Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education
Vol. 21, Issue No. 7, October-2024, ISSN 2230-7540

DOI: https://doi.org/10.29070/t72zhg33

Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Barriers to Technical Learning among Adult Learners in Online Distance Education

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive review of the multifaceted challenges faced by adult learners in internalizing technical learning methods through online distance education. The study uses only secondary data sources and conducts an in-depth investigation of the internal, external, and institutional obstacles that stand in the way of adult learners achieving success in technical education programs. External restrictions, such as work-life balance, caregiving duties, and disruptive home situations, were found to interact with internal obstacles such as cognitive limits, low self-efficacy, and poor self-regulation. These internal barriers were found to interact with external constraints. While this was going on, it was discovered that important drivers to dropout behaviour and low retention consisted of institutional issues connected to outmoded course designs, insufficient learner support services, and a lack of adaptable pedagogical frameworks.
The review went on to investigate how these obstacles are connected to one another and frequently compound one another, which ultimately results in disengagement and education cycles that are not completed. The results of studies have shown that adult students who are subjected to external demands are more likely to have increased internal challenges. This is especially true when educational institutions fail to give solutions that are flexible and learner-centred. According to the findings, there is a pressing requirement for integrated support systems that not only target a single category of obstacles, but also the entire ecosystem of learning issues that adult learners face. The article also included a review of global techniques and policy initiatives that have been shown to be effective in countries that have well-established adult education systems. Strengthening institutional capacity, giving training on digital preparedness, building pre-course orientation modules, adopting flexible assessment methods, and guaranteeing continual faculty development are some of the key suggestions that have been extracted from the research that has been conducted. According to the conclusion, there should be legislative changes and methods to online technical education that are attentive to the context, and they should be tailored particularly to meet the varied and ever-changing requirements of adult learners. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on adult digital education by emphasizing the importance of inclusive, responsive, and technologically progressive strategies to support adult learners in technical domains.

Keywords: Adult learners, technical education, online distance learning, learning barriers, educational retention

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INTRODUCTION

When we talk about technical learning techniques, we are referring to the structured approaches, tools, and pedagogical strategies that are utilised in order to teach skills and information that are often of a professional, professional, or discipline-specific natures. The usage of online simulations, coding platforms, software training modules, interactive laboratories, and instructional movies are all examples of these approaches. All of these methods are intended to improve functional competence in technical disciplines. When it comes to adult learners, particularly those who are participating in online distance education,

technical learning provides both an opportunity and a difficulty. This provides a means by which one may acquire new skills or update old ones, which is frequently required for job progression or reintegration into a workforce that is undergoing change. On the other hand, the capacity to internalise such knowledge necessitates not only a fundamental understanding of digital technology but also cognitive plasticity and self-regulated learning techniques, both of which may not be available in the same proportions throughout adult populations (Boeren, 2016; Kahu, 2013).

In today's digital economy, there is a growing emphasis on ongoing professional growth and learning that continues throughout one's whole life. For adult learners who are interested in acquiring new skills or improving existing ones but do not prefer to be constrained by the limits of traditional classroom settings, online distance education has emerged as an essential platform. As a result of its adaptability, accessibility, and scalability, online programs have become an appealing alternative for adults who are attempting to balance their employment and family duties with their educational pursuits (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Adult learners frequently face difficulties in internalising complicated technical knowledge due to constraints in instructional design, technology hurdles, and personal learning issues. This is the case despite the fact that these benefits present themselves. To ensure that learning experiences are both inclusive and successful, it is vital to have a solid understanding of these barriers (Guri-Rosenblit, 2018; Wang et al., 2019).

The challenges that adult learners face while engaging with technical learning methods are multidimensional. Cognitive challenges include difficulties in abstract thinking, memory retention, and adapting to new learning modes. Technological issues such as lack of access to high-speed internet or limited digital proficiency also hinder effective engagement. Psychological factors such as fear of failure, lack of confidence, and academic anxiety are commonly reported. Social constraints like family responsibilities and professional commitments further limit time and focus. Additionally, institutional shortcomings in terms of insufficient support systems, rigid curricula, and lack of learner-centered approaches contribute to the difficulty in mastering technical subjects (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Park & Choi, 2009).

A considerable revolution has taken place in adult education since the early 2000s. This transition has been brought about by the emergence of digital platforms, which have redefined the way in which learning is provided and experienced. As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, educational institutions all around the world were required to move to online forms, which further expedited the transformation. The structural and personal constraints that adult learners encounter were brought to light and intensified by this digital shift, particularly in technical topics that have historically relied on hands-on instruction (Means et al., 2014; Hodges et al., 2020). Theoretical frameworks such as Knowles' Andragogy provide an emphasis on learning that is self-directed and relevant to real-life problems, both of which are especially important for adults. In a similar vein, Kahu's paradigm for student engagement places an emphasis on emotional, behavioural, and cognitive involvement, all of which are essential for effective learning in virtual settings (Kahu, 2013; Knowles et al., 2015).

According to recent global reports, enrollment in online adult education programs has steadily increased over the past decade. In the United States alone, nearly 35% of adults aged 25 and above have participated in some form of online learning, with technical courses being among the most sought-after (National Center

for Education Statistics, 2021). However, dropout rates in online technical programs remain significantly higher than in traditional face-to-face formats, often exceeding 40% in some cases (Lee & Choi, 2011). One of the most significant concerns is retention, since a significant number of students drop out of school owing to difficulties with technology, time restrictions, and insufficient academic assistance. These figures highlight the significance of conducting a study of the difficulties encountered by adult learners in technical domains in order to accomplish the goals of improving learning outcomes and the efficiency of policy (Park, 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

A comprehensive review of existing scholarly literature that is based on secondary data will be conducted as the primary objective of this study. The purpose of this review is to investigate the difficulties that adult learners encounter when attempting to internalise technical learning methods in online distance education. The purpose of this study is to identify, classify, and synthesise the various types of barriers internal, external, and institutional that hinder the capacity of adult learners to successfully engage with and remember technical content. Additionally, the purpose of this review is to propose practical and policy-level recommendations that can assist educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in the process of developing learning environments that are more inclusive and supportive of adult learners. These recommendations will be formulated by organising existing knowledge into thematic classifications.

For the purpose of this study, a procedure known as a systematic literature review was used. Regarding the research, there was no primary data collecting that took place. Secondary data that had been published, specifically articles from academic journals that had been subjected to peer review, were the source of all of the information. The purpose of this review was to provide a synthesis of empirical results that investigate the challenges that adult learners have when participating in online technical education.

Only empirical studies focused explicitly on adult learners enrolled in online distance education programs were included. The study considered qualitative, mixed-method, and descriptive research published in scholarly journals from the year 2000 onwards. Excluded from the study were articles related to corporate training sessions, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), non-degree online programs, literature reviews, meta-analyses, editorials, and conference proceedings.

Articles that were relevant to the study's objectives were found using a set of keywords that included technical learning, adult learners, distance education, barriers, dropout, retention, internal challenges, external obstacles, and institutional support. The articles that were found were organised, reviewed, and analysed using a constant comparative approach. Reputable academic databases such as Web of Science, ERIC, SAGE Journals Online, Wiley Online Library, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online Journals were also used for this purpose.

INTERNAL BARRIERS TO TECHNICAL LEARNING

Adult learners in online distance education often face a range of internal barriers that significantly affect their ability to internalise technical content. One of the primary challenges is cognitive decline or age-related difficulties that impact memory retention, concentration, and the speed of processing new information. These limitations are compounded by limited exposure to digital tools, resulting in low digital literacy levels which inhibit learners from engaging effectively with technical learning platforms.

Additionally, many adult learners lack intrinsic motivation due to prolonged gaps in formal education, leading to reduced engagement with complex technical material (Norton, Billett, & Choy, 2021; Fischer, Nistor, & Scheiter, 2022).

Emotional difficulties provide an additional layer of complexity to the learning experience. It is normal for adults to have a low sense of self-efficacy when they believe they are not adequately prepared to manage new learning technology, particularly in technical areas. Students frequently experience academic anxiety as a result of this psychological barrier, which manifests itself as a feeling of being overwhelmed by unfamiliar terminology, software, or coding environments. The fear of failing and being assessed for underperformance is a common factor that inhibits active engagement in technical activities, which in turn hinders the acquisition of information and the development of skills (Peterson, Hofmann, & Greer, 2020; Morales, Klein, & Benson, 2021).

In asynchronous learning environments, self-regulation becomes a major obstacle for many adult learners. Without real-time instructor supervision, they have a hard time managing their time, setting goals, and sticking to study schedules. As a result, they procrastinate and eventually stop caring about the course material. Several studies have demonstrated that when self-regulation is weak, adult learners fail to meet course expectations, particularly in technical modules that demand constant (Zimmer, Ortega, & Flynn, 2021; Hurst, Delgado, & Mason, 2022).

International studies provide further insights into these barriers. For instance, a comparative study in Canada and South Korea found that adult learners with low digital confidence and high anxiety had significantly lower completion rates in online technical certification programs. These findings underline the need to address internal barriers through learner-centric design and support mechanisms (Barker, Kim, & Suarez, 2021; Delgado, Manzano, & Reardon, 2023).

EXTERNAL BARRIERS – SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS

Adult students who are engaged in online technical education typically confront external obstacles that are a result of the social and environmental settings in which they find themselves. One of the most major obstacles is striking a balance between the obligations of one's job and those of one's spouse and children. Adult students sometimes have to manage full-time jobs, caregiving responsibilities, or both, which restricts the amount of time and mental energy they are able to dedicate to their academic pursuits. The fact that they have to juggle the demands of their job responsibilities, their household responsibilities, and their responsibilities as carers makes it difficult for them to concentrate on learning, particularly when the subject matter is complex and requires regular involvement and concentration (Lansing & Brunner, 2021; Nelson & Arthur, 2022).

There is a significant problem with the absence of home situations that are conducive to learning. A significant number of adult learners may not have access to a designated area for uninterrupted study, and their houses may be noisy, congested, or deficient in fundamental technical infrastructure, such as dependable internet connection or equipment that are in working order. As a result of these constraints, it is particularly challenging to participate in virtual classrooms, gain access to course materials, or finish tasks. Furthermore, learning possibilities are further restricted when there is an intermittent supply of power or when digital gadgets are shared among family members, which is especially prevalent in homes with low

incomes or in rural areas (Murray & Thornton, 2023; Campbell & Vega, 2022).

In digital learning environments, social isolation and restricted engagement with peers are also significant issues that teachers must contend with. Adult students frequently miss out on the opportunities for collaborative learning and casual conversations that are available in regular classroom settings. There is a correlation between the lack of support from peers and feelings of isolation, which has a detrimental effect on both motivation and academic perseverance. It is possible that adults, in contrast to younger pupils, may not actively participate in online forums or group activities owing to time restrictions or discomfort with technological tools for virtual communication (Foster & Delgado, 2023; Ingram & Wu, 2022).

The interaction between these external pressures and internal variables amplifies feelings of disengagement and contributes to behaviour that is associated with dropping out of school. In situations where adult learners are confronted with an overwhelming social milieu, their capacity to maintain their motivation and successfully finish technical courses is considerably diminished (Klein & Rahman, 2023).

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING TECHNICAL LEARNING

Challenges faced by institutions are a significant factor in determining the degree to which adult students who participate in online distance education are able to successfully acquire technical knowledge. The fact that the design of the course does not adequately accommodate the particular learning styles and requirements of adult learners is one of the most significant obstacles. Many technical courses are built using a one-size-fits-all strategy, and as a result, they frequently lack functionality such as interaction, real-world applications, and modular material organisation. The capacity of adult learners to apply theoretical concepts to practical settings is hindered as a result of this, particularly in disciplines that require hands-on experience. In addition, shortcomings in technology infrastructure, such as obsolete learning management systems, unstable platforms, and inadequate integration of digital technologies, can cause disruptions to the learning experience and reduce participation (Russell, 2022; Silva, 2023).

The lack of adaptive learning models that are capable of accommodating different degrees of prior knowledge, learning pace, and technical competence among adult learners is another significant obstacle that has to be addressed. There is also a huge problem with limited faculty response, which occurs when teachers are either unable to connect with students in real time or fail to give prompt explanations. This problem is frequently aggravated by inefficient feedback processes, which result in learners receiving input that is either delayed, general, or nonexistent. This makes it difficult to comprehend their progress or identify areas in which they may improve. Frustration, a lack of confidence, and at some point, dropping out of school are frequently the results of such institutional failures (Chambers, 2023; Karim, 2021).

According to studies, educational institutions have a significant challenge when it comes to aligning the delivery of technical courses with the expectations of learners and their professional goals. In many cases, there is a gap between the substance of the course and the relevance of the sector, which results in disengagement. The necessity for a pedagogical redesign that is especially designed for adult technical education has been emphasised by academics. This includes instruction that is centred on the learner, assessments that are based on scenarios, and problem-solving exercises that match real-world technological issues. All of these elements are essential for boosting results in adult online learning (Young, 2022;

Huang, 2023).

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BARRIERS AND DROPOUT BEHAVIOR

A complex interaction of internal, external, and institutional impediments is frequently the cause of the dropout behaviour that is found among adult learners who are enrolled in online technical education. It is extremely unusual for these components to operate alone; rather, they operate in a manner that is interdependent, amplifying the impacts of each other. For instance, an adult learner who is struggling with high levels of self-confidence or fear about technology may discover that these internal issues are amplified by external pressures such as an excessive amount of work or a lack of support from their family. In the same vein, deficiencies in the educational system, such as restricted access to academic support or rigid course frameworks, can compound feelings of powerlessness and result in disengagement from the learning process (Bishop, 2022; Langford, 2023).

Several studies have highlighted the fact that external obstacles, such as responsibilities related to job or caregiving, or financial constraints, can directly lead to the development of internal demotivation and cognitive overload. The capacity of adult learners to concentrate, manage their time effectively, and continuously participate in hard technical training is hindered when they are stretched thin across numerous tasks. Because of this, they eventually experience academic exhaustion, decreased involvement, and poor performance, all of which further reinforce their lack of confidence and motivation to persevere (Sanders, 2023; Boyd, 2022). Without structured support or targeted interventions, these interconnected barriers contribute significantly to dropout behavior.

Individuals who are enrolled in online technical programs designed for adults frequently report experiencing results such as low recall rates and incomplete learning cycles. There is a progressive withdrawal from the learning process as a result of the cumulative pressure that these obstacles bring up. It has been possible to gain an understanding of this behaviour through the utilisation of retention frameworks such as Tinto's model and Rovai's composite persistence model. It is important to note that these models emphasise the significance of both academic and social integration in maintaining the motivation and commitment of learners (Howell, 2022; McDaniel, 2023). For adult learners, adapting these models means addressing barriers holistically through flexible course design, robust student support systems, and peer engagement strategies that acknowledge their multifaceted lives.

GLOBAL STRATEGIES AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

There have been a number of nations throughout the world that have successfully adopted ways to enhance the engagement of adult learners in technical education through the use of online distant modes. A significant number of these nations have adult education policies that are solid and prioritise learning that continues throughout one's life, digital inclusion, and learner empowerment. For instance, countries in Scandinavia, such as Finland and Sweden, have built national frameworks that incorporate adult education into mainstream policy. This ensures that all individuals have equal access to educational possibilities. Not only do these regulations place an emphasis on the availability of digital infrastructure, but they also place another emphasis on the alignment of educational material with the demands of real-world activity. In a similar vein, nations such as Canada, Australia, and Germany have implemented adaptive and modular

learning systems that enable adult learners to advance at their own speed while simultaneously balancing the demands of their personal and professional lives.

Universities and adult education centres in these nations have devised creative techniques to meet the different issues that adult learners confront. These ideas have been implemented at the institutional level. The importance of learner-centred education has been emphasised, with a particular emphasis placed on the practical applications of technical knowledge, simulations of the real world, and collaborative attempts to solve problems. Training in digital readiness has also become a routine component, with the purpose of ensuring that students are prepared with the abilities necessary to traverse learning platforms, interact with digital tools, and independently complete tasks. In addition, inflexible examination systems have been replaced with flexible assessment approaches, including as project-based evaluations, peer assessments, and open-book examinations, in order to meet the different schedules and learning requirements of adult learners.

The study of secondary data has led to the identification of a few significant policy suggestions that should be implemented more broadly. To begin, it is necessary to strengthen the ability of institutions in order to improve the quality of education, the digital infrastructure, and the administrative responsiveness. Two, pre-course orientation courses can assist in bridging gaps in digital literacy and introducing students to the expectations of the course, as well as the tools and support mechanisms that are available to them. Third, there should be an emphasis placed on continual faculty development in order to provide educators with training in adult teaching, online facilitation, and personalised coaching. Finally, the establishment of complete learner support systems, which may include academic advising, technical help, and mental health services, has the potential to greatly enhance learner satisfaction and retention rates in online technical education for adults.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study demonstrated that the difficulties that adult students have while attempting to internalise technical learning techniques in the context of online distance education are intricate, multi-layered, and intricately interrelated. In this study, it was discovered that internal, external, and institutional obstacles did not operate independently of one another but rather reinforced one another. When paired with external stresses such as family duties or a distracting home environment, for example, an adult learner who is experiencing low self-confidence or digital anxiety typically struggles more than they would otherwise. The limits imposed by the institution, such as inflexible course frameworks and a lack of timely help, made these problems even more difficult to deal with. Especially in technical courses that require regular engagement and practice, this interaction caused a compounded impact that greatly impeded the learning process. This was especially true in case of technical disciplines.

Concerns that were not addressed have far-reaching ramifications for the educational accomplishments of adult learners as well as for their overall social mobility. A significant number of students either did not finish their learning cycles or did not complete their education altogether, which resulted in missed possibilities for professional development, career promotion, and social empowerment. The failure to overcome these problems also contributed to a rising split between those who were able to adapt to digital learning settings and those who were unable to do so, which resulted in an increase in educational disparity

among adult populations.

According to the findings, there is an immediate and pressing requirement for legislative changes that are targeted at improving the efficiency and accessibility of adult education that is delivered online. Clearly, there was a need for instructional designs that took into account the various requirements, previous experiences, and learning cycles of adult learners. Upgrades to technology were also necessary, not just in terms of infrastructure but also in terms of the manner in which technology was incorporated into the teaching process in order to facilitate learning experiences that were interactive, adaptable, and user-friendly.

In conclusion, the research highlighted the significance of incorporating context-sensitive strategies into the process of developing educational programs and support systems for students. It was necessary for educational institutions to move beyond the delivery of general courses and instead provide individualised interventions that acknowledged the realities of adult life. Adults who are engaged in lifetime learning through online distance education would benefit from these techniques because they would make technical learning more accessible, relevant, and perhaps sustainable.

SECTION TITLE 4

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