Chapter 7
Fear Factors: Hidden Challenges to Online Learning for Adults

Patricia Sendall  
Merrimack College, USA

Raymond J. Shaw  
Merrimack College, USA

Kim Round  
Merrimack College, USA

Jane T. Larkin  
Merrimack College, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is: (1) to examine the interrelationship between andragogy and online learning; (2) to uncover the hidden challenges to successful online learning for non-traditional students; and (3) to uncover hidden challenges in faculty adoption of online instruction. The authors believe that fear is often the biggest factor which can present itself in a variety of ways. A study was conducted to identify those hidden challenges facing students and faculty who choose not to take or teach online courses. This study identifies how institutions can support students and faculty who desire to take or teach online courses. This study also discusses how online learning is aligned with andragogy\(^1\), which traditionally leverages learners’ experience, independence, and interaction (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001).

INTRODUCTION

Many colleges and universities understand that in order to stay relevant in this time of declining enrollments, and with an increase in non-traditional student populations, curricula must be developed in ways to accommodate them. According to Jacobson and Harris (2008), non-traditional students make up between half and 75% of the students enrolled as undergraduates. Many institutions may launch online learning environments attempting to cater to the non-traditional learner. Given the flexibility that online learning offers, one might expect that most non-traditional students will gravitate toward this option. However, organizations are identifying

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-830-7.ch007
a number of factors that must be addressed in order to successfully launch and maintain a robust online learning environment.

Experts in the field suggest that the current generation of teenagers—sometimes referred to as the E-Generation—possesses digital competencies to effectively navigate the multidimensional and fast-paced digital environment. For generations of adults who grew up in a world of books, traveling through cyberspace seems as treacherous and intimidating as speaking a new language. In fact, Prensky recognized such non-IT literate individuals as burdened with an accent—non-native speakers of a language, struggling to survive in a strange new world. (Jones-Kavalier & Flannigan, 2008)

BACKGROUND

Maor and Volet (2007) have identified three barriers to online learning: (1) institutional inexperience in developing online courses; (2) perceived insufficient instructional support and communication, and (3) insufficient participant computer literacy. Various research studies, including those done at Arizona State University, Texas Women’s University, and Ball State University, have focused on the Early Majority population and their expectations with regard to the technology environment (Brush, et al., 2003; Butler & Sellbom, 2002; Nelson, Snider, & Gershner, 2002). The research identifies similar foundational requirements, which includes training, support, reliable infrastructure, and consulting to match the right technology with the right learning objective.

To overcome a resistance to change and/or fear of something new, faculty members at the University of Maryland were offered stipends and recognition for successfully integrating technology, utilizing the University’s current resources (Fritz, 2004). Wingard (2004) reported on the results of a coordinated study done across seven institutions. In this study, faculty members were exposed to strong instructional technology support, training, and consulting, in their use of Web technologies in the classroom.

Ashley-Fridie (2008) argues that there needs to be a “focus on faculty attitudes, motivations, and specific factors” in order to take the fear out of online course design. She argues that administration must provide pedagogical support, instructional technical support, intrinsic support (challenge, keeping up with technology, acceptance, etc.), extrinsic support (time, money, scheduling, flexibility, etc.), and instructional design support.

Andragogy

Adult learners often express great trepidation at the thought of signing up for online courses. Likewise, many faculty members are reluctant to offer their courses in an online or hybrid format. At first glance, and based on our observations during advising sessions or faculty planning periods, it appears that the primary reason for this reluctance to teach and learn in an online environment is that students and faculty alike prefer the face-to-face interaction they find in traditional classrooms over the perceived anonymity of online courses. However, as we dig deeper into the possible reasons for the unwillingness of these individuals to become involved with online learning, we suspect that the underlying issue is related to fear. There are many kinds of fear, of course; therefore, for the purposes of this study, we have identified the fear of loss of control, the fear of technology and the fear of the unknown, as having the greatest impact on adult learners and faculty members as they contemplate online learning.

With questions as basic as “how do I turn on this computer?” to more complex concerns such as “how can I keep students from cheating in my online courses?” students and faculty may need basic coaching on how the online learning environment works (fear of loss of control), in computer technology including Blackboard or