

## Chapter 23

# Gender Impact on Adult Education

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### ABSTRACT

*As society becomes more pluralistic, it behooves adult education to understand how gender intersects adult education so that equitable means of learning and teaching can empower all adults. In order to address gender issues in technology-enhanced adult education, the contributing factors of developmental learning need to be examined. Gendered learning has both biological and social constructs, which impact experiences in adulthood. Adult education needs to help learners re-negotiate their personal and social identities. In the process, educators can help students learn different ways to interact socially as well. Several gender-linked issues impact adult education; for example teaching across generations has a new twist because of socially-contextualized technology. In providing distance education, adult educators need to incorporate gender-sensitive resources, learning activities, technical issues, student-teacher relations, and assessment. Twenty-first century trends of changing economies, global interaction and interdependent literacies can help both genders learn optimally.*

### INTRODUCTION

Women now constitute the majority of workers and formal adult education learners in the United States. They realize that education can provide them with a means to gain access and succeed in today's economy. This need for adult education is especially true relative to technology because

almost two-thirds of jobs require technology skills, many of which were not even in existence a decade.

Recently, more attention has been paid to gender-linked ways of knowing. As society becomes more pluralistic, it behooves adult education to understand how gender intersects adult education so that equitable means of learning and teaching can empower all adults.

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## **BACKGROUND**

In order to address gender issues in technology-enhanced adult education, the contributing factors of developmental learning need to be examined. Gendered learning has both biological and social constructs, which impact experiences in adulthood.

### **Gendered Learning**

Learning is both biologically and socially determined in that the brain processes information in unique ways, and the interaction of individuals and their environments impact their learning. This reality is echoed in the terms of “sex” (which is biologically determined) and “gender” (which meaning is socially constructed). It should be noted that these distinctions are not mutually exclusive but rather nature lays a foundation upon which education efforts build. Without acknowledging or understanding that foundation, adult educators risk overlooking important aspects of the learning environment and teaching techniques within.

While differences between females and males are significant, in total more variation exists within each sex. Additionally, as boys and girls mature and grow older, they have even more in common. Other factors -- individual, cultural, and situational -- largely shape adults. Nevertheless, long-term impact of gendered education has to be recognized, and strategies to acknowledge such practices and offer gender-equitable learning activities need to be implemented. Ultimately, though, adults have the most need to see how gender impacts their own self-perception and learning; by embracing their own gender and understanding their counterparts' approach, *all* adults can learn more effectively.

Do boys and girls experience school in the same way? Yes and no. In general, girls work harder, are more motivated, make better grades and are more satisfied with school than are boys. Boys are less comfortable with rules and authority than girls, and are more apt to think that their teacher

does not like them (Black, 1995). Wherein lies the issue?

Gender differences in school behavior start from the first year. In examining how children interact in playground games, Pellegrini et al. (2002) found that boys played a greater variety of games, especially chase and ball games, and that girls played more verbal games. Facility in playing games was an accurate predictor of boys' social competence, and both genders' adjustment to first grade. Boys tended to express their emotions through actions while girls used words, which also reflected boys' interest in things and girls' interest in people and relationships.

Girls develop earlier than boys, so their bodies can process stimuli meaningfully at a younger grade. It takes boys longer to learn, yet they have shorter attention spans and need more teacher time than girls. Gender-linked subject matter, linked to kinds of reasoning, already surfaces by third grade. Boys demonstrated better general math skills and three-dimensional reasoning, and girls excel in verbal and reading abilities. Learning disabilities start early too as boys are more likely to be hyperactive and need reading remediation. Moreover, more boys are held back in grades than girls.

Puberty accentuates other gender-linked learning issues. For instance, boys achieve academically after puberty while girls start to drop out of some advanced science courses. Girls' IQ scores drop off during middle school, although they rise again in high school. Boys tend to pursue power while girls pursue a comfortable environment. Boys' social acceptance is usually based on physical strength and athleticism, and while girls' acceptance is typically based on beauty and peer relationships. Additionally, boys' social hierarchies tend to be stable while girls' are fluid. Girls are more likely to be depressed, but boys are more likely to successfully commit suicide. Still, teens look for experiences that create intense feelings (Park, 2004). Because learning is largely a social process, the emotional lives of adolescents needs

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