Chapter 7
Effective Online Learning for Adults:
Ragan's Principles Applied

Darnell J. Bradley
Cardinal Stritch University, USA

ABSTRACT

Using seven of Ragan's 10 principles of effective online teaching, the online course experiences of 84 doctoral students was examined. The doctoral students took a series of research-focused elective courses over the course of a year. An instructor questionnaire was created based on Ragan's principles and disseminated to the students after completion of the course. The author offers analysis of the results via their connection to Ragan's principles and offers practical ideas for how instructors can create effective online learning experiences for adult students.

BACKGROUND

Adult learners, once considered a non-traditional population in higher education have established a firm normalcy. The research of Knowles (1980) proposes that adult learners are motivated by learning experiences that are directly applicable to their lives, tend to be self-directed, and want to feel that they have a definite sense of purpose in a learning experience. These foundational elements of adult learning are well-documented and understood by successful adult learning practitioners.

What is lesser known is how adult learners thrive in an online learning environment. As online learning expanded in higher education, much of the research emphasis focused on the undergraduate experience, as well as the experience of students who are typically not considered adult learners (students ranging in age from 18-22). Early research into the experiences of adult learners in online environment found less than promising results. Adult students tended to be less academically successful in online learning, were retained at a lower rate than their non-adult peers and found online learning to be a less attractive learning option.

As online learning has proliferated, so has its success among adult students. According the 2015 *Noel-Levitz Adult Learner Marketing and Recruitment Practices Benchmarking Report*, the online format is one of the most popular formats for adult learners, ranking third in preference for students at private institutions. Among private institutions with adult programs, online or blended formats are in place at over 60% percent of those institutions. Further, the 2015 Babson Survey of Online Learning reports a 3.9% increase in the number of distance education students, a slight increase over the 3.7% increase in 2014. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET) reflects that 28% of all college students now take at least one distance education course, and that 14% of all higher education students took all of their courses exclusively at a distance (Poulin & Straut, 2015). Poulin and Straut (2015) further report that 28% of students enrolled in at least one of their courses via distance education in the fall of 2014. In 2015, there were 5.8 million distance education students accounting for 28% of all enrolled students. Of this total, 2.85 million were taking all of their coursework toward a degree at a distance; while 2.97 million were taking some, but not all of their courses at a distance (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

METHODS

The selected elements Ragan's framework were interpreted through the researcher's own lens and practice in online learning. As such, there was license taken in the above description as well as the application to the courses taught by the author.

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