” student-instructor,” and “student-student” models (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014b, p. 13). A third way to define online learning outcome based which may be measured by engagement, productivity, or learn-to-learn. A combination of these three characteristics can begin to help us understand what online learning is and what it isn’t.

The digitization and distribution of teaching material allows for instructors to share, re-purpose, and iterate off of each other’s work (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007). This enhanced economy of teaching tools has the potential to increase the effectiveness of instructors on an epic scale and in real time.

Atkins, Brown, and Hammond (2007) believe that online education is the only way for the demand for higher education to be met as we progress into the future.

Online learning is typically hosted on a Learning Management System. These LMSs have grown over the years from informal systems based on proprietary software to formal systems based on open standards (Keen, 2013). Each LMS plays host to a number of features and enable the student to engage in a variety of learning environments. The primary characteristic of most online learning systems is that of asynchronous engagement. This allows for instructors, facilitators, and students to participate in the class on their own time. Means, Bakia, and Murphey (2014b) argue that online learning systems create environments for self-paced learning, self-guided learning, content choices, content complexity or difficulty level, degree of learner control, types of scaffolding, nature and timing of feedback. The most advanced systems allow for adaptive learning to take place online. “A learning system is considered adaptive if it uses information gained as the student is learning with it, rather than pre-existing information such as the learner’s age, gender, or prior achievement test score, to change the way in which the system presents instruction to better meet the learner’s needs” (Means et al., 2014a, pt. 1143). This opens the gate for a new type of competency based education paradigm whose automation, and scale provide types of adaptive learning experiences never possible before.

Another benefit of online learning include the visualization of instruction, interaction, customization and complexity, interface, and amount of help offered to learners. Online learning provides a venue for student engagement for those who otherwise not engage in course discussions or activities (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). asynchronous

The digital record, and automation, of each learner’s actions online is also a distinctive benefit of online learning. Bender (2012) argues that the role of the instructor is that of a facilitator but may also play the role of expert, formal authority, social authority, ego idea, or person. Each of these mantles are required for different students at different phases of the learning process.

# What is Adult Learning?

Adult learning often referred to as andragogy. The definition, of which, can be derived from the Greek *aner* and a*agogus* which can be roughly translated as *helping adults to learn* (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Malcom Knowles (1980) coined the phrase in the late 1960’s in references to his research on the subject. *Andragogy* has risen up under the long shadow of *pedagogy* which literally translates as the art and science of teaching children. Differentiating itself from child institutions of education allows andragogy to be seen in a different light. Sousa (2011) describes the fundamental differences in brain function between children and adults. The process by which the brain processes, stores, transfers, and organizes information develops over time. Adult learning is biologically different than child learning.

Social factors play a unique role with the adult learner as well. Knowles (1980) highlights several characteristics of an andragogical approach toward learning which include social responsibility to one’s community and family, a need for practical and relevant application to current living situations, and the desire to learn from experiential techniques. The adult learner is more aware of their self and aware of others and peruses education accordingly. Andragogy allows for a more holistic approach to the learner and their world. When the student is pulling from, and applying to, every day experiences the process becomes applicable instantly. Inherent with this is an emotional connection to knowledge and empowerment (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

The adult learner is also self-directed which means they have a desire to control the process and approach to education (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Goals of the adult learner include the aspiration to gain knowledge or develop a skill, to become self-directed, inspire transformational learning, or even emancipatory (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). The very concept of transformational learning, that which brings about a noticeable change in the student, has become a hallmark of andragogy. The student is changed by what they know, how they know it, and who they are.

Adult learning is experiential in nature. It is dependent on rich environments through which an individual learns. This environment may include the physical setting but also the physical, social, and economical context of learning.

Adult learning shares characteristics of the Socratic method. It depends on inquiry and discussion as a basis of critical thinking. However, andragogy places more value on the context of the question-asker to bring light to the knowledge in demand. An adult learner is assumed to be self-directed in some capacity (Blondy, 2007).

Shifting demographics are making adult learners more common in higher education. In the United States almost 40% of all undergraduate students are over the age of 25 and more than 25% are over the age of 30 (King & Alperstein, 2014).

Education takes place in a very different world. Merriam and Bierema (2013) argue that the forces of globalization, information society, technology, and changing demographics paint a drastically different landscape for the adult teacher and student. Globalization has transformed the ways goods and services, including education, make their way in and out of our lives. The democratization of knowledge has made education and information based training widely available; some consider it a ubiquitous experience in education today (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). We are all aware of the dramatic influence has begun to exert over our modern lives. As the millennial generation enters higher education and the workforce the educational landscape of these internet-natives has adapted to their needs and preferences (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The shift toward technology in higher learning with adult learning is significant.

# Hypothesis

There is no doubt that technology is changing the role of the educator and the learner today (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). But does online learning align with what we know about adult learning? And can we derive a series of best practices when we compare the two? I believe it does, and I believe that we can. Online and adult learning share a series of essential characteristics. Correlating these elements helps establish a series of best practices for educators and students alike.

Lets take a closer look at the online and adult learning before finding ways to integrate and apply their core components.

# Characteristics of Online Learning

1. Personal
   1. Self-guided
   2. Content choices
      1. Difficulty level (Thompson, 2014)
      2. Content complexity
      3. Types of scaffolding, or support
   3. Nature and timing of feedback
   4. Self-paced (Bender, 2012)
2. Clear Objectives
   1. Provides clear scope, sequence, and purpose of course
3. Visual
   1. Images
   2. Videos
   3. Interactive environments
4. Scalable (Christopher, 2014)
5. Accessible
   1. Students
   2. Instructors
6. Interactive
   1. Discussion based learning (Bender, 2012)
   2. Web enabled, blended, online, or fully-online
7. Automated (Thompson, 2014)
   1. Assessment and progress reviewed instantaneously

# Characteristics of Adult Learning

1. Self-directed
   1. Planning, organizing, controlling, and assessing individual learning
   2. Executed by student, may be initiated or facilitated by instructor
   3. Often requires a guide
2. Application Focused
   1. Transformational learning
3. Socially Aware
4. Self-disciplined (Palloff & Pratt, 2013)
   1. Self-motivated
5. Results-Oriented
   1. Integrative Knowledge
   2. Experience based

# Assessing Online Learning

There is no doubt that online learning in demand and here to stay (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). But, with so many applications, and so many unique contexts, it is no surprise that the discipline of online instruction remains poorly defined. Furthermore, the impact of learning in an online environment is unclear. Means, Bakia, and Murphey (2014a, pt. 138) argue that, “There is no set of definitive studies revealing whether or not using online learning is a good idea.” Palloff and Pratt (2013, p. 197) agree that, “There is little agreement at present as to what constitutes a quality online course or program.” This is because the joint influence of implementation, context, and learner characteristics and not just from technology alone.

One problem is that digital tools change constantly and quickly (Crouch, 2008). The cost of these tools continues to go down while their implementation becomes less clear in many ways. Discerning how and when to deploy traditional, web-enabled, blended, or total-online courses is difficult. Many institutions are wrestling with the time commitment to establish and maintain a compelling online education presence that is so very different than that of the traditional instructor model.

And where the demand on education is greatest with undergraduate studies, the effects of online learning appear to be less effective. Blended learning is the preferred modality for less mature, under-prepared, and less-confident learners (Means et al., 2014b).

Online education allows for the classroom to be “flipped’ from an educator centric model to student centric model (Pacansky-Brock, 2012). This new paradigm of learning may be appealing to an emergent student body but the transition can be difficult for instructors

It’s important to note that the lack of technology or technology skills is a limitation to those engaging in online learning (Means et al., 2014b). While some of these deficiencies can be overcome through technical assistance, the general fluency with which students engage technology may impact the effectiveness of their learning. More importantly, the proficiency of many professors may be lacking when it comes to facilitating an online course. Online course preparation models, like Christopher’s (2014) PREP model, are becoming more important for the digital classroom.

# Assessing Adult Learning

Andragogy has followed a trajectory similar to that of the internet; both came of age in the second half of the 20th century while emerging as dominant forces in the new millennium. It is important recognize digital tools as first tools for adult learners today and in the future (Vogt, 2011). Adults are taking advantage of cheaper, and more powerful devices, applications and networks than ever before (Diamandis & Kotler, 2015).

The social aspect of adult learning creates a need for like-minded learners to occupy the same environment. Blondy (2007) argues that adult learners should be encouraged to communicate with each other regularly. But this need often conflicts with the specific, and contextual, learning objectives of each adult learner.

The andragogical model places the learner at the center. It places less value on the instructor and more value on discovery and reflection. It shares similarities with the Socratic Method as it depends heavily on critical thinking in light of robust dialogue. But andragogy is more deliberate about self-discovery and reflection. This may be because the subject of andragogical study is often unique to the students themselves.

# Integration and Application

## Integration

Is there an overlap between adult and online learners? The answer to that question is a resounding yes. According to King and Alperstein (2014):

* 60% of all online students are 29 or older
* 70% are women
* 80% have prior college credits
* 25% already have B.A.

Adult learners seem to make up the majority of online learners. This makes sense for socio-economic reasons as well as educational ones. Socially, more students are pursuing graduate degrees and more adults are pursuing degrees to accompany second or third careers. Some institutions are also able to keep the costs of online learning at a minimum when compared to traditional and residential models of learning.

Adult learners may be drawn to online learning for educational reasons as well. Active learning is a product of online and adult learning processes. Active learning is dependent on consistent engagement in the form of feedback from peers and instructors (Bender, 2012).

Nonlinear learning is an option for the online adult learner. The asynchronous reception and synthesis of information allows for adults to learn at their own pace and on their own terms. Adult learners are more likely to find accommodates for their academic needs in an online setting. Access to education has never been more open for the hundreds of thousands who engage in online learning every year.

Means, Bakia, and Robert conducted a meta-analysis of studies evaluating the effectiveness of online learning and found that, “purely online and purely face-to-face instruction usually produce statistically equivalent learning outcomes” (Means et al., 2014a, pt. 626). It is unclear if these outcomes indicate the ineffectiveness of online learning or if they indicate an ineffectiveness to leverage engage students in learning online.

## Application

When we integrate what we have discovered about online and adult learning it becomes clear that their correlation can establish a series of best practices for educators and students alike. Consider a convergence of the characteristics listed earlier:

1. Self-directed
   1. Content choices
   2. Nature and timing of feedback
   3. Self paced
   4. Facilitated
2. Results Oriented
   1. Scope, sequence clearly defined
   2. Clarity of purpose
   3. Experience based
   4. Self-motivated
3. Interactive
   1. Discussion based learning
   2. Integrative knowledge
   3. Self assessment (platform based)
   4. Transformational learning

### Self-directed

The learning paradigm, according to Pacansky-Brock (2012) should include an emphasis on the discovery and construct of knowledge instead of the simple transfer of knowledge, the designing of learning environments opposed to covering the material of the course, facilitating learning experiences, instead of lecture based class time, and the achievement of learning for diverse groups of students instead of allowing diverse groups to simply access the information. We see here a strong emphasis on environments that facilitate discovery experiences for learning.

A learning environment contains more than just lecture notes. Provide a variety of opportunities for adult learners to respond. Options, variety, and self-determination are essential for the online adult learner. In many ways, the online learner may have greater exposure to more information. It becomes the role of the instructor to shift to that of facilitator and not just distributor of information.

Create opportunities for adult learns to shape their learning path within the boundaries of the course. Giving more opportunities to own the material increases the effectiveness of that material. Establish courses with clear boundaries but allow for room to explore.

Students will want to have a say in the nature and timing of their feedback. Help facilitate peer-to-peer discussions around a topic by forming groups.

### Results Oriented

Make sure that the scope, sequence, and purpose of the course is clearly defined. Consider allowing the student to help create tools to evaluate their own work. When the adult learner can own the creation and assessment of academic work it becomes an invaluable learning experience.

Allow the material of the class to pivot on the life experience of adult learners. The application of assignments to real-world situations is extremely influencia. Not only will their work be better, it will open the doors to greater understanding of the subjects at hand.

Remember that the adult learner is self-motivated. Highly control environments discourage participation and involvement. Trust the learner to maintain a high standard of learning and that they will self-adapt to the challenges presented by the course.

### Interactive

The formation of a community is essential for an online course (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Students should create a personal avatar to be used online. This will increase the personal connection between students and mitigate the anonymity of medium. Face to face interactions encourage student participation and the completion of degrees. This is especially relevant as a majority of online students tend to live close to the host campus (King & Alperstein, 2014).

Allow students to connect to you personally and enhance the social dynamics of your class. Bender (2012) suggest that instructors include a personal biography, introductory lecture, and discussion forum that is personal in nature. Allow your personality to express itself in this initial venue and consider its role throughout the course.

Mini lectures posted online may be more effective than longer ones. This increases the opportunity for interaction between segments while reducing the likelihood of students becoming distracted while viewing the content on their digital devices (Bender, 2012). Don’t throw out synchronous learning events like voice chats, or live guest speakers (Bender, 2012). They could do a lot to encourage individuals to bond over shared learning experience and develop a common sense of purpose and direction (Senge, 2006).

Design is an important part of the interactive environment. Technical, academic, and user experience designers need to collaborate to create environments that intuitively capture the attention and path of the learner. They should be simple to navigate, easy to understand, and visually appealing. Palloff and Pratt (2013) argue that instructors should be visual, organized, compassionate, analytical, and willing to lead by example.

Don’t assume that teachers or students will automatically know how to use technology (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). The instructor must make sure that their students are confident using online tools to overcome any hesitancy, or inadequacies, with the platforms (Pacansky-Brock, 2012). Resist the urge to define technology as anything invented after we were born (Dyer & Gordon, 2011).

Course development needs to focus on interactivity and not just content (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Instructors need to become comfortable handing over a degree of control to the students and students need to be willing to take up this responsibility for their own education (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Remember that mediums communicate meaning (Dyer & Gordon, 2011). Pacansky-Brock (2012) suggests that instructors should embed content instead of just linking to it. This type of integration helps to prevent the disruption of thought that often derails the learning process (Carr, 2011).

Personal blog posts may encourage more interaction than forum posts. A blog post poses a more social, personal, outward facing, expression of knowledge. While the problems of ownership may be solved with personal blogs, it may become more difficult to assess student submissions through the class.

Create systems that encourage constant feedback from instructors and peers. When your goal is to generate a conversation around a topic you should limit the length of original posts and responses. Long posts and responses discourage students from engaging each other in online conversations (Bender, 2012). Engaging the class in an online discussion can be enhanced by forming the class into smaller groups or breakout rooms (Christopher, 2014).

# Conclusion

Technology has changed the role of the educator and the learner today (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). What we know about online learning and adult learning points us to three key areas of convergence: self-direction, result orientation, and interactivity.

Developing the techniques and platforms to empower adult learners online will have a significant effect on how we learn today, and teach tomorrow.

Thanks, I have been Brent Colby. You can contact me at brentcolby.com

Or download the notes to my discussion online at brentcolby.com/adultlearningonline

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