Chapter 7
Understanding the Online Learner

ABSTRACT
This chapter extends some of the differences discussed in chapter 6, focusing exclusively on defining and understanding the online learner and understanding how online learners can be differ from Face-to-Face (F2F) learners. Although this chapter is intended to touch upon the many demographics of online learners, it is not a comprehensive list of differences as all individuals have unique lifestyles and reasons for pursuing online education. This chapter does, however, discuss some of the more researched understandings of the demographics of online learners, including returning/non-traditional students, veterans, working adults, and the unique educational considerations of these individuals.

INTRODUCTION
An instant message from gb135 could be from 60-year-old Greg Butler, a retired executive in Washington, D.C.; from a fifth-grader Ginny Bradshaw, who lives in Boston; or, for that matter, from former president George H.W. Bush. Such a cryptic moniker lacks the demographic details that are traditionally used to identify individuals. Such potential anonymity raises the possibility that individuals can construct online identities that are unrelated to their physical ones.—A. P. Rovai, M.K. Ponton & J.D. Baker (2008)

Many researchers have pursued defining and understanding varying demographics of online learners. There are also many research studies that examine specific demographics of online learners in order to understand their
internet and computer usage, their technological skills, their propensity for online learning, and their lives outside of the digital classroom. Such research has paved the way for more focused questions regarding the needs, capabilities, preparedness, and technological insights of online learners. The more that instructors understand the online learner, the more that they are able to develop the online classroom into an informative and supportive community of learning. The information in this chapter is important to help define some of the important factors of consideration for online instructors to understand about their students. Understanding the individuality of online students is imperative to everyone’s success in the classroom.

Just as there are different types of learners that we have identified in our traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom, the online classroom has different types of learners of various demographics, with a few additional considerations instructors need to be aware of before teaching.

While generalizing our students is not the most effective way to organize and devise a classroom plan, learning about the unique considerations of our students is important. Perhaps this is more clearly understood using the example of elementary school: Elementary school teachers are prepared and understand the learning cycles and age development progressions of their students. In knowing this the teacher can not only set up a successful classroom environment, but can also identify if and when there may be a problem with a student in terms of understanding or communication.

At the college level, this is typically forgotten. Our students are adults whether they are just learning how to be (and that they are) adults or could be parents, executives, or returning students of any age, race, ethnicity, technological capability. College instructors are typically subject-matter experts rather than trained in pedagogy, regardless of environment. If a potential instructor’s graduate program particularly emphasizes pedagogical training, then graduates of those students may have more experience. Typically, though, college instructors are not formally introduced and experienced with pedagogy.

When you go a step further into the online college course, the boundaries are even more loosely defined; instructors may have international students residing in their home countries, but participating in classes, and thus six hours ahead or behind the “official” classroom time. You may have significant variations in age, gender, work experiences, ethnicity, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, economic status, socioeconomic status, families, and much, much more. This is not to say that these variations do not exist in the face-to-face classroom, but rather that they exist more transparently face-to-face. Online students can potentially be (or represent themselves as) anyone or anything. One such way for individuals to introduce or represent themselves in the online environment is through the creation of an avatar.

Avatars have represented a unique facet of education in terms of self-representation. Avatars are computer generated images (much like cartoons) that are part of many programs such as Second Life, some LMSs, and many