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E-learning and mature-aged learners

Angela Lewis PhD

"I loved the fact that I could go at my own pace without a snooty professor down my back making me take a test!"

E-learning uses computer network technologies to create, foster, deliver, and facilitate learning, anytime and anywhere and this is one of its strongest drawcards. Advertising for e-learning programs makes much of the fact that a person can learn at their own pace, in their own time and in the comfort of their own homes. However, nothing much is ever mentioned about how it is even easier to watch TV or simply do the ironing rather than march oneself off to the computer to spend a couple of hours completing some type of lesson. I have to put up my own hand and say 'guilty', as I have a box of Jung psychology CD-ROMs still in the Australia Post gold-bag from when they were delivered last March.

But procrastination is not the only issue that faces people when they learn alone. My experience from hosting online units is that for some people, in particular the older learner who is the post-45 bracket, e-learning creates unforseen barriers which they may not have considered when they embraced the implied flexibility of this new way to study and learn. Unexpected hurdles may come from having to make a paradigm shift from learning in the traditional classroom mode they are familiar with, to a style of learning which can feel isolated and unsupported, and further complications can arise from having to use a computer and being expected to have some IT skills and technical confidence.

◼ Hello...is there anybody out there?

I recently facilitated an online unit which ran for three months. The group comprised approximately 15 participants and our goal was to read a chapter weekly from a set text and then contribute our thoughts and discussions to an online forum. We were allocated a 20-minute face-to-face group meeting prior to commencement and then it was online for the remainder of the course.

Satisfactory completion was considered to be contribution to approximately 80% of the weekly sessions. However, I had a number of people in my group who did not participate at all, or participated only once or twice over the four months. For my part I tried to make myself as accessible and visible as possible – writing to each person individually prior to the course and offering help, encouragement and various ways to contact me. By midway through the course, the group was being carried by a few core people and despite the fact that I spent a large amount of time phoning and emailing the missing people, I was still not successful in encouraging them to participate further online.

The key reasons the people in my groups gave for not participating, or not participating more fully, were:

- not finding time and then realising the time it took to not only work things out alone online, but to complete and submit the tasks

- feeling isolated from the learning event, the teacher and the other learners

- in particular, not having face-to-face communication with other participants resulted in some of the group feeling intimidated about putting their writing up in a public space (and this was evidenced by everybody waiting for 'someone else' to go first)

- having technical issues (eg not understanding the posting process, not feeling confident with negotiating the discussion site, losing work, or posting to the wrong forum).

◼ What the researchers say

These outcomes are not peculiar to this group, because while the distance and online learning market continues to grow (Palmieri

2007, Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) 2007), it has also been found that the drop-out rate for e-learning courses is higher than in traditional face-to-face courses (Dutton and Perry 2002; Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2002), with some institutions reporting attrition rates of 20% to 30% (Liaw, Huang and Chen 2007). This suggests that not everything is working as well as it could be in some e-learning systems.

Bouhnick and Marcus (2006) surveyed 130 university students about what they considered caused them learning dissatisfaction when participating in e-learning units. They found these key obstacles:

• lack of a firm framework to encourage students to learn

• a high level of self-discipline or self-direction is required

• absence of a learning 'atmosphere' in e-learning systems

• the distance learning format minimises the level of contact, as well as the level of discussion, among students and the teacher; in other words, e-learning lacks interpersonal and direct interaction among students and teachers

• the learning process is less efficient; when compared to the face-to-face learning format, e-learning requires students to dedicate more time to learn the subject matter.

The students in this study did not, however, nominate technical difficulties, and this may be assumed to be a generational issue, given that they would all have grown up with exposure to IT, while my learning group did not. In a similar vein, analysis of 1,121 VET students (Bowman and Kearns 2007) found that 70% - 75% of mature-aged learners who completed some type of e-learning believed that the experience had boosted both their skills and confidence with technology, while only 55% of younger VET students found that aspect important. I think one can assume this is because they already possess those skills.

Kop (2008) also argues that current research in adult education shows that the mature-aged learner may also require and even expect guidance, validation and critical engagement with the educator as this is the type of learning environment they have experienced previously. It results in many finding the online learning experience to be outside of their comfort level. It is actually 'too autonomous' for them. It has also been suggested (Salmon 2004), that the widely accepted trend of the online tutor acting as 'facilitator' (which implies a high level of learner autonomy) is problematic, as nearly all students preferred the help of an online tutor to guide them through resources and activities as well as engage them in the course content.

The Bouhnick and Marcus list has much in common with the key outcomes from my online group (most particularly the aspects related to self direction and interaction). However, time and space prohibit me from delving more deeply into all the various aspects of e-learning dissatisfaction and how they relate to my experiences, so I would like to touch on some key points.

Where to from here?

Speaking from the point of view of someone who delivers IT training, it is clear to me that in terms of dealing with mature-aged learners specifically, a simple classroom session in how to navigate the e-learning site, including stepping through how to post comments and upload their work (held prior to commencement of the e-learning course) would have boosted the confidence of those in my group and allowed them to concentrate on the actual course they had to complete.

Lack of IT skills, computer literacy or prior IT experience are often cited as being problematic for a mature-aged learner (Kuhlen 2006, Lewis 2006). However, these are aspects that can be easily addressed with specific skills training and coaching. Once interventions are in place that create a positive sense of self efficacy with IT skills, the learner is then free to get on with the task of learning.

Mungania, in a study for the Masie Learning Center, found that self-efficacy is one of the three pillars that will determine the success or failure of an e-learning program (Mungania 2003, p.8).

"To interact with strangers in what ostensibly is a reflective conversation – it means you have to be confident in what you are saying as it is such a public forum" (female online group member).

I also believe that my group could have had a better experience in a blended learning environment, in which there was some face-to-face as well as online interaction. This would have created a bridge between the two styles of learning. As well, it would have allowed them to foster stronger relationships with the other participants and the facilitator, because while sharing, reflecting and learning from other classmates is entirely possible online, it may have been an easier divide for them to bridge after first making some bonds in 'real time' (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2002, Swan 2001) and may have benefited their online interactions.

Bowman and Kearns also found a similar preference for blended learning in their research amongst TAFE teachers and they note that for older workers returning to study, "e-learning should be fun and this is most easily done through blended e-learning" (Bowman and Kearns 2007, p. 35).

Meeting face to face would also have allowed the group to informally share their experiences about the workload itself. I have found that when some people first begin learning online they do so with the expectation that it will not be as rigorous, time-consuming or academic as it might be in a traditional classroom. In that respect e-learning needs to be 'sold' as a genuine learning event that will take as much time and energy as traditional learning.

Learning at the kitchen table or trying to squeeze in a quick post with the keyboard balanced on your knees in bed (as can be the case for people completing their study at home), may not contribute effectively to the requirement for a 'learning atmosphere' as identified by Bouhnik and Marcus (2006). While I was not present when my students posted their contributions and work online, I was well aware of when it was done and I noticed a lot of it was posted very late at night and frequently at the last minute.

This brings me to my last point: adult learners undoubtedly flock to e-learning because of their need for flexible learning and e-learning's inherent promise is to provide this. AFLF's 2007 report into e-learning identified that 59% of mature-aged learners indicated that the option of e-learning was a factor in their choice of a course (Bowman and Kearns 2007). However, mature-aged learners also have competing requirements for their time, which can include jobs, families, spouses and children. These conflicts can be even more challenging for women (Gouthro 2005, Morgan, Quesenberry & Trauth 2004).

And therein lies the double-edged sword. Yes, e-learning is flexible, but the price of flexibility is that the learner must be self-disciplined in scheduling their learning, have good time management skills and must take responsibility for their learning. This can be difficult for some adult learners when other more immediate responsibilities in the home or workplace compete for their time and is an aspect that requires discussion prior to a course, if it cannot be included in the form of some guidance and coaching in a pre-course orientation (Mungania 2003 has a list of good practice guidelines).

Summary

The e-learning experiences of mature-aged learners are always going to be different to the experiences of younger learners and these are predicated on previous educational experiences, skill and self-efficacy with IT, and the various commitments they have, both in the home and workplace. Some of these aspects will alter generationally, most particularly issues related to IT skills and confidence.

However, issues such as finding the time to study autonomously online while dealing with other responsibilities may not be so easily solved. E-learning is a rich field of research and this short article can only touch at its edges. While the Australian government has, and continues to fund, a number of research projects (most particularly under VOCED and the AFLF) on the uptake and use of e-learning by mature-aged learners, this area needs ongoing research and exploration, particularly given the issues of skills shortages and the need to increase workforce capacity in Australia .

Footnote: My next large L&D project will involve a retail system rollout nationally. The organisation had planned to do this in an online learning-only format, however, given our audience are largely older learners, they are now rethinking this approach and we are planning how to deliver it in a face-to-face method aided by e-learning. We believe this will give us the best learning outcomes.

References:

An extensive list of references accompanies this article. It can be accessed by viewing the online version of this article on the AITD's website (member-only section). Go to http://www.aitd.com.au/memberaccess/articles ■

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