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How to Stay A.L.I.V.E. in a World of Ever-Changing Technology: Keeping Up with Adult Learning in a Virtual Environment

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Keywords: Virtual environments, technology, adult learning

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the benefits and barriers for adult learning within virtual environments.

Introduction

In the past decade, technology has had an enormous impact on adult educators and learners. Technology for learning and collaboration include asynchronous email, weblogs, bulletin boards, distance learning platforms, and more robust synchronous environments of virtual chat, virtual classrooms, and virtual worlds. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) suggested that bold new opportunities are presented to adult learners through technology and that technology provides a "rich learning experience in the andragogical" tradition (p. 237). Ardichvili (2008) remarked that virtual communities of practice are "important vehicles for collective learning" (p. 541). Furthermore, these virtual environments provide opportunities for the elimination of some of the barriers of interaction and learning in real-time (Bierema & Hill, 2005). These virtual environments can also enable lifelong learning by providing flexibility in the pace of learning for the learner's own competence and circumstances (Macpherson, Elliot, Harris, & Homan, 2004).

Method and Data Sources

Over the past year, we conducted a focused inquiry in a virtual world by observing and interacting with other adults in open forums, training sessions, university spaces, and by forming several virtual learning communities. The social constructivist mode of inquiry, one designed to seek new insights and a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was selected for this inquiry.

Data in this study was gathered from three primary sources and two secondary sources. The primary sources were open-ended questionnaires (Patton, 2002), semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as well as participant observational data (Spradley, 1980). All primary data was gathered in the on-line virtual world of Second Life (SL). Forty-five participants were recruited for the study through purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) using advertisements in educational settings, invitations to participants observed in public and educational settings, and postings to an educational e-mail discussion list. Secondary sources consisted of a review of extant literature and examination of supplementary data from numerous blogs, websites, and an educational e-mail discussion list.

All data gathered in this inquiry were systematically analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2005; Ruona, 2005). Accordingly, data gathered from each primary and secondary data source was unitized, transferred to data cards, then systematically sorted into categories, coded and finally clustered into major themes. Trustworthiness and confirmability of the thematic findings were enhanced

through the triangulation of various data sources (Denzin, 1992), the use of member checking with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), memoing (Ruona, 2005), and use of multiple investigators (Morse, 1994).

Findings & Discussion

In a review of the available literature on the role of technology in adult education, little research has centered on the impact new technologies have on adult learners. Johnson and Levine (2008) note that "the core element in any virtual world is the ability for the visitor to interact with the environment—people, objects, and places—and to influence the course of events" (p. 162). In today's virtual learning environments learners can interact in the same space at the same time; thereby, allowing for the emergence of virtual learning communities (communities of practice). Our findings reveal that there are benefits, as well as barriers, to the utilization of virtual environments in adult education for adult learners. The results of this study found themes in learning and in additional themes that have implications for adult education/learning. In our study, we found formal instances of learning, communities of practice, and self-directed learning. Furthermore, we found instances of educators utilizing Second Life for developing their learning environments and in curriculum/content design. In this study, many virtual communities of practice were aesthetically informed. Our findings also included benefits of using Second Life: (1) Variety of Educational Topics Available; (2) Provides Opportunities for Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration; (3) SL Facilitates Collaboration across geographical boundaries; (4) Emergent/Immersive Environment and Presence replaces old technologies; (5) Stimulates Life-long learning; (6) Health/Emotional Benefits reported by participants; and (7) Cost savings (eliminating travel expenses/phone calls, etc.). The barriers to utilizing Second Life included: (1) Glitches in Technology reduce effectiveness; (2) Addictiveness of SL; (3) Newbie/Learning Curve; (4) Funding Issues; and (5) Requires Self-Directedness.

Implications for Practice

The intent of the research is to contribute to the scholarship of adults' perceptions of learning in a virtual environment. It is hoped that the research will provide individuals with new tools for using virtual learning environments in their own practice and develop ways of appreciating its potential impact on adult education.

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