

# Chapter 3

## Towards Blended Learning Designs Fostering Adults' Social Capital: What Do Empirical Findings Reveal?

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### ABSTRACT

*In responding to the ubiquitous presence of information and communication technology (ICT) in the educational landscape, blended learning has been increasingly adopted in adult education. While adult educators and practitioners face challenges due to such pedagogical shifts in instructional design, they are also encouraged to underscore the emancipatory values of adult education to contribute to the global social exclusion combat. Thus, it is of particular significance to examine how different elements of the blended learning design can result in social outcomes for adult learners. By deconstructing the blended learning design into specific online and general supportive factors, the present chapter sheds more light on the question: How does learning in a blended environment contribute to adult learners' social capital? On top of that, practical recommendations for instructors are put forward.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Blended Learning in a Digital (but Socially Segregated) Society**

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the flourishing of a variety of adult education provisions. This is due to the need to cope with the rapid growth of knowledge, evolution in means of production, and substantial advancements to information and communication technology (ICT). In conjunction with research lines focusing on adult learning theories and the accompanied pedagogical practices, ICT-based education has developed notably. This type of education emerged as a promising solution to help adults overcome barriers that interfere with their participation in adult education, including situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers (McGivney, 1993; Norman & Hyland, 2003). Blended learning, which is a mix of face-to-face and online instruction, is becoming the new traditional mode of teaching and learning (Graham, 2006; Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011).

In the meantime, societies worldwide are challenged to include adults who experience difficulties with social exclusion and poverty (United Nations, 2016). In other words, many individuals are excluded from full participation in society (World Bank, 2013). In Europe, 23.7% of adults are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2017). Social exclusion refers to a lack of participation or resources in several life domains, such as civic participation, social relations, housing, access to services, or digital participation (Van Regenmortel, 2017).

Adult learning and education (ALE) is a proven pathway in promoting wide societal benefits while countering challenges like social exclusion (Preston & Hammond, 2002). To date, policymakers and educational researchers have underlined ALE's role in enhancing social inclusion (De Greef, Segers, & Verté, 2012; Nilsson, 2010). The concept of social inclusion is measured at a macro-level (e.g., a given state or community). However, for adult education, the empowerment and self-actualization of the individual is at stake.

This chapter will conceptualize social inclusion by the notion of social capital operationalized at the individual level. In brief, social capital consists of the bonding and bridging dimensions. The former refers to strong relationships among people of similar backgrounds and/or beliefs (Williams, 2006). The latter contains weak ties built among people of diverse backgrounds. These ties may provide access to new information and opportunities (Williams, 2006). Hence, an individual's social capital refers to his/her social relations, participation in diverse networks, and the resources that arise from it.

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