Profile of the Online Learner

Part 1 Training Notes

Part 1 of the training provides an understanding of the online population, including

- Who the learner population is
- How they prefer to learn
- Why they chose the online environment
- What issues they face in being able to persist in learning

The training in Part 1 has three distinct goals, which align with Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of the book:

Goal 1

The first goal is to help trainees understand that the online population is made up of older adults who have other responsibilities in their lives besides their education, a situation that is quite different from that of the traditional on-campus learner, whose main responsibility is learning. In addition, many adult learners are professionals, so there has to be a level of respect for their position in life that is not necessarily given to the younger college student who lives on campus. Spend time helping trainees understand how culture affects online learners, so trainees are able to proactively manage situations that arise from cultural issues and provide an environment in the course that respects diversity.

Part 1 Training Notes (*continued*)

I recommend that you complete Activity 1.1., Comparison of Diversity Characteristics, with information on the diversity of the learners at your institution. If you have specific data on your online population, then include that. If not, you will have to use data regarding your overall learner population or anecdotal data, if available. Trainees can compare the profile of the adult learner from the Noel-Levitz data to make sure that they are considering the unique population at your institution.

Goal 2
The second goal is to help trainees understand that adult learners' requirements for learning are different. On the one hand, they have a great need to know, have a stronger self-concept, can draw on personal experience more readily, have a certain readiness to learn, have a stronger orientation to learning and stronger motivation. On the other hand, adult learners can be differentiated by their degree of self-directedness, which can be situational based on the subject matter, their confidence and motivation, and their academic skills. Finally, adult learners prefer certain types of social styles, including independent, dependent, competitive, collaborative, avoidance, and participative, which affect how they approach learning. As trainees reflect on how adults learn, they will be more aware of how to adjust their pedagogy to meet the range of needs of the adult learner population.

Goal 3
The final goal of Part 1 of the training is to help trainees understand why adult learners choose the online environment and what challenges they face in order to persist in learning to achieve their goals. Factors that influence persistence include learner characteristics, academic skills, external factors that are influenced by their roles and responsibilities outside of the course, and internal factors relating to their ability to integrate academically and socially into the institution from a distance. If you have specific persistence data for your institution, you can share that data and look at the specific persistence challenges at your institution.

Part 1 of the training focuses on developing an understanding of online learners so you can deliver a quality learning experience that meets the needs of all learners. We examine learner demographics and consider cultural differences that affect the online learner. We also look at general attributes of online learners, including their attributes as adult learners, their self-directedness, and their social learning styles. Finally, we consider issues faced by online adult learners as they engage in

online learning, as well as the critical factors that influence online learners' ability to persist in the online environment and achieve their goals.

Understanding the characteristics and needs of online learners may not necessarily guarantee success in an online course, but it may inform your pedagogy as you develop an understanding of your learners, what motivates them, and what barriers may prevent them from being successful in an online learning environment.

TRAINING COMPETENCIES

- Compare the profile of learners you currently teach with the profile of online learners to determine similarities and differences that will affect your instructional approaches.

- Plan appropriate strategies to manage issues that may arise due to cultural differences.

- Build instructional strategies that support how adult learners prefer to learn.

- Develop an understanding of challenges that adult online learners face that have an impact on their ability to persist.

READINGS AND PRESENTATIONS

Readings from *Effective Online Teaching: Foundations and Strategies for Student Success*:

Chapter 1: Characteristics of the Online Learner

Chapter 2: Key Learning Attributes of Adults

Chapter 3: Challenges That Affect Learners' Persistence

Overview of Readings

Chapter 1, Characteristics of the Online Learner, looks at the diversity characteristics of the online learner. The average online learner is female, around 35 years of age, working full-time, and married with children. The majority are undergraduate learners taking one to six credits online. They are primarily white, but there is a growing population of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian learners, which requires instructors to have an awareness of cultural differences

that may affect learners' ability to engage equally with you and their peers in the online learning environment. Because of the wide range of characteristics and needs that make up the online learner population, it is critical to understand the diversity of online learners in order to develop unique approaches that support learners and facilitate their successful completion of the course.

Chapter 2, Key Learning Attributes of Adults, examines the learning attributes of adult learners, which set them apart from traditional learners. These attributes include their need to know, self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation. Adult learners' levels of self-directedness and social style also have an impact on how they will engage in the online learning environment. By focusing on learning attributes specific to adults, you can target your pedagogy to meet the unique needs of adult learners, and thus have an impact on their satisfaction and motivation to persist.

Chapter 3, Challenges That Affect Learners' Persistence, considers why adult learners choose the online environment and describes issues and challenges that adult learners face as they engage in online learning. This chapter also considers critical variables that influence learners' ability to persist in the online environment to achieve their goals.

PowerPoint Presentations
- Part 1, Chapter 1: Characteristics of the Online Learner
- Part 1, Chapter 2: Key Learning Attributes of Adults
- Part 1, Chapter 3: Challenges That Affect Learners' Persistence

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Assignment: Diversity Characteristics

Complete Activity 1.1., Comparison of Diversity Characteristics, for your institution.

Discussion
- Discuss similarities and differences of the online students from the Noel-Levitz data and the characteristics of online learners at your institution. How are they similar? How are they different?

- Consider how culture may affect learners' ability to engage in online course activities. What factors contribute to their ability to interact with the content, learners, and instructor in the online environment? How will you help learners overcome cultural barriers?
- Consider your role in teaching with respect to the characteristics of the online learners. Choose two of the characteristics in the following list and discuss how they will influence your teaching style.
  - Diversity
  - Culture
  - Assumptions of learning
  - Self-directedness
  - Social styles
  - Persistence factors
- After reflecting on how you believe learning is influenced by the specific profile of the online learner, consider your conceptualization of teaching and discuss how your role is affected. What are your role and responsibilities, and what are the students' role and responsibilities?

Assignment: Self-Directed Learning Strategies

Using your understanding of Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) model (Grow, 1996), complete Activity 1.2., Learning Activities Aligned with Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model, and describe instructional strategies that you currently use to support learners at all levels of self-directedness. Once you have completed the table, post to the discussion questions relating to this assignment. (*Please note:* You will revisit this table later in your training as you continue to build your understanding of instructional strategies you can use to support different levels of self-directedness.)

Discussion

- After you have completed your assignment on self-directed learning strategies, post a response to this discussion describing the strategies you choose for each level of self-directedness and what issues you feel you will have in implementing them in an online learning environment.

- Discuss persistence of online learners in your institution. Do you have an understanding of the specific issues that affect persistence of online learners at your institution? Reflect on the variables from the persistence models presented in Chapter 3 and discuss how they relate to the issues learners face at your institution.

Activity 1.1 Comparison of Diversity Characteristics.

Primary Diversity Characteristics	Learner	[Name of Institution] Data
Gender (Noel-Levitz, 2009)	60% Female 40% Male	
Age distribution (Noel-Levitz, 2009)	20% under 24 32% — 25–34 26% — 35–44 18% — 45–54 4% — 55 and over	
Ethnicity (Noel-Levitz, 2005)	74% White 12% African American 4% Hispanic 3% Asian 7% Other	
Secondary Diversity Characteristics	**Learner**	
Enrollment status (Noel-Levitz, 2009)	81% Primarily online 19% Primarily on campus	
Work status (Noel-Levitz, 2005)	70% Employed full-time 17% Employed part-time 13% Unemployed	
Marital status (Noel-Levitz, 2005)	37% Married with children 18% Married 31% Single 11% Single with children	

Activity 1.2   Learning Activities Aligned with Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model.

Stage	Characteristics	Instructor	Instructional Activities/Strategies
Stage 1: Dependent learner	• Little prior knowledge in subject • Unsure of the focus of his or her learning • Low self-confidence • Low motivation • Has difficulty organizing information • Has difficulty making decisions	• Instructor as authority: • Directs activities • Provides explicit directions • Offers frequent feedback	
Stage 2: Interested learner	• Basic understanding of what needs to be done • Not confident • Low motivation	• Instructor as motivator: • Provides encouragement • Builds confidence • Gives frequent feedback	
Stage 3: Involved learner	• Has skills and knowledge in subject • Has learning goals • Confident • Motivated	• Instructor as facilitator: • Facilitates progress through content • Offers appropriate tools, methods, and techniques • Provides choices • Encourages learners to share experiences	
Stage 4: Self-directed learner	• Has skills and knowledge in subject • Ability to set learning goals • Confident • Motivated • Good time management skills • Ability to self-evaluate	• Instructor as consultant or guide on the side: • Provides self-evaluation strategies • Gives support when needed	

Exhibit 1.1   Diversity Characteristics of Online Learners.

Primary Diversity Characteristics	Learner
Gender (Noel-Levitz, 2009)	60% Female 40% Male
Age distribution (Noel-Levitz, 2009)	20% under 24 32%—25–34 26%—35–44 18%—45–54 4%—55 and over
Ethnicity (Noel-Levitz, 2005)	74% White 12% African American 4% Hispanic 3% Asian 7% Other
Secondary Diversity Characteristics	**Learner**
Enrollment status (Noel-Levitz, 2009)	81% Primarily online 19% Primarily on campus
Work status (Noel-Levitz, 2005)	70% Employed full-time 17% Employed part-time 13% Unemployed
Marital status (Noel-Levitz, 2005)	37% Married with children 18% Married 31% Single 11% Single with children

Exhibit 1.2 Impact of Cultural Differences on Learning.

Dimensions	Cultural Differences	Associated Countries (Hofstede, 2008)	Teaching and Learning (Hofstede, 2008)
Power distance status—position of person in society	*Large power distance:* Power and wealth unequal with higher power exerting influence over lower power	China India Arab countries	Teacher-centered Dependent learners Teacher initiates communication Teacher respected Teacher is guru who transfers personal wisdom
	Small power distance: Power distributed equally	Netherlands Nordic countries Austria	Learner-centered Learners are equals Teacher is equal Learner-initiated communication Teacher is expert who shares interpretations, experience, and ideas
Uncertainty avoidance—degree to which certain cultures are able to tolerate unstructured or unclear environments	*High uncertainty avoidance:* Cultures where unstructured or unclear environments are not tolerated	Germany Japan Latin countries	Learners need right answers Teacher has right answers Emotions in class can be expressed Pressure among learners to conform
	Low uncertainty avoidance: Cultures where unstructured or unclear environments are tolerated	Nordic countries Netherlands China India	Learners want good discussion Teacher may say ¨I don't know¨ Emotions should be controlled Tolerance for differences in class
Individualism vs. collectivism—relationship with others	*Individualism:* Refers to a group of people whose concern is looking after themselves and their families	Spain France Netherlands Nordic countries Poland Hungary Italy Germany United States	Purpose of education is learning how to learn Learners' individual initiatives are encouraged Learners expected to speak up in class when they need or want to Learners associate according to interests
	Collectivism: Refers to a group of people that look after each other in exchange for loyalty	Thailand Korea Costa Rica Russia Bulgaria Portugal China Japan Mexico Venezuela Greece Arab countries	Purpose of education is learning how to do something Learners' individual initiatives discouraged Learners only speak up in class when sanctioned by group Learners associate according to popularity

Exhibit 1.2 (*continued*)

Dimensions	Cultural Differences	Associated Countries (Hofstede, 2008)	Teaching and Learning (Hofstede, 2008)
Masculine-feminine — emotional gender roles Masculinity-femininity differences based on gender differences	*Masculine cultures:* Men are assertive and the main decision makers	China Japan Mexico Arab countries Germany	Brilliant teacher admired Best learner is norm Competition in class Praise for good learners Learners overrate own performance Failing in school is a disaster
	Feminine cultures: Overlapping roles where neither men nor women are the most assertive or sole decision makers	Thailand Korea Costa Rica, Chile Russia Spain France Nordic countries	Friendly teachers most liked Average learner is norm Overambition unpopular Praise for weak learner Learners underrate their own performance Failing in school is a minor incident

Source: Hofstede & Bond, 1984.

Exhibit 2.1 Grow's Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model.

Stage	Characteristics	Instructor
Stage 1: Dependent learner	• Little prior knowledge in subject • Unsure of the focus of his or her learning • Low self-confidence • Low motivation • Has difficulty organizing information • Has difficulty making decisions	Instructor as authority: • Directs activities • Provides explicit directions • Offers frequent feedback
Stage 2: Interested learner	• Basic understanding of what needs to be done • Not confident • Low motivation	Instructor as motivator: • Provides encouragement • Builds confidence • Gives frequent feedback
Stage 3: Involved learner	• Has skills and knowledge in subject • Has learning goals • Confident • Motivated	Instructor as facilitator: • Facilitates progress through content • Offers appropriate tools, methods, and techniques • Provides choices • Encourages learners to share experiences
Stage 4: Self-directed learner	• Has skills and knowledge in subject • Ability to set learning goals • Confident • Motivated • Good time management skills • Ability to self-evaluate	Instructor as consultant or guide on the side: • Provides self-evaluation strategies • Gives support when needed

Source: Grow, 1996.

Exhibit 2.2 Grasha-Riechmann Student Learning Style Scales.

Style	Preferences
Independent	• Prefers to work alone • Not interested in discussion and other learner interaction • Not interested in team work
Dependent	• Looks to instructor and learners as guides • Prefers an authority figure to tell them what to do • Prefers highly structured environments
Competitive	• Interested in learning for reward and recognition • Prefers exams to projects
Collaborative	• Learns by sharing and cooperating with instructor and learners • Prefers group work and discussions
Avoidant	• Not excited about attending class or studying • Uninterested • Overwhelmed
Participative	• Interested in class activities and discussion • Works hard • Wants to meet instructor's expectations

Exhibit 3.1   Comparison of Persistence Models That Address Traditional Students.

Model	Theory Overview	Variables
Spady Retention Model (1970)	A sociological model of the dropout process. Spady proposed five variables that contribute directly to social integration.	1. Academic potential 2. Normative congruence 3. Grade performance 4. Intellectual development 5. Friendship support

Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975)	This model seeks to explain a student's integration process based on academic and social systems of an institution.	1. Preentry attributes
		    Background characteristics
		    Previous educational experiences
		    Individual attributes
		2. Goals, commitment
		    Higher grades
		    Increased intellectual development
		3. Institutional experiences
		    Interaction with peers and faculty

Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change (1985)	This model assesses student change and considers the direct and indirect effects of an institution's structural characteristics and its environment.	1. Student background, precollege traits 2. Structural, organizational characteristics 3. Institutional environment 4. Interactions with peers, faculty, and administrators

Exhibit 3.2 Comparison of Persistence Models That Address Nontraditional Distance Learning Students.

Model	Theory Overview	Variables

Bean and Metzner (1985)	Predicts student persistence based on student-institution ''fit.''	1. Academic variables
		    Study habits
		    Course availability
		2. Background and defining variables
		    Educational goals
		    Ethnicity
		    Prior GPA
		3. Environmental variables
		    Finances
		    Hours of employment
		    Family responsibilities
		    Outside encouragement
		4. Psychological variables such as
		    Stress
		    Self-confidence
		    Motivation

Rovai Composite Persistence Model (Rovai, 2003)	Is based on a synthesis of persistence models relevant to nontraditional students. Better explains persistence and attrition among the largely nontraditional students who enroll in online courses and programs.	Variables Prior to Admission
		1. Student characteristics
		    Age, ethnicity, gender
		    Intellectual development
		    Academic performance
		    Academic preparation
		2. Student skills
		    Computer literacy
		    Information literacy
		    Time management
		    Reading, writing skills
		    Online communication skills
		
		Variables After Admission
		1. External factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985)
		    Finances
		    Hours of employment
		    Family responsibilities
		    Outside encouragement
		    Opportunity to transfer
		    Life crises
		2. Internal factors
		    Tinto (1975): Academic integration, social integration, goal commitment, institutional commitment, learning community
		    Bean and Metzner (1985): Study habits, advising, absenteeism, course availability, program fit, GPA, utility, stress, satisfaction, commitment
		    Workman and Stenard (1996): Student needs: clarity of programs, self-esteem, identification with school, interpersonal relationships, accessibility to support and services
		    Kerka and Grow (1996, as cited in Rovai 2003): learning and teaching styles