

Chapter 9

Identifying and Addressing Fear of Learning in Adult Education and Training: How to Bring Out Your “Inner Skydiver”

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is two-fold: to bring to light 1) how fear is a barrier to adult learning and 2) how online education has advantages to address it. It is also a hope that this chapter can inspire and empower adult learners, educators, and instructional designers to be proactive in identifying and addressing fear in adults who have not yet committed to being students again, who are considering dropping out of programs, and who are failing to fully experience the potential of an educational endeavor. This problem and the suggested intervening approaches draw on social-emotional learning concepts, connectivism, technology in education, and andragogy.

INTRODUCTION

I remember from so many years ago like it was yesterday... I was sitting in third-grade reading class. My classmate was reading a passage, albeit too slowly for my tastes, so I had already jumped ahead several paragraphs, maybe several pages. I was engaged in the story and lost track. But then it happened. The teacher called on me to read aloud. Fear engulfed me, and my face flushed. I swallowed hard and tried to guess where he might have left off. Of course, I guessed wrong, and the entire class laughed when the teacher corrected me.

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Fear: The Hidden Curriculum

Alongside the subject matter from the written curriculum in schools, students also learn from what is left out, the null curriculum (Eisner, 1979), and what is tacitly promoted, the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968). One impactful yet silent, hidden contributor to the learner's experience is fear (Edmondson, 2019). By the time we are adults, many face difficulties with learning founded on negative experiences that reinforce that fear. Whether standing in front of the entire school for the spelling bee, dreading the teacher calling on you, or having that “bully” laugh at your wrong answer in class, every learner amasses a certain amount of apprehension of educational settings accumulated over the years. Adults have expressed that fear is one of the barriers they face when deciding to further their education (Leyretana & Trinidad, 2022); fear of failure, fear of being unable to learn, fear of social repercussions, fear of being excluded, fear of technology, and more.

Although not a taboo subject, fear of learning in adults is not well discussed in the literature (Perrin et al., 2014), despite sporadic thoughts from educational theorists addressing fear in children. Because those most fearful of learning do not engage in adult education or the adult training industry, teachers and instructional designers may have a disproportionate idea of how widespread the fear of learning really is. How can educators and instructional designers serving online adult learners bring this barrier to light and reduce this impediment? How can adult learners recognize this in themselves and take steps to address it personally and individually? Identifying and addressing fear of learning thus has great value, not only to engage fearful adults in educational opportunities but also to add to our knowledge of the size and nature of this problem.

AIMS FOR THIS CHAPTER

Problem. Because adults bring their prior experiences to the educational setting (Knowles, 1978), and those experiences can include negative experiences or trauma (Brookfield, 1986), fear is undoubtedly prevalent and can impact the effectiveness of education. Educational theorist giant, John Dewey (1984), noted that fear could stop engagement in learning, and he characterized interesting moments as supporting growth and motivation while fearful moments inhibit education. Even further, some individuals suffer from Learning Anxiety Disorder (LAD), a debilitating condition requiring treatment. Fear in educational contexts is undoubtedly a significant problem encompassing complex facets on varied levels.

Scope and definitions. Nonetheless, this chapter will not explore all fears of all students, nor outline disorders, nor delve into medical or clinical research—rather, it will unravel a sliver of this problem framed from a practical standpoint: particularly the fear of learning that some adults experience, especially when engaging in online education. We refer to the fear of learning as an unpleasant and strong apprehension to engaging in learning in various formal and informal educational settings. We refer to adults as individuals having autonomy and choice in their educational decisions rather than compulsory education. Often also, adults are employed and have dependents. We refer to online education as a course modality where all or part of course content is offered over the internet. This encompasses entirely online as well as blended or hybrid learning environments, both synchronous and asynchronous arrangements, and anything from micro certification training to full degree pursuits.

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