Chapter 64
A Theoretical Perspective of Inequities in Online Learning/Education Based on Generational Differences

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ABSTRACT

Online learning has been on the rise during the 21st century. Both instructors and students enjoy the flexibility of teaching and learning from anywhere they choose. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 forced institutions of higher education around the globe to rely on technology to deliver education whether the institutions, instructors, and students were ready or not. The spread of the virus dictated the quick adoption of remote delivery of education. In this chapter, the authors provide a brief history of traditional learning theories followed by an assessment of their applicability to online education. Next is a delineation of the roles played by both instructors and students in online higher education. Furthermore, they explore generational differences in online learning (i.e., based on existing literature, what generational differences are evident with learning online and delivering content online?). At the end of the chapter, they provide the reader with implications/recommendations for the successful delivery of online learning/education.

INTRODUCTION

For over two decades now, online learning has become the fastest strategy of delivering education in different settings, and giving students of all generations a variety of choices in the learning process (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Singh & Thurman, 2019). The ability of online learning to break the barriers associated with school segregation and choices due to student demographics and achievement gaps has enabled students to participate in high quality learning even under challenging circumstances. An excellent example is the current unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic which had shown the educational structures of many nations the importance of investing more in online learning resources to make sure that learning does not come to a halt in the future (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020; Saavedra, 2020). This COVID-19 pandemic also proved that the majority of the world's nations are still behind in the development of online learning which is equivalent to the workload delivered in face to face courses (Saavedra, 2020; Zhu,& Liu, 2020). For example, nations with already fragile educational systems struggled dismally to transition to this new normal of online learning (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020).

Various scholars have adopted different definitions of online learning but, generally, it has been defined as education presented via computers (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Carliner, 1999; Singh & Thurman, 2019). However, Khan (1997) argued that online learning involves more than just presentation and deliverance of materials using the Internet. Khan provided an expanded definition of online learning as a situation whereby the Internet is used "to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning and to grow from the learning experience" (p. 519). The advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web has increased the amount, variety, and quality of educational resources available for students. It also improved efficiency of communication between students and instructors.

Institutions of higher learning in different parts of the world are adopting online learning at an incredibly fast pace, and the coronavirus outbreak is significantly accelerating this development (Zandberg & Lewis, 2008; Zhu, 2020). According to Li and Lalani (2020) "Even before COVID-19, there was already high growth and adoption in education technology, with global EdTech investments reaching US$18.66 billion in 2019 and the overall market for online education projected to reach $350 Billion by 2025" (para. 3).

Students engaged exclusively in online learning in the United States alone represented seven percent of post-secondary students in 2005 (United States Distance Learning Association, 2007). In 2008, over 2.8 million higher education students were engaged in online learning and that number increased by 32 percent in 2011 (Sheehey, 2013). Evidence indicates that institutions, professors, and students benefit from online learning. For example, institutions cite an increase in student enrolment; professors are finding it easier to update learning material and check student progress. There is also the flexibility of teaching from home. For students, online learning has created educational opportunities for those who would not have had the opportunity particularly those balancing education with careers and family (Sheehey, 2013).

First, a brief history of online learning is presented followed by a discussion of dominant learning theories. After that is a delineation of the roles played by both instructor and student in online education. Based on existing literature, generational differences in online learning will be explored i.e., what generational differences are evident with regards to learning and delivering content online? The chapter concludes by providing the reader with implications/recommendations to help further advance the field of online learning/online education.

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