

Chapter 6

Participatory Barriers to the Informal Learning of Older Australians using the Internet and Web 2.0 Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to explore the real and perceived barriers that exist for older Australians when engaging with informal eLearning. The chapter has two main areas of focus: first, an examination of some of the challenges faced by older Australians engaging in informal eLearning, and second, an overview of two Australian initiatives designed to break down the barriers between older Australians and technology. The chapter commences with a review of the international literature to define informal learning before considering the intersection that exists between informal learning and online learning. The emerging social issues of the ageing Australian population are then presented to provide context to the main exploration within this chapter – the real and perceived barriers that exist for older Australians as they attempt to engage in eLearning. After discussing two community initiatives and introducing a model for surmounting the identified obstacles, the chapter discusses possible solutions making relevant recommendations and suggesting directions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore the real and perceived barriers that exist for older Australians in their efforts to engage in informal eLearning. Yet before examining these barriers, it is useful first to define exactly what is meant by the term ‘older’. According to Golding (2011), the term has a variety of definitions within the literature ranging from “older than 45 years” to people older than the nominal Australian retirement age of 65. The World Health Organization (WHO) provide some clarity by clearly stating that “most developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of ‘elderly’ or older person” (World Health Organization, 2012). In this chapter, we accept the WHO definition and thus refer to older Australians generally as being 65 years or over.

Informal eLearning is an important subset of lifelong learning, yet the existence of real and perceived barriers to access may mean that some citizens are unable to capitalize on the plethora of eLearning opportunities that exist. There are many benefits to lifelong learning, and the Australian Government’s Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011) believes that lifelong learning enables individuals to be adaptive, resilient and active participants of their society. In particular, it enables older Australians to maintain independence, stay connected to others, self-manage their lives and health, and better anticipate life’s transitions.

The relationship between eLearning and work opportunities for older Australians is redefining the concept of retirement to potentially relegate it as an outdated concept as foreshadowed by Dychtwald’s (2005) expression ‘ageless ageing’ and the finding that 80% of baby boomers are ‘working retirees’. The relationship also highlights the importance of making progress towards digital inclusion whereby access and digital literacy are

embraced, and new attitudes emerge regarding older people who may be disadvantaged or marginalized. Transition to retirement is potentially a marginalizing process as older people slowly relinquish work in ways compatible with maintaining their lifestyle aspirations. This heightens the need to further develop a broader relationship between eLearning and work opportunities while overcoming stereotypical threats about ageing such as deterioration of capability, memory, flexibility, speed, commitment, motivation and lack of interest in personal or professional development. Effective eLearning brings many benefits such as virtual reach, individualization, flexibility, performance improvement, and the broadening of skill sets including technology capability and alignment with new and increased work opportunities which embrace virtual markets.

To foster lifelong learning amongst older Australians, the Australian Government’s Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011) identified four important factors (two of which relate directly to computer-mediated learning opportunities):

1. Valuing and supporting community education.
2. Harnessing the opportunity provided by broadband technology to deliver information, vocational training and academic learning in a way that is tailored to the needs of older people.
3. Ensuring high-speed broadband access is available to seniors with limited means.
4. Enabling older workers to undertake vocational training to upgrade their skills or prepare for new career directions.

The chapter has two main areas of focus: first, an examination of some of the challenges faced by older Australians (and by extension, older citizens in other developed communities) as they attempt

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