Chapter 11

Differentiating Instruction for Adult Learners in an Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education courses offered online are becoming increasingly common. Unfortunately, few instructors of online teacher education courses have specific preparation for teaching adult learners or in teaching online courses, resulting in faltering attempts to transfer traditional methodology such as lectures to online platforms. This chapter considers the background of distance education and examines relevant literature on adult learners. Differentiated instruction is proffered as a means of meeting the needs of adult learners in online teacher education courses. Specific examples of differentiating content, process, and product are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has received increased attention since 1981 when totally online courses were first offered to adult education students (Harasim, 2006; Li & Irby, 2008). Increased offerings of online courses within higher education have raised concerns within the academic community (Duffy, Webb, & Davis, 2009). While many argue about the advantages of differing delivery format, many researchers document that the actual instruction provided within any delivery mode is what determines the effectiveness of any learning experience (Parsons, Massey, Vaughn, Scales, Faircloth, Howerton, Griffith, & Atkinson, 2011). Asking "Is online learning as effective as face to face learning?" is the wrong question. Instead, teacher educators need to explore how online learning can be an effective vehicle for bettering the education offered in teacher education courses.

One area that deserves further attention and research at the higher education level is differen-

tiated instruction. While there is little published about differentiated instruction beyond the K-12 settings, online courses are rich environments with many supportive elements for differentiated instruction. Further, typical teacher education distance courses are full of a wide array of adult learners who range in age from teenagers to senior citizens. Online teacher education students often do not share similar geographical places, socio-economic status, family situations, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds. They vary widely in life and teaching experience, making it an ideal environment for differentiation.

The objectives for this chapter are to further the nascent discussion of differentiated instruction at both the college level and in online courses. After providing foundational background from the literature regarding distance education, adult learners, and differentiated instruction, this chapter concludes with an example of differentiation in an online learning environment.

BACKGROUND

When considering differentiated learning in an online teacher-education course, three distinct areas provide important frameworks for consideration: online learning, adult learners, and differentiation.

Online Learning

The advancements of the Internet have naturally led to increased opportunities for learners. Universities have begun to capitalize on the increased student population available world-wide for online courses. Research on online learning has suggested multiple benefits from online courses. First, there is the opportunity for increasingly individualized instruction (Thomson, 2010). Thomson's work with gifted high school students learning online reported that students and teachers believed the format of online learning seemed more personalized with much of the instruction taking place

through extended email conversations between the instructor and a single student. Also, online instructors often make use of multiple formats for presenting the material (Li & Irby, 2008), targeting specific learners' strengths and weaknesses (Blake, 2009). Additionally, the learner can self-regulate the learning that occurs (Li & Irby, 2008; Thomson, 2010). Further, some research has suggested that enhanced communication between instructor and student is one frequent outcome of online interaction (Dykman & Davis, 2008; Li & Irby, 2008; Thomson, 2010) and that students may feel more comfortable sharing because they are given time to compose thoughtful responses rather than being called on to respond immediately in class (Li & Irby, 2008). Finally, the terms "convenience" and "flexibility" are used repeatedly in the online learning literature, emphasizing the variety of learning options that make online courses ultimately more inviting and available for many students. As Li and Irby (2008) noted, "Online education provides a time-independent and place-independent learning environment" (p. 453). Thomson (2010) concluded:

"There are number of benefits that the online environment can offer students above and beyond what the traditional classroom environment offers. As a result, instead of trying to recreate the face-to-face environment to whatever degree possible, online teachers and program administrators should instead, try to capitalize on the unique benefits that the online environment can offer students." (p. 702)

Increased offerings of online courses have raised concerns within the academic community. Cited as a major barrier to more extensive adoption of online learning within these settings, many faculty members continue to devalue such course experiences (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Particular to teacher education, Duffy and colleagues (Duffy, Webb, & Davis, 2009) questioned if distance learning was an effective mode of teaching when

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