Chapter 5.1

Perspectives on the Realities of Virtual Learning:
Examining Practice, Commitment, and Conduct

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ABSTRACT

Thought-provoking awareness and reflection often initiate meaningful discourse and positive models for change. Globally diverse practitioners teaching online courses may benefit from examining how online practice, commitment, conduct, and standards can affect teaching, learning, and the adult student experience.

INTRODUCTION

Online, virtual, Web-based, or computer-facilitated education has opened doors to intellectual inclusion for adults who are often excluded from participating in formal education, professional development, and training programs. Nontraditional students seeking advanced scholarship or career development opportunities are increasingly attracted to the convenience of online study and discover online education is manageable in conjunction with life's commitments.

Virtual classrooms command respectful communication between people who will likely never meet face-to-face. Interacting as global strangers necessitates individual disclosure and reciprocal information sharing. Considering worldwide surges in identity theft, online peers often wonder how secure personal information is when revealed in controlled but vulnerable spaces. Implementing security and privacy protocols help to protect online participants from Internet intruders.

Monitoring course quality encourages instructive integrities and delivery of exemplary online curricula. Because emerging theories and technologies quickly change educational landscapes, regular updates are needed to ensure learning materials are fresh and relevant. Without monitoring and periodic evaluation, online classes may not reflect institutional or best practice ideologies and fall short in fulfilling the needs of adult students.

Without personally engaging in the online student experience, it is sometimes difficult for instructors to understand the impact alternative methods of curriculum delivery, interpersonal communication, and behavior has on adult learning. This chapter

may serve as a catalyst for instructor awareness, critical reflection, meaningful discussion, and positive change.

BACKGROUND

Learned societies are borne through access to education, reference libraries, and diversely insightful dialogue. The Internet has revolutionized learning for citizens with access to the World Wide Web. Numerous estimates indicate that over 20 million people use the Internet daily for research activities, entertainment, education, and communicating with others.

Emerging educational trends support worldwide expansion of online degree and professional development programs. According to Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner (2007), "more dollars are spent on adult learning and continuing education programs than elementary, high school, and post secondary education combined" (p. ix).

Adult learners often participate in education and training courses to increase employment opportunities, "deal with changes in the stages of adulthood" (Dominice, 2000, p. 49), boost personal esteem or to realize a childhood dream. Online courses greatly benefit students who desire flexible scheduling, self-paced learning, and are especially invaluable to students who cannot be present for on-campus courses.

Although Dewey theorized that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (Dewey, 1938; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 162), reporting objective evidence is often preferred over relying on subjective experience. Existing research and discussion suggests that most faculty members, researchers, instructors, and interrelated online education experts have never taken a graded online course as an adult student learner. Never having a personal online learning experience may disadvantage instructors of adults. As part of teacher training and professional development programs, adult educators may

benefit from taking graded courses in actual or simulated online learning environments.

Adult learning theory demonstrates that teaching adults is facilitated through integrating course content with real life experience. Reciprocal acts of equality, honesty, and respectful communication are valued in learning communities. Inclusion, positive feedback, and sincere praise build confidence and encourage reticent students to participate.

To gauge student learning, course effectiveness often warrants institutional e-Learning performance assessments. Courses transferred into learning management systems (LMS) that don't convert well into online formats may provide students with an unintentional but inferior scholarly experience.

High instructional competencies elevate the reputation of institutions offering Web-based outreach and training. Existing literature chronicles thousands of 'what *to* do' suggestions on becoming an accomplished online instructor. Notable is the e-Learning Guild's, *834 Tips for Successful Online Instruction* collected from diverse member practitioners or "tipsters" (December, 2005, pp. 65-70). To educate, uplift, and empower everyone involved in online education, adult educators may benefit from critically reflecting on real life 'what *not* to do' narrative. Educators and professional training specialists may regard the experiences and mistakes of others as valuable tools for learning and improvement.

The Business of Adult Learning

Adult pedagogy, sometimes referred to as andragogy, builds on assumptions that adult learners routinely create meaning by combining coursework and life experience with practicum. As a result, self-directed learning has become "a highly researched adult education topic" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 128). Transitioning from teacher-directed to student-directed learning transforms traditionally student-

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