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Distance Learner Needs, Characteristics, and Motivations: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: *Why is it that adults demonstrate higher enrollment rates in distance learning (DL) courses both in the U.S. and across the world when compared to younger learners who are more likely to receive education in rather traditional classrooms? What drives adult learners to return to school and why? Who are adult learners according to the DL literature? These are questions that need to be addressed and call for further research and review in the current educational context wherein the net generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) unequivocally prevails over any previous generation of learners that has thus far helped reseacrhers come up with a taxonomy of learner types, which includes their learning needs, characteristics, motives, as well as their educational goals and needs.*

KEYWORDS: *Adult learners, distance learning (DL), DL learners' educational goals, needs, characteristics, motivations, literature review*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era today, according to Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2012), the millenials born between 1982 and 2005 have already begun to shape a new form educational environment, which is not restriced by the constraints of time, space, or even man-made curricular, instructional, or adminstrative mandates. As such, this learner generation has started to change not only the educational, but also the societal make-up due to several change factors such as the ever-growing demands of global economies, politics, information, and innovative technologies. Social media turn out to be an extremely powerful vehicle for youth connecting, communicating, collaborating, and constructing knowledge. For example, statistics show that 76.4% of Americans in the age group 18-24 and 57.3% in the age group 25-34 use social media (Benson & Morgan, 2014). Due to their cost and time-efficiency, along with their speed of deployment, they offer learning opportunities for information building, sharing, collaboration, and thus creating knowledge-building communities. Benson and Morgan (2014) presented an unconventional look to use of social media technologies in higher education, differentiating itself with its not so unilateral approach to the *what*, *how*, and *why* of college students' utilizing these tools in their learning processes.

The new generation of learners has the ability to learn, create, recreate, and share information at their own pace and time, based on their own learning needs, characteristics, motivations, and their personal learning styles. Besides, they recognize their own important role in helping "shape the future of this increasingly global, interconnected society" (Yildiz & Scharaldi, 2015, p. 259), which explains that the digital world is very likely to help lower transactional barriers to students' autonomous learning that leads up to their enhanced success at school, in the work place, and in their social relationships. In such a global, e-context, adult learners or older adolescents feel the need to keep up with these novelties in technology in learning, especially in the last three decades. Amidst these technological developments, many working professionals now find themselves required to catch up with this digital world of distance learning, virtual learning, e-learning, online learning, blended learning, and social media applications (Nafukho, Muyia, & Graham, 2010). For this reason, they have started to go back to their education for various other reasons including better employment opportunities, increased career-related skills, higher expertise in the workplace, higher chances for promotion at work, and others have driven adult learners back to school, particularly to non-traditional, online classes—or distance learning (DL) courses—which are the foci of this paper. DL is the type of education that these adult students cannot receive in traditional, face-to-face, brick-and-mortar classrooms due to several factors such as family obligations, children, employment, disability, etc. (Simonson et al., 2012). These are the factors that can help explain why adults enroll in online, distance learning programs or courses.

Yet, there are additional factors that need further research and review in the DL literature as to why they engage in DL the way they persistently do in today's aforementioned educational milieu. They are reportedly motivated to enroll in DL courses by opportunities to gain further expertise they might need in their specialty (Simonson et al., 2012), get personal satisfaction by nurturing their personal interest areas, or even for

self-enrichment purposes. Because most of these driving factors do not often appeal to their younger counterparts who do not often take DL courses voluntarily like adults (Simonson et al., 2012), a comprehensive recent research on who adult learners really are, what they academically need, and why can help the reader gain new insights into both the theory and practice of adults in DL environments.

II. WHO ARE ADULT LEARNERS COMPARED TO YOUNGER STUDENTS IN TRADITIONAL LEARNING SETTINGS? EXPLORATION OF ADULTS STUDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS, NEEDS, AND MOTIVATIONS TO LEARN IN A DL ENVIRONMENT

One pervasive characteristic of the distance learner is an increased commitment to learning (Simonson et al., 2012, pp. 218-219), which rather adult learners tend to possess when compared to older adolescents or much younger learner demographics. Today, tere is no doubt that learners who take DL courses are rather self-directed and intrinsically motivated to learn and succeed. Moore and Kearsley (2012) describe adult learners' autonomous learming characteristic as their *need to learn and succeed* rather than being obliged to learn in order to academically succeed and emotionally, cognitively, and physically develop at traditional school settings. Unlike children or adolescents, adult learners rather tend to learn through individual work, self-drive, and motivation, which could explain the reason why, especially in asynchronous, online learning enviornments, some adult learners might not quite enjoy working with teams (Simonson et al., 2012). Time commitment, regular attendance and participation in collaborative work, as well as timely feedback to team members are obvious challenges to team work, which adult learners might find difficult to overcome at times. Also, unlike younger adults, they do not need to go through critical development stages, for they now undergo other stages of life such as employment, family, children, and other such commitments. As such, adult learners rather choose learning via technologies at remote locations not only because of the flexibilty of DL in terms of time, finances, and other factors, but predominantly because they have the ability to choose DL voluntarily compared to children/adolescents at school age who do not often have the opportunity to do that (Simonson et al., 2012).

Adults are busy individuals with several family obligations, and thus, allowing them to "learn anywhere and anytime" (Ally, Schafer, Cheung, McGreal, & Tin, 2007, p. 2) using web-based, preferably portable devices, can provide them with flexibility in their learning. According to Glenn (2000), the type of learners today is rather interested in interactive learning environments wherein they have access to multiple choices in terms of assignments they complete and various forms of feedback they receive, in addition to learning opportunities with which they can express themselves as self-directed learners utilizing various resources in order to create learning experiences that are individually meaningful for themselves. Today's students want to be in charge of their own learning processes, performing tasks as hands-on and solving problems with an inquiry-based approach to their personal learning experiences. Besides the evolution of students in the new millennium, the evolution of technology, according to Gitonga and Murungi (2015), provides learning opportunities with innovative technologies that are interactive and effective, demonstrating diverse content areas that might be difficult for students. Lehtinen (2006) posited that students of the digital world are able to learn anytime and anywhere thanks to the advancements in technology, particularly on the Internet.

Simonson et al. (2012) pointed out that "young people are not necessarily involved in a distant class by choice. They are often seeking a particular course of study, but do not have ready access to a face-to-face class in their current location" (p. 221). They are thus often placed in DL settings without considerations of what motivates them to learn, their learning goals, needs, or whether they are capable of directing their own learning at all. Unlike younger learners, however, the situation is different with adult distance learners. Ideally, adult learners, according to Moore (2007)—who, by use of preferably web-based ICTs or electronic DE/DL tools, get in charge of their learning activities on their own and manage to learn independently from the teacher who rather functions as a guide or a facilitator. These learners need to take the onus of responsibility to lead their own learning processes (Simonson et al., 2012). This is a great learning opportunity for these learners, for such autonomy or independence leads them to understand the given content at their own pace and based their previous experiences and knowledge. They also have the advantage of rebuilding the content and leading the method of learning in a way that they often excel at internalizing the subject matter, by taking the ownership of their individual learning process anytime and anywhere, without being constrained by the limitations of time and space.

III. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT LEARNING ADAPTED TO DL ENVIRONMENTS: ANDRAGOGY

The idea with self-directed learning is that the learners control and regulate most of their learning activities. Adults learn through a process during which they can regulate how they learn, where they learn, when they learn, as well as how fast they learn; that is, the pace of their learning. Brookfield (1986) explained that

"the attainment of adulthood is concomitant on adults' coming to perceive themselves as self-directing individuals" (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p. 51). According to Knowles (1980), andragogy includes the following four assumptions: 1) self concept; 2) experience; 3) readiness to learn; and 4) orientation to learning. Democratic participation is another critical component of andragogy. Under Knowles' self-directed learning approach, a shift to transformation starts once adult learners successfully manage to transfer information from their previous experiences to their current knowledge (Murray, 2008). When infused with the andragogical approach to learning towards effective design, development, implementation, and evaluation of instruction (Reiser & Dempsey, 2007), web-based, digital technologies pose alternatives to adults' participation in social, economic, and political life in the U.S. Katzlinger and Herzog (2014) posited that instructors should organize the learning environment that fosters and supports self-regulated learning processes for their dents.

Knowles (1984) stated that because adults are self-directed, type of instruction delivered to them should allow them to discover things and gain knowledge on their own, without reliance on people who should provide them with guidance only when necessary or when they make mistakes.Instructors should organize the learning environment that fosters and supports self-regulated learning processes for their students. Autonomous (i.e., self-directed learning) learning constitutes a vehicle for helping adult learners feel like they are an organic part of the mainstream education. If so, by using DE media and technologies, adult learners are very likely to actively participate in the society, and thereby, become active, social, and participative members of the social milieu. They prefer and manage to direct their own learning processes, rather than remaining as passive, marginalized learner groups. Murray (2008) called this phenomenon as a *paradigm shift* in today's digital era.

In DL/DE environments, the new norm is the pedagogy driven by web-based technology (Chuang, 2013) despite that advocates of traditional learning/teaching methods resist adapting to new changes, by maintaining their status quo. Such transference is initiated with mobile devices as today's learners become independent and *autonomous* as tech-savvy learners who are apt to understand and apply the given content with portable, digital tools without the boundaries of time and space. This provides them with great flexibility to build—and rebuild—diverse contexts of learning and sharing knowledge from multiple entry points. Imtinan, Chang, and Issa (2014) focus on the educational potential of utilizing mobile technologies both in the world of academia and for the future of teaching and learning practices, in general. According to Imtinan et al. (2014), m-Learning rather holds a pedagogical value particularly because of these various conceptual frameworks, instructional design models, and learning pedagogies it draws on. It is clear in this article that mobile technologies enable learners to become more independent and collaboratively engage in the entire learning process. Fuegen (2012) argued that, with their huge potential, DE/DL technologies help create such diverse contexts with communication and dialogue powerful enough to defeat today's *transactional distance divide*. Taiwanese college students' attitudes and self-efficacy as they utilize mobile technologies in their learning processes. Regarding this, Yang (2012) investigated English language learning with mobile tools for college-level students in Taiwan, and found that most of these adult students agreed that "their motivation for English learning was enhanced and most of the students had positive attitudes towards mobile learning" (p. 66).

Under the provision of andragogy applied to DE, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are designed for learning, promoting, and fostering a learning culture of innovations. ICTs utilized by adult learners remotely and at different times provide them with significant experiential research that supports innovation and independent learning. These online, DL technologies lead adult ESL learners to socially connect and interact with others in the global context, in addition to electronically engage not only in the content provided to them, but also to information others are learning, building, and disseminating. With respect to this, Ally et al. (2007) focused on learning with mobile technologies—also called m-Learning—which provide a versatile learning environment delivered to the right person, at the right time, and in the right place. Use of mobile devices in adults' learning processes can be an insightful research area to further investigate—yet will not be discussed in-depth in this literature review— which might lead scholars in the field to bring up the hypothesis that it is very likely that mobile tools will soon become an indispensable component of DL/DE courses where adult learners in an age range of 25-50 enroll, making up the largest demographic of DE students in the country (Moore & Kearsley, 2012) .This makes sense, for if fostering learning communities of culture of innovative information and technologies provides opportunities of new research about the learning motives, goals, needs, interests, and definition of independent adult learners enrolled in DL/DE environments including, post-secondary students, and other adults in community colleges as mentioned earlier, then, making mobile computing devices accessible for them and an integral, organic part of the DL curriculum would not be a myth, but the reality of this millennium's educational milieu.

IV. DISTANCE LEARNERS' RESPONSIBILITIES DURING THEIR LEARNING PROCESSES IN DL PROGRAMS

If a high level of commitment is considered as a priority of the distance learner (Simonson et al., 2012), then the inference should be that adult learners enrolling in off-campus, flexible, DL courses or programs should

not experience many challenges in terms of delivering what is expected of them during their studies in these programs. This, however, does not necessarily mean that adult learners do not have certain academic responsibilities as they engage in several learning activities, along with social and academic intreractions with their peers, instructor(s) in class, as well as the school adminstrators and online school counseling/support services. In fact, according to Macfarlane and Smaldino (1997), "just as the instructor must take responsibility for learning about students, learners in the distance education classroom must assume ownership in their learning experiences" (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p. 227). Simonson et al. (2012) underscored that DL students need to know "how to respond in educational settings wherein diverse modes of instructing is implements' (e.g., asynchronous or synchronous). For instance, during either synchronous or asynchronous discussions, they need to know when and how to post responses in the appropriate platform, pose questions to their instructors or peers, or present a substantive, research-based, evidential idea. Hence, it is essential that "distant students learn to use the tools available in the distant classroom." (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 227).

As stressed by researchers in the recent DL literature, a distance learner needs to have increased commitment to his/her own learning, which is a critical characteristic of this type of learner, particularly because distance learning (DL) is a student-centered learning environment. "In any student-centered learning environment, students must assume responsibility for their own learning (Kiliç-Çakmak, Karatas, & Ocak, 2009, as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p. 233). The learner needs to understand the course requirements related to assignment submission deadlines, class participation, and assessment (e.g., grading). For this, the instructor should be responsible for posting a syllabus on the course web site at the onset of the course, which clearly states specific learning objectives of the course, module, or a specific unit under weekly discussion, along with the academic expectations of the distance learner. Sending out weekly notes and announcements on a regular basis would additionally help distance learners organize their academic schedule, which they might adjust based on their current employment, familial, or other personal commitments.

Simonson et al. (2012) emphasized that a distance learner's assuming substantial amount of responsibility for his/her studies would be extremely helpful for increased success. The authors stressed that distance students must understand the importance of time commitment to their studies, combined with how they communicate with their instructor(s) and their peers, as well as how they obtain learning resources, submit assignments, regularly attend, and actively participate in online class discussions. According to Simonson et al. (2012), regular, consistent class participation can lead to enhanced student success, especially in asynchronous learning environments which call for a certain netiquette. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) pointed out that "class participation, be it in a traditional class or a distance class, always enhances learning for students" (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p. 231). Therefore, with such responsibilities, distance learners must "focus on their own learning and be able to judge whether they need additional assistance and how to proceed to request it" (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 233), which is completely congruent with the *autonomous learning* approach robust in DL settings today.

V. EFFECTIVE DL EXPERIENCES BASED ON NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS' NEED FOR QUALITY AND EQUIVALENT EDUCATION IN COMPARISON TO LOCAL, TRADITIONAL LEARNERS

A successful DL experience is a system of several components including primarily the learners, the content, the instructional method, learning materials, and the learning environment, including the technology process is to consider the components of a successful learning system (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009). The interaction of all of these critical elements informs distance education (DE) course instructors about the quality of that learning experience for all students. According to Simonson et al. (2012), however, the most crucial factor to consider in a DL environment is not creating equal, but rather the equivalent learning experiences for all types of students—be they non-traditional online students of those enrolled in traditional classrooms.

DE leaders need to allow for programs that provide distant learners with equivalent learning experiences with what local learners. If the fundamental characteristic of DE or distance learning (DL) is the separation of the teacher and students on various levels, then, what DE leaders should do is to create a learning environment that is not only based on a dialogic learning process, positive, and equivalent for all learners, but also one that promotes self-directed, rather student-driven learning and teaching ideally supported with information and communication technologies (ICTs). Regarding this, Simonson et al. (2012) emphasized that educational leaders in the DE field should "strive to understand technology and technological approaches that make the experiences of distant and local learners positive and equivalent, at least until someone's genius identifies an approach to learning using telecommunications systems to change education" (p. 28).

Distance learners should manage to apply the information from within the given content into their real-life practices and thus get actively involved in class-related activities, construct knowledge and engage in the entire learning process with their own control and ownership on whatever the subject matter is, in addition to relating to the content with their personal knowledge and experiences (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). DE specialists

should strive to understand technology and technological approaches that make the experiences of distant and local learners positive and equivalent. Regarding this, Simonson et al. (2012) contended that "learning experiences for [distance] learners should be equivalent, not necessarily equal" (p. 239), which should be tailored toward the needs and motivations of both local, on-campus learners (of traditional, face-to-face courses) and those of off-campus, non-traditional, DL learners. Nafukho and Irby (2015) explored the impact of innovative technology integration into classes in order to enhance faculty's teaching quality, maintain college-level students' engagement, and enriching their learning experiences with technology. The authors especially shed light to students' perceptions about integrating ICTs into online and blended learning and teaching settings based on their individual and collective experiences with these technologies both inside and outside of the classroom, which emerge as highly positive.

VI. CURRENT TRENDS IN ADULT STUDENTS' DL EXPERIENCES: RECENT ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AND AN UPWARD SURGE IN ENROLLMENTS IN U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The recent US economic downturn has ended up with a surge of working professionals, those who search for jobs, as well as high school graduates who return to school with the expectation that they can develop new career-related skills and expertise (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). We should particularly keep in mind that not all of these often adult, working individuals are able to afford a traditional four-year college education, which leads us to think that the popularity of community colleges today has exponentially increased compared to that in the past decade. As such, several (two-year) community colleges across the country have already begun to invest in technology resources for all types of learners enrolled in their school systems. These widespread investments among community colleges across the nation today are typically made either as part of administrative computing or academic computing technologies, making these colleges "more competitive with four-year institutions" (Duke, 2009, as cited in Ramaswami, 2009, para. 7), and thus boosting the reputation of these colleges which were once regarded almost as the stepchildren of mainstream education.

Due to the current economic recession in the country, the enrollment rates at community colleges have dramatically increased. Regarding this, I would like to present quick facts about the current enrollment numbers, based on the results released in the latest report from the US Department of Education (*The Condition of Education, Special Analysis 2008: Community Colleges*):

> Enrollment in two-year institutions has been rising steadily for several years, posting a 10 percent increase between 2000 and 2006. During the 2006-2007 academic year, the nation's 1,045 community colleges signed on 6.2 million students, or 35 percent of all post-secondary students enrolled that year. Though statistics for the 2007-2008 academic year are not yet available, most community colleges estimate enrollment increases of 10 percent or more from the previous year, with even higher registration for online courses. (as cited in Ramaswami, 2009, para. 2)

Considering community colleges investing in innovative educational technologies in order to meet the needs of this rise in the current learner population, it is thus plausible to infer that majority of these colleges are now fully prepared to technologically handle the aforementioned increase in enrollments of learners from all backgrounds, diverse expertise, learning needs, goals, interests, and experiences. In other words, they use technology to attract more adult learners descending from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, enriching community college classes with their vast and diverse specialties, skills, and experiences. A good example to this would be Calhoun Community College, which has a current enrollment of 9,000, and which appears to have started "out with a course management system from Blackboard that was initially used only for distance education, but now applies to almost all traditional courses as well. In early 2008, Calhoun invested in Tegrity's Campus 2.0 lecture-capture solution" (Duke, 2009, as cited in Ramaswami, 2009, para. 3). This seems to have helped the college serve an expanding pool of distance learners from diverse learning characteristics, needs, and motivations.

Based on the situation in this exemplary institution and in other such community colleges across the country, I can also infer the fact that one core strength of community colleges is distance learning. "A May 2008 study of more than 1,000 higher education institutions conducted by technology solutions hub CDW-G reports that 94 percent of community colleges offer distance learning, compared to 74 percent of four-year institutions" (Ramaswami, 2009, para. 7). According to Ramaswami (2009), "the extreme diversity of the student body (working adults, part-time students, seniors, disadvantaged students) means that many individuals need to be able to study remotely at their convenience, tasking educational institutions with providing easy, 24/7 access to learning opportunities" (para. 7). These are obvious challenges ahead of today's community colleges, and yet they have been remarkably successful in responding to such challenges—probably even better than what four-year educational institutions do—especially since the economic downturn.

VII. ADULT DL STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS TO LEARN VIA WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGIES

Much of research on student learning ties to the importance of student experiences in engaged and hands-on learning, which can be applied to real-life situations. From this viewpoint, adults enrolling in DL/DE courses or programs seek similar learning experiences that allow them to pragmatically implement in their workplace, further research, expertise, and even when engaging in personal, social relationships with their family, friends, cohort, colleagues, and others—either as face-to-face or online. Through their experiences, adult learners find value in the information being taught and learn how to transfer the knowledge to real-world practices. Practical knowledge helps adults the ability to *autonomously* build bridges between their past and present experiences. Moore and Kearsley (2012) argued that adults are rather more interested in participating in a distance learning situation "because of their motivation to apply learning to their work (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p. 221). It is, therefore, imperative that instructional/curriculum designers and instructional technologists consider "how to motivate adults to stay active in learning" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p. 221).

In this context, adult DL students' motivation to use their theory-based knowledge in practice can tremendously contribute to their new identity as dynamic, pragmatic individuals leading their own learning and improving their status quo in various aspects of their lives (e.g., work, education, research, leadership, family, etc.). According to Chuang (2013), the new norm is the pedagogy driven by technology. Unfortunately, there is yet another category of adult DL students, who are regarded as the advocates of traditional learning/teaching methods. This second group of adult learners still remains reluctant to adapting to innovative learning and teaching practices and the evolution of DL-based programs, courses, modules, and other such training/educational programs, by maintaining their status quo. Thereby, they find themselves falling behind their counterparts who are stimulated by learning goals and motivations such as developing their own career-related standing, improving their educational and possibly financial status, expanding their friends and family-related networks, and most importantly, nurturing their very basic human need: Transcending themselves with the powerful mix of theory and practice of knowledge as developed individuals who excel at contributing to the society as a whole in all ways. It is also unfortunate that the art and science of information acquired in today's online, web-based technology-rich—recently, presided by mobile learning technologies—DE/DL environments seem to impinge upon the manner in which this latter category of adult learners design, develop, deliver, and evaluate instruction, or simply, how they operate in life.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED FOR ADULT DISTANCE LEARNERS

In the digital educational contexts today, there are several technology tools available for distance learners. When adult learners are under close inquiry in web-based technology-supported DL/DE environments, it is undoubtedly that majority of DL instructional designers and educational /instructional technologists who strive to design and deliver effective instruction for this specific group of learners currently enrolled in DL programs would not dismiss the fact that Clark (1983) was in no fault when he came up with the contention that *media are mere vehicles* (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012). This means that these ID specialists and SMEs have the onus of knowing who DL/DE learners are, what their study skills, educational backgrounds, work-related expertise, and personal, academic, and/or career-related experiences comprise, in addition to their particular learning needs, goals, interests, preferences, and their attitudes towards and perceptions about ICTs as they involve in DL environments.

On planning and executing decisions pertinent to DL-related ID, one can fully understand that these SMEs and instructional/curriculum designers are not to base their curricular decisions on their personal beliefs, dispositions on who should take DL courses, traditional courses, face-to-face courses, blended courses, or fully online, or e-learning courses, how, where, or at what percentage. It should be additionally considered that they are not to take from current, practical templates, processes, or some trendy theoretical approaches to learning made accessible for DL/DE environments, or the mandates of the school administrators (Simonson et al., 2012).

Making informed decisions about the most appropriate technology use designed for DL learners—for adult DL learners, in particular—certainly emerges from a thorough and informed knowledge of and appreciation for the type(s) of learners that decide to study in DL-based settings. It is thus crucial to gain the knowledge of what motivates them as they make substantial life-changing decisions on multiple levels (e.g., career-related, academic, and personal). According to Simonson et al. (2012), what told of the demise of Troy were signal fires. Back then, they were considered as the most appropriate vehicles (i.e., technology) for communication. Drawing on this analogy, the following assertion can be made: Today's (adult) DL learners' educational needs, goals, characteristics, and motivations should dictate the most effective and efficient instructional models in the process of design, delivery, and assessment in DL/DE environments.

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