

Chapter 14

Key Factors for Maximizing the Effectiveness of Blended E–Learning: The Outcome of the Internal Evaluation of a Distance Education Program for Adult Learning in Greece

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on the main factors, which should be met in order to maximize the effectiveness of a blended e-learning program for adult learners. The factors discussed in this chapter are derived from the perspectives of the learners, scientific staff, administrative staff, and the technical staff engaged in the distance learning process. Specifically, these factors have emerged through the internal evaluation of a national program, Design and Implementation of Distance Learning Programs, implemented in Greece via the Distance Adult Education Center for Lifelong Learning. Findings on the strengths and weaknesses of the program as well as suggestions for implementation of future related programs are also discussed in the chapter. The findings indicate that harmonization of program content and the educational process with the principles of adult education both in face-to-face and online environment has a positive effect on the educational outcome of the program. In addition, the appropriate use of the communication tools in the Learning Management System (LMS) is very important for the effectiveness of the program.

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education, specifically e-learning, is the single most promising educational innovation of our lifetime. E-learning has seen a spectacular growth in popularity and availability, and today, nearly every imaginable level and type of education is also offered via web-based learning (Maddux, Ewing-Taylor & Johnson, 2002; Bonk 2009). The advantages of e-learning are obvious and this technique seems like ideal for adult education purposes (Kirkpatrick & Jakupsek, 1996; Panneer Selvam, 2009). E-learning overcomes the geographic and time limitations of conventional education, reaching learners in remote locations, providing education to learners, regardless of their location, fitting their individual time schedules and pace, and allowing learners to attend flexible and upgraded educational courses in order to acquire new and update existing knowledge, skills and competencies for personal, social and professional development.

The General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning (GSLLL) of the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports is a national agency that is responsible for the development of lifelong learning public policies and rules for the implementation and supervision of national educational programs. Among the responsibilities of GSLLL is the promotion of distance learning and training, including the use of new technologies and digital environments in lifelong learning programs for adults (Law 3879/2010). GSLLL designed and implemented a blended program in 2008 to meet the educational needs of Greek citizens within the framework of non-formal adult education. At the end of 2011 an internal evaluation was conducted with the aim of assessing the successes and failures of the program taking into account the perspectives of learners and staff engaged in the program.

In the first part of this chapter the characteristics of the adult learners as well as the prerequisites for providing effective adult learning programs

in face-to-face and online environments are presented. In the second part, the main features of the blended program are outlined. The third part deals with the objectives, the methods and the sources of data for the evaluation. In the fourth section the results of the evaluation are presented and are discussed, focusing on what works and what does not in the face-to-face and online environments of the blended program. Finally, suggestions for improvement are summarized along with proposals for future work.

BACKGROUND

Characteristics of Adults as Learners and Prerequisites for Effective Adult Learning Programs

Adults as learners have considerably different characteristics from children, and these characteristics, as well as the requirements for effective adult learning must be taken into consideration and be integrated in any learning environment involving adults. In this part we present the main characteristics of adults as learners as well as the requirements for effective adult education in an e-learning environment, in relation to important concepts such as immediacy, interaction, active participation and collaboration.

It was in 1968 in the United States when for the first time Malcolm Knowles introduced a set of assumptions about how adults learn, under the term andragogy. These assumptions were later updated and expanded by Knowles (1984) as follows:

1. **Self-concept:** As a person matures his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being
2. **Experience:** As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience

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