

# Chapter 11

## Eliminating Barriers for Non-Traditional Minority Adult Learners (NMALs) in Online Spaces

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### ABSTRACT

*With the rising cost of inflation, adults are considering returning to school. Yet, the family-work balance, cost of living, and prices of education create barriers for most, especially diverse adults in low-socio-economic areas, English language learners (ELLs), and those labeled with a disability. As education has taken the lead in online spaces, barriers still have been overlooked to provide equitable and accessible educational platforms for adults. As motivation for a promising future drives non-traditional minority adult learners (NMALs) to return to school, education must be convenient, cost-effective, and inclusive. Furthermore, advancing technology and digital tools leave both educators and adult learners at a disadvantage. By incorporating professional development, fair access to technology, and WOW practices into online learning environments, barriers will be eliminated for NMALs allowing for systemic equity in online learning platforms.*

### INTRODUCTION

A high percentage of openings in the workforce require some form of higher education (Cronen et al., 2021; Digital Promise, 2016). Despite the opportunities for job growth and placement, presently there is a lack of training in the underserved community. We focus on nontraditional minority adult learners (NMALS)—language learners, low-income, and those with special needs (Chen, 2017; Levicky-Townley

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7712-0.ch011

et al., 2021). A quarter of a million adults have not graduated or have fallen short of being able to attend traditional post-secondary education due to uncertainties of financial burden, family responsibilities, working full-time, low literacy levels, or geographical inconvenience (Kilgore, 2004; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Due to demanding responsibilities, adult online education seems to be the only option considering traditional methods fell short and did not serve their needs. With increases in the economy, many from underserved communities are finding themselves already enrolled or with a desire to go back to school to improve their outcomes. Adult learners enter the non-traditional education system to obtain a GED, high school diploma, trade certification, or college degree. Underserved adults need programs that are conveniently accelerated and flexible. Currently, there are approximately 36 million adults with low literacy in the US, and about 6 million are enrolled in at least one online course (Digital Promise, 2016; Oyarzun et al., 2021; Stephens & Coryell, 2020). Online education has increased by well over 97% from 2012 to 2020 (NCES, 2022; Stephens & Coryell, 2020; Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Furthermore, with advancements in technology and the popularity for online education, many adults will aspire to better themselves by enrolling in more programs. In addition, online education provides sustainable lifelong learning (Stephens & Coryell, 2020). However, we must consider those who left traditional schooling (face-to-face classroom setting), as they may lack the confidence and skills to return to school. As a result, those who are currently enrolled may find it difficult to navigate the advances in technological software of online learning management systems (LMS). Ultimately, are adult online programs ready to serve those from underserved communities?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of how educators can provide relevant and productive means of engagement and learning for underserved populations in their online courses. We will start with non-traditional minority adult learners (NMALs), who they are and why they are returning to school. We will then explore Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory within the framework of andragogy (Finn, 2022). Andragogy focuses solely on the adult learner, leading them from teacher-directed to self-directed learning (Finn, 2022). We will briefly investigate the use of SN-Learning environments in support of andragogy.

SN-Learning is a new form of advanced technology that promotes collaboration, communication, and tailored online lessons for the independent learner (Krouska et al., 2019a). With the purpose of self-directed learning allowing for independence and flexibility, the authors will also study barriers and solutions to those barriers that non-traditional minority adult learners (NMALs) may face. Amidst the solutions, the authors spotlight the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and its application in creating online spaces for adult learning, including diverse learners (language learners and learners with special needs). Universal Design for Learning outlines principles and guidelines to maximize learning experiences for all learners. Lastly, another section will discuss incorporating culturally relevant-sustaining pedagogy (CR-S) into online lessons. Here we will consider multiple ways to meet the needs of students for an equitable experience by recognizing and including students' cultural identities (Doran, 2021).

Readers of this chapter will learn about inequities in adult online education and ways that educators can facilitate positive learning experiences through online learning management systems (LMS). Readers will learn flexible ways to apply UDL when designing their online lessons, including considering the six assumptions of andragogy. There will be suggestions on engaging activities by using interactive and collaborative sharing tools for assignments. Finally, this chapter will provide higher education educators (professors, adjuncts, instructors, and administrators) with secure ways to promote social equity by eliminating systemic inequalities in online adult learning spaces.

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