

Chapter 35

Self-Directed Learning Facilitation among At-Risk Adult High School Learners: Is Technology the Key?

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ABSTRACT

Surprisingly little adult educational research speaks to technologically based learning strategies that support the self-directed learning facilitation of at-risk adults in a daytime high school (dropout-recovery) setting. This chapter investigates the question of whether technology is a key tool for the facilitation of self-directed learning with at-risk adults to support education stakeholders of dropout-recovery schools who seek ways to improve upon the lives of adults who could not manage the traditional high school curriculum. Current research discussing technology as a learning tool has too broad of an educational context and possesses valid and weak points. At times, the literature may be of little use to specific stakeholders in the field of adult learning. The purpose of this chapter is to appraise technological trends in adult education for the facilitation of self-directed learning among at-risk adults in high school. Moreover, the purpose of the chapter is to draw upon these trends within educational contexts to offer new practical insights into fostering best adult educational practice. This chapter examines self-directed learning in the adult high school context, reviews technology as a tool for at-risk adult self-directed learning, and appraises online learning and video gaming as technological tools for the self-directed learning of at-risk adult students in dropout-recovery schools. Ultimately, this chapter provides a new frame of reference for stakeholders who want to implement technology as a learning tool for at-risk adult populations attaining a high school diploma.

INTRODUCTION

Over one million adults, aged 16 to 21, lack a high school diploma; over 60% are unemployed, poor and live in urban areas (Sparks, 2013). For

the purpose of this chapter, an adult is an individual beyond the compulsory education age of 16 (Merriam & Brockett, 1996). Alternative routes or dropout-recovery schools (Sparks, 2013) leading to educational attainment have increased

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in the U.S. as a way to address this phenomenon. Dropout-recovery schools are branded as institutions of formal learning which function as “dropout-recovery systems,” that “re-engage and re-direct...people who leave the public school system” (Bloom, 2010, p. 90) in a daytime setting. The education stakeholders of dropout-recovery schools aim to improve upon the lives of adults who could not manage the traditional curriculum subscribed to by public high schools (Cooper, 2011; Bloom, 2010). Stakeholders encompass teachers, administrators and education policy makers (Bloxham, 2008).

Coinciding with the mission of dropout-recovery schools is the increase in adult dropouts opting for a high school diploma over the standard GED option (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011). This trend places a demand on education stakeholders who must now consider the different approaches to learning facilitation in order to better retain these diverse adult learners seeking a diploma. A facilitator of learning is a stakeholder who introduces self-directed learning material, observes and evaluates; in addition, can design and develop material (Piskurich, 1993). Self-directed learning is a concept that focuses on the creation, execution, and evaluation of a learning experience directed by the learner and can characterize approximately 80% of the adult learning experience (Tough, 1979). A facilitator ultimately assists the adult high school student “learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners” (Mezirow, 1981, p. 137). Facilitators of learning can work in dropout-recovery schools traditionally categorized as Secondary Schools for Adults (SSA) (Glorieux, Heyman, Jegers, & Taelman, 2011), Transfer Schools (TS) (<http://schools.nyc.gov>) or Alternative High Schools (AHS) (Bloom, 2010).

Facilitators of learning have to work twice as hard to retain adults learning within SSA, TS or alternative high schools, unfortunately, due to the life issues that put adult students at-risk of non-completion (Barron, 1989; Kagan, 1990). At-risk

adults enrolled in a daytime high school setting (SSA, TS, AHS) have to cope with interrelated life issues such as, socioeconomic challenges, dysfunction in the home and/or community, homelessness, sexual identity crises, learning disabilities, mental health, criminal and disciplinary issues, parenthood and being a member of a marginalized ethnic or racial minority group (Carswell, Hanlon, O’Grady, Watts, & Pothong, 2009; Grunbaum et al., 2002). These life issues obstruct the facilitation of self-directed learning strategies enough to stymie at-risk adults’ retention and subsequent educational attainment (Towle & Cottrell, 1996).

Helping adults obtain a high school diploma in a dropout-recovery school can augment the disparate socio-economic status of the nation’s urban uneducated adult population by 30% (Swanson, 2009). For this very reason, state public education stakeholders aspire to enhance the enrollment and retention rates of dropout-recovery schools (Cullen, Levitt, Robertson, & Sadoff, 2013). With the majority of this responsibility placed on the individuals that facilitate the learning of at-risk adults in dropout-recovery schools, an appraisal of learning tools that can augment self-directed learning and foster their retention is both timely and appropriate.

Literature exploring technology as a tool for adult learning and vocational success (Laurillard, 2013; Wang & Cranton, 2013; Mendrinos, 1997) eclipses the gap in literature exploring technology in the context of at-risk adult high school learners and their retention; specifically, technology as a tool for the facilitation of self-directed learning in dropout-recovery schools. Technology can refer to, computer software and hardware, applications from the Internet of various kinds, or Internet learning activities (Lowenthal & Wilson, 2010). Technology has proven to enhance the academic achievement of marginalized student populations (Kim & Chang, 2010; Chang & Kim, 2009). Since at-risk adults are deemed marginalized due to their being “members of perceptually ambiguous

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