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## Adult Education-Related Graduate Degrees: Insights on the Challenges and Benefits of Online Programming

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## **Adult Education-Related Graduate Degrees: Insights on the Challenges and Benefits of Online Programming**

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the experiences of program coordinators'/instructors' experiences of teaching online in graduate adult education programs. Specifically, we examined their perspectives on the benefits and challenges to both students and instructors in online learning environments and participants' recommendations for others who were interested in transitioning their courses and degrees to online programming.

**Keywords:** online adult education graduate programs, online instruction, teaching and learning online

The use of technologies has become revolutionary by transforming the manner in which we interact and has reshaped the landscape of higher education causing adult educators to rethink future programming (Conceicao, 2016). According to Beaudoin (1990), the implementation of online instruction has broadened access, making educational attainment more available to adult learners. According to several authors distance learning can be offered in different forms, namely, hybrid (the mix of face-to-face and distance education), online (some courses are offered in an online environment), and completely online (entire programs are delivered on-line) (Kress, Thering, Lalonde, Kim, & Cleeton, 2012). Course delivery can occur in both synchronous and asynchronous modes (Wooten & Hancock, 2009). When student and teachers are engaged simultaneously in the learning process, the mode is considered synchronous; however, when students are learning at their own pace and their convenience, they are engaged in an asynchronous mode. As colleges and universities embrace the idea of online instruction, adult educators must examine the realities of these emerging digital classrooms when considering their own programs.

When taking into account the recipients of online instruction, Twenge (2014) identified two factions of users that include digital immigrants and digital natives who make up the digital community. These labels are based on the technological skill sets or competencies that adults bring to the online environment. The author describes digital immigrants as newcomers who are less familiar with the virtual world; digital natives possess greater familiarity with technology and engage various platforms regularly. Because adult learners may have membership in one of the aforementioned groups, it is necessary for adult educators to provide the accessibility and guidance needed in order for them to succeed in an online environment, particularly for those students who are considered digital immigrants. Likewise, as technology continues to become more pervasive in higher education, Conceicao (2016) warns of the need for adult educators to establish presence and be prepared for the diverse group of learners enrolling in online programming. Therefore, it is important for adult educators to embrace this non-traditional method of facilitation since many adults, no matter the competency level, are choosing to learn in virtual classrooms (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

Allen and Seaman (2013) conducted a study tracking ten years of distance education among at least 2800 universities from 2002 to 2012. The findings from the report indicated that over time online learning has increasingly garnered the approval of academic leaders from less than 50% of support in 2002 to almost 70% of support by 2012. These findings suggest that distance learning is critical to the sustainability of higher education. The authors further noted as of 2012, approximately 6.7 million students were currently enrolled in at least one online course which is an increase of approximately 570,000 students since 2002. To meet the needs of the growing populations of students, more and more, faculty are teaching courses online. Allen and Seaman further indicated since 2002 many higher education institutions have experienced a major shift from offering online *courses* (34.5%) to offering *programs* that are fully online (62.4%) in 2012, making degrees more attractive to individuals who once thought education may have been inaccessible. According to the authors, while higher education has experienced a shift in online learning, academic leaders argue that more time and effort may be required to develop and teach online courses. The authors also noted the lack of academic discipline required for on-line instruction and student retention can serve as barriers when engaging students in an on-line learning environment. Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk (2012) noted in online instruction the student to student and student to teacher social interaction can become estranged making it difficult for the construction of knowledge to occur.

### **Purpose and Motivation**

The motivation for conducting the current study was the result of the authors' master's program transitioning to a fully online format. We were interested in learning from other programs as we engaged in decision making processes for the transition. During the review of the literature, it was discovered that much of the research on faculty involvement in online instruction focuses primarily on design and delivery with little attention given to the instructor's experiences (Conceicao, 2006). Hence, Conceicao suggested that more attention be given to faculty and their experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of faculty in developing and teaching online adult education courses in a master's program. The research questions that guided the inquiry were: what are the characteristics of online graduate programming in adult education; what are the benefits and challenges for students and instructors involved in online programs; and, what recommendations do these faculty members suggest for others who may be interested in moving to online teaching/programs?

### **Theoretical Framework**

As we were interested in the processes, challenges, benefits, and contexts involved in online graduate programs in adult education, we recognize that people and programs had to come together to choose and operationalize this educational path. Therefore, the framework guiding this study is Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames model which describes four frames through which people conceptualize organizational behavior and changes: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. When employees are assigned to specified roles and relationships the organization is functioning within a structured frame. The human resource frame focuses on the people aspect of an organization through processes namely, hiring, onboarding, training and development, promotions, and performance management, to name a few. Often times coalitions

of power and authority within systems influence how decisions are made making the political frame operable within organizations. Features, including storytelling, myths, rituals, behaviors, and humor are the symbolic elements demonstrating aspects of the culture of the organization. The four-frame model can be utilized in organizational development and offers a multi-lens approach to problem-solving and organizational change. Bolman and Deal assert these frames are coherent, and because of the consistency between tenets, accounts can be reexamined from multiple frames or points of view. Moreover, a multi-frame method does not support a narrow or mechanical approach, rather, a broadened approach to understanding organizations. Therefore, the four-frame model supports this research as we seek to examine the perspectives of faculty teaching and leading online adult education in master's programs.

### **Research Design**

The authors chose to explore the question through a qualitative research design. In the first step, the authors conducted an extensive literature review and analyzed the data from the aforementioned online questionnaire in which 28 CPAE list serve members responded. The questionnaire contained nine questions about the nature of their master's programs in adult education including the formats in which these programs were offered, types of recruitment efforts, concentrations, and the approximate number of students. These data were analyzed for themes and compiled to underpin a subsequent interview protocol with six of the participants who volunteered to take part in follow-up interviews. Semi-structured interviews asked probing questions about respondents' insights into the benefits and challenges, to students and instructors of offering adult education graduate courses online and recommendations for faculty interested in online teaching. Subsequently, recorded and transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed using constant-comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2009) methods.

### **Findings**

We received 28 responses from universities ranging in size from a little over 5,000 students to more than 66,000 students. After eliminating duplicates and unclear or incomplete replies, we ended up with a list of 24 master-level programs in adult education. Of the 24 programs, 23 offered online or hybrid courses and 10 programs were fully online. Two of the 10 programs offered fully online used a cohort model. Nine of the programs had more than 60 students enrolled including four of the fully online programs. The largest university to offer a fully online program had a student population of over 66,000; the smallest institution was approximately 8,500 students. Half of the 24 programs used social media to market themselves with the most popular choice being Facebook, used by nine. It was evident universities of all sizes were taking advantage of technology and using the Internet to market and offer graduate-level courses.

In our analysis of the follow-up interviews, we investigated both benefits and challenges for students and faculty involved in online graduate adult education programs, and any recommendations these individuals suggested for those who are interested in teaching online. Across all of the interviews, unsurprisingly we found that benefits for students included flexibility of taking classes that did not require on-campus attendance. One respondent suggested students "are able to care for their families and incorporate instruction... [online courses] give

them a chance to work while they are raising their family and pursuing their full-time jobs.” Others highlighted that many of their students would not be able to attend their programs if they required on-campus courses. Online programming helped to “reach...some really excellent students who really need the program.” Respondents contended that their degrees offer “access to world-renowned faculties” and “just in time learning” for “real-world” learning and digital skills acquisition. Additionally, we found that faculty believed that the online environment for learning can demand better occasions for critical thinking and improved engagement with the content than students sometimes have in a face-to-face course. Benefits to faculty also included “flexibility” about when and where they engaged in teaching. They also highlighted the opportunities for their own instructional development that online teaching requires. Our participants regularly learned to “engage with [new] technology” for teaching and learning and needed to find novel ways to “communicate” more directly and with more flexibility in order to effectively support students in virtual environments. Our respondents also indicated that their programs attracted a more widely diverse group of learners. One interviewee indicated that teaching online offers the program a richness of perspectives “not just in terms of the ethnicity, races, but also in terms of political views, sexual orientation, the whole nine yards. It allows me to connect with the larger or broader segment of the population.” Online teaching benefits these adult education professors by helping them “connect with students from all over the state, the country, and sometimes internationally.”

Challenges also characterize teaching online, however. Our findings indicate that there are indeed some adult students who do not thrive in online programs because while they like the convenience of online learning, they do not care for “the structure”. For example, our participants explained that some of their students “hated the discussion format”, disliked the “lack of sociability,” or struggled with the required shift in learning from “other-directed to self-direct[ion] as learners.” These faculty members also suggested that their students sometimes had difficulties with technological components of online learning. Rural students were challenged to access high-speed Internet connections, particularly when trying to engage in activities such as opening videos or working on collaborative software documents. Others labored to navigate the course management systems and frequent changes made in these platforms, adapting to the “culture” of virtual learning environments, and dealing with the lack of immediate feedback from the online instructor. Finally, one respondent stressed that some students have a “misconception of online education [thinking] that it’s easier than face-to-face education...people confuse convenience with ease.” Correspondingly, challenges for faculty also include difficulties with technology and supporting students to become “more self-directed” and “self-motivated.” Many suggested how difficult it can be to “create a community space for online students,” to engage in “democratic approaches” in teaching, “creating [online] environments that are safe but challenging,” and designing online learning that connect with what we know about effective teaching and learning in adulthood. A participant expressed:

“Facilitating adult learning is something that really demands demonstration, hands-on work, and for online program, that’s difficult because you can’t just step in front of the classroom and say, “look, here’s how you do it.” I mean you can use videos but it’s still not the same, and I want them to get out there and do it. So, thinking about how do you get them these experiences, get them to learn from their mistakes, give them support, the information that they need so they can go out and try it, hopefully be successful, without having you there as a model is a big challenge.”

Indeed, many lamented the loss of “personal interaction with students” they had enjoyed in face-to-face courses, admitting “much of the communications is lost” when teaching online. Others were challenged by learning how to “explain things” in their online classes and that the lack of “immediate give and take...feedback from the students” makes teaching in these courses somewhat more complicated when gauging understanding and learning. Finally, all of the participants cautioned that teaching online can be very time-consuming.

When asked to consider recommendations for those who were considering transitioning to online teaching, our participants emphasized the importance of learning about *how* to teach online, about the course management platform, and about instructional technologies. They suggested that this kind of instructional development could be gained through university instructional technology offices, through connections with national organizations dedicated to effective e-learning and teaching professional development such as “The Online Consortium” and “Quality Matters”, and by even finding another instructor whose teaching “you respect and [so as to] try to pattern your work after theirs.” They recommend working toward creating community and “presence” in one’s courses, taking careful time to think about how to “create assessment that is meaningful...and engaging”, thoroughly considering learning outcomes when creating online courses, ensuring important student advising support and orientations, and staying mindful of “the adult’s life outside of school” when designing courses for adult education students.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Increasingly, professors of adult education are being called upon to provide online instruction. Much of the research regarding online learning has been focused on program design. We hope the experiences and perspectives of professors in our field can help advance the literature on this topic.

Our findings suggest that designing and building online courses can be extremely time-intensive and require special skills from the instructor. A focus on the learning outcome goals of the course and program must be in-place when creating and teaching classes to ensure a comprehensive and connected curriculum. Findings also indicate that online programming and teaching tends to be particularly individual, and somewhat isolating for adult education faculty. While administrations are often supportive of the move to online, the work and the operationalization of the online experiences are likely to be fully up to the instructor. Here, our research speaks to the *structural* and *human resources* frames of adult education graduate programs in that many employ one or two full time faculty, which are then supplemented by many adjuncts or part time instructors. The majority of our participants suggested that they had to invest in much self-directed professional development as well as provide training and mentorship to their adjunct faculty who are so essential to their programs. Participants indicated that new and nuanced partnerships and relationships with university technology departments (including instructional designers), with administration, with adjunct or part-time faculty, and with students were required when shifting to online programming. These partnerships can include *political* pressures in which there are competing interests, power struggles, and resource management challenges that call for negotiation, bargaining, and compromise.

Finally, university, the discipline of adult education, and the program’s academic and community cultures and identities all influence the process of change, indicating that *symbolic*

frames will likely be at play when implementing online graduate programs. Findings here imply our discipline's program coordinators and instructors must focus on what we know as adult educators for effective facilitation of learning in adulthood, regardless of the teaching/delivery method. The puzzle of how to involve demonstration, discussion, democratic classrooms, relevancy, immediacy, diversity, equity, and connections with real world work and life needs are tenets of adult education, and therefore must be designed into online as well as in face-to-face programs.

Implications for program coordinators and faculty interested in offering online courses or programs clearly include the need for professional development, adequate time for course design and online construction, workload and administrative support, and engagement in marketing and recruitment efforts. Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames model assisted us as we conducted our research, and it may also support programs interested in transitioning to online course or degree offerings to analyze the often-complex change processes inherent in these kinds of transitions. While research in online teaching and learning is not sparse, we hope that future research on online adult education graduate programs specifically will continue to investigate best practices for designing and teaching graduate adult education courses, the characteristics of professional development needed to do so, and the academic, administrative, and student support structures, human resources, politics, and symbols required for effective and successful online graduate programs.

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