The Influences of Distance Learning on Adult Learners

By Henry O'Lawrence

Distance learning is any type of instruction in which the student and instructor are separated by physical distance (not in the same room) (Wahlstrom, Williams & Shea, 2003). It is a medium of teaching and learning using modern technology so that teachers or students do not have to be together in the classroom. With the growth of distance learning programs, the online format has led to a growing interest in learning among adult learners and in continuing pursuit of their educational goals.

However, there is a wide range of opinion concerning the appropriateness of distance learning, especially among nontraditional students. Some still support the importance of face-to-face and classroom experiences in which students learn from one another through classroom interaction, and others contend that a hybrid configuration (part of the course in the classroom and part in distance learning) is much better than learning that is presented exclusively through distance learning. Extended observation of students taking classes online or in the hybrid mode leads to the clear conclusion that distance learning is not for everyone.

The author discovered that many students, administrators and even faculty did not understand that the definition and the role of distance education is very broad. Discussions, interviews and group discussions among colleagues indicated that there are many interpretations, and among those discovered, this article treats only a few that seem significant.

The following are issues discovered during the assessment:

- trying to compare the online program/curriculum with the regular program/curriculum;
- trying to compare the traditional institutions offering online programs as part of their curriculum with institutions that are not well known but spend a significant amount of money promoting their online programs (One mentor called those schools the "University of What's Happening," and another called them "purchased degree, show me the money and get your paper" institutions.);
- trying to compare graduates of online programs versus those who went through regular and rigorous programs at traditional institutions;
- the inability to really understand the purpose of distance education and the targeted population;
- problems when online graduates from ordinary schools compete with those who earn their degrees in a traditional way (from rigorous academic programs); and
- lack of evidence that evaluates the knowledge that students gain, the objectives of the distance learning program, and how these objectives are being realized.

Purpose of the Study

There were initial concerns that distance learning might lower the quality of instruction; however, studies show that its benefits are clear and demonstrable, and it continues to gain acceptance. According to Belanger and Jordan (2004), several reasons play major roles: It opens up new opportunities for students who might otherwise be excluded from participation in the learning process; it allows institutions to educate a larger number of students with relatively fewer instructors, thus providing a cost-effective method of delivering higher education; and learners have the opportunity to pursue lifelong learning after graduation, regardless of lifestyle or location.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to determine what influences adult learners to participate in distance education. Lessons and findings are drawn from authors who collectively teach online courses and from adult learners participating in online courses. This article also emphasizes factors that motivate or deter adult participation in distance education, especially the online format.

Information regarding attitudes and specific reasons for adult participation in distance learning can provide insight to faculty attempting to incorporate online courses into their existing regular classes in the future. For the purpose of this article, distance learning, distance education and online format mode of instruction are used interchangeably. Also, the terms adult learners and nontraditional students are used interchangeably.

Methodology and Data Collection

According to Diaz (2000), many researchers endeavored for many years to determine whether distance education could provide the same level of academic excellence as courses taught in traditional modes. A large portion of distance education research has been devoted to comparative studies of distance and traditional methods of education, and

researchers conducting comparative research often ask the same basic research question: Is distance education as good as, or better than, traditional education?

Diaz (2000) states that this type of question is premised on the implicit, yet rarely mentioned assumption, that traditional education is the ideal mode of educational delivery and thus can serve as the gold standard against which all other forms of alternative education should be measured. Diaz refers to the assumption as untenable, simply because it is impossible to determine whether one class method is better than another without first agreeing on the criteria for such a determination.

For the purpose of this study, an instrumental case study was conducted as an in-depth inquiry that observes historical facts and development occurrences, and presents conditions and environmental interactions that are instrumental in accomplishing something other than understanding (O'Lawrence, 1999). This study focuses more on insight, discovery, and interpretation and understanding of the perceptions of adult learners participating in distance learning education. Its objective is to develop an understanding of the dynamics and influence of distance learning on adult learners.

Several on-campus interviews were made, and data collection occurred in two phases—open-ended interviews and documents review—because triangulation of data adds substance and credibility to case studies. Open-ended interviews were conducted with students on the online program or taking class totally taught online or hybrid. Stake (1995) says that two fundamental uses of the case study are to obtain descriptions and the interpretations of others, while Yin (1994) suggests that open-ended interviews translate facts, details, concepts and opinions in oral form. Through open-ended interviews, more in-depth information is obtained.

Findings and Analysis
The findings and analysis of this study are based on overall interpretation

of the interviews conducted with the students, both face to face and via telephone. This report is analyzed and interpreted to the best of the author's knowledge, and every complicated comment or personal attack was eliminated to avoid bias representative. Most adult learners, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, balance work and family demands with part-time degree completion. Because of the need to complete college coursework to finish their education, keep their current jobs and be promoted, distance education appeals to these groups primarily because of flexibility of time, convenience of working from home, and the ability to take care of family or work from the office while at the same time having cultural diverse group interactions.

They see online technologies as providing new opportunities and preventing a drive to attend a class, so that they can remain in their homes or workplaces, and yet participate in learning activities, interact with most of the people in class, exchange information more frequently, and establish friendships with other students.

Other reasons that influence participation in online programs are due to the common characteristics of adult learners.

- They possess a variety of prior learning and work experiences.
- They can integrate new concepts with their prior knowledge while picking up new ideas from their colleagues with similar work experiences.
- They enjoy and desire practical applications, because the co-hoc nature of most of these programs draws prospective students from the same way of life and work-related similarities.
- They learn best by having control over their learning environment and have the opportunity to showcase their talents in group or special projects.
- They enjoy the ability to participate voluntarily in the learning experience, and most of them think that they know more than their instruc-

tors. Unfortunately, most of the instructors do not challenge those individuals.

In reference to the question of whether or not there are any benefits of distance learning, many adult learners take a distance learning course with certain expectations about its rewards and its drawbacks. The following are some of the gains of a distance learning course they identified as compared to a traditional classroom course:

- **Flexibility:** They believe that the greatest rationale for the existence of most forms of distance learning is that students can do much of the work at times and places of their own choosing.
- **Self-tailored learning:** Within certain limits, it allows them to learn at their own pace, in their preferred medium, or in a more comfortable environment.
- **For instructors.** They are able to combine lecture material with specific modules offering computer learning tools. This permits instructors to devote more time, if required, to covering concepts in class, while letting students learn the hands-on portion of the course on their own.

It is also important to be aware that there are certain difficulties to distance learning that adults encounter regularly. The most significant drawback is that some of the adult learners taking classes online lack self-discipline and time-management skills.

Some feel lonely without face-to-face contact with other students. No matter how much they may communicate with others by phone, e-mail and discussion board/chat room, it is never the same feeling. Internet-based distance learning courses, in particular, rely on lectures as a means of instruction and more on reading and discussion; thus, students who are uncomfortable with their reading and writing skills find themselves equally uncomfortable with their distance learning course.

Conclusion, Recommendations and Summary

Many studies have attempted to find out whether distance education differs from traditional modes of instruction when referring to facilitating student success. The majority of these studies reported no significant differences between the distance and traditional modalities. Most important, the design of such types of research (whether comparative or evaluative) clearly places emphasis on the importance of the method of delivering instruction and is consistent with the instructivist (instructor-centered) learning theory, but inconsistent with the constructivist (learner-centered) theory, which is more concerned with the role of the student in learning than with the role of the instructor in teaching (Diaz, 2000).

Teaching online courses can be very challenging and time consuming and requires extensive preparation to ensure that things are done well and that students get feedback within 24 hours of posting their responses. Distance learning is a viable alternative for life-long learning opportunities, including informal courses, professional development tutorials and full degree programs. But we must be very careful to perform in-depth evaluation and assessment of online courses regarding ease of access, media attention or exaggerations, the role and interest of the private sector, and the major reasons for increased demand by both education and business, as well as the effectiveness of online learning activities.

Instructional strategies are what really make a difference in how adults learn online, not technology itself. Instructional methods should make learning meaningful and interesting for adult learners. Traditional institutions—with well-educated, well-qualified faculty—that adopt part of their programs to be distance learning either in the form of hybrids or totally online should not be compared with other institutions whose main objectives are business, profit and then education. The authenticity of the programs of those other institutions—

along with the qualifications of their faculty—may be questionable. In most cases, such programs limit the quality of the educational system and, as a result, make the college degree less valuable, creating weak competitiveness.

Finally, and in the author's opinion, students rate distance learning in various ways. Most students are not suited to this type of learning, and some subjects are not taught as effectively online as others. These opinions are totally based on classroom assessment, students' answers to the questions asked via e-mail, classroom discussions and phone interviews.

A good manufacturer produces good products. We still need good standards, good reputation, value and a competitive spirit that will give students an edge in a global economy. Jennifer Mulrean (2005) asks an important question: Who would hire an online grad? She offers important advice for those seeking degrees online. Find out first how the online degree will measure up against those earned at traditional brick-and-mortar programs and determine whether it will allow the graduate through the door of the human resources department.

What is most interesting here is that a survey by the Distance Education and Training Council found that "almost 70 percent of corporate supervisors rated the value of a distance degree just as valuable or more valuable than resident school degrees in the same field."

The results of this study provide clear evidence of the need for evaluation of educational programs of distance learning. They also show that the evaluation of adult learners is important in determining the knowledge that adult learners are acquiring, and in developing methods to analyze their social problems and then appraising solutions to those problems.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that an evaluation that involves evidence about behavior changes in the adult learners be conducted routinely in order to provide an appropriate method of evaluating online adult learners. Observations online will be useful in

determining habits and certain kinds of operational skills. Interviews may shed light on changes taking place in attitudes and interests. Such interviews, in the form of questionnaires, will serve to give evidence about interests, attitudes and behaviors related to distance learning education.

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