

## Chapter LVI

# The Online Adult Learner: Profiles and Practices

**Judith Parker**

*Teachers College/Columbia University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*While the online adult learners are growing in numbers, the diversity in what motivates them and what they expect from an online course has grown as well. This chapter explores the current literature as well as qualitative and quantitative data from course surveys and student reflections in online courses taught by the author in an attempt to profile these learners, determine why they are taking online courses and investigate their evolving attitudes toward technology. It includes summaries and student quotes to portray the individual thoughts of online adult learners.*

### INTRODUCTION

The past 7 years have afforded me the opportunity to teach the same two courses on campus and online during alternating semesters at Teachers College/Columbia University in New York. Qualitative and quantitative data has been gleaned from pre and post course surveys and reflections on on-line assignments in traditional on campus classes. My personal experience and data collected from the documents mentioned above

indicate many differences from commonly held assumptions about on line learning and on line learners. This chapter will attempt to provide a profile of this group of online learners. Through a longitudinal and comparative study of the online and on campus students in my classes over the past 7 years, I attempted to answer questions such as the following: Who are adult online learners demographically? Do they differ from their counterparts who take the same courses on campus? If so, how? What motivates adult learners to select

an online class? What is their attitude about the online learning experience at the end of the class? How have the educational needs and expectations of online learners changed over the past 7 years? How might these trends guide future decisions about online learning made by those who develop and teach courses and students who participate in them? Since e learning is likely to continue to impact the educational landscape, this information could inform the future development of and participation in e-learning activities.

## **BACKGROUND**

Today's popular media and many practitioner journals suggest a rather homogeneous picture of today's online adult learner as a busy professional, stay at home parent or part time student. Yet the literature and my experience indicate a population with very diverse backgrounds and expectations. Li and Irby (2008) profile online learners as "busy working people, often on shift who want to advance their career, frequent travelers, those who physically find it difficult to attend college and parents who want to or have to spend more time at home with their children" (p.451). They note that online education has become the "vehicle to help access to the underserved populations, but also expands student access to universities that are not in their geographical area including international locations" (pp.450-1). White and Bridwell (2004) also see new technology as expanding the "learner's capacity for access" (p.273). In contrast, Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) voice the concern that potential online learners have limited access to technology which is increasing the digital divide and widening the gap between the haves and have-nots. They cite a 2005 study that estimates that only 14.6 % of the world's population has internet access. Another concern is mentioned by Piskurich (2006) who cites statistics that report that 60 – 80% drop out of elearning courses and by Li and Irby (2008)

who mention concerns for lower student performance and the rate of retention and note the need for enhanced specific skills such as writing, communication, time management, organization, and the ability to work independently.

Many authors agree that online learning is not for everyone. Jeong and Lee (2008) note that "reflective learners have a tendency to reflect and test information more often than active learners but their research found that there was no significant differences in the number of replies posted per student per debate but that the exchanges between reflective learners produced more critical discourse. In a research study conducted by Pratt, (1999) he found that introverted persons were often more successful online. Student reflections from the author's courses indicated that often students for whom English was a second language indicated the preference for online learning. They appreciated the fact that asynchronous online discussions allowed them the time to study another student's posting, craft a thoughtful response, possibly check its English correctness with another student, then post the response. With a fast paced in class discussion they often were lost in attempting to translate the comments and their own thoughts back into English. Another advantage is explored by Sandmann, Reischmann and Kim (2007) who see a role for asynchronous e learning in broadening and deepening the global perspectives of the learner but also caution that educators need to recognize differences in motivations and expectations of learners in different cultures. They also noted marked differences in the participation patterns of students from different cultures.

For adult learners, Malcolm Knowles (2005) sees technology as providing learning opportunities in the "andragogical tradition" (p.237) and as consistent with the adult learning idea of self-directedness. Nilson (2003) profiles the students as learning best when they are actively engaged, when learning evokes emotional not just intellectual involvement. As Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest, "when teaching and learn-

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