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Training Adult Education Researchers in a Remote Doctoral Program: Experiences, Reflections, and Suggestions for Moving Forward

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience, reflections, and best practices related to training adult education researchers in an adult learning and leadership doctoral program at a Research I institution in the United States. We discuss embedding technology into the curriculum, fostering connections, and supporting the development of self-directedness as key elements of an effective online doctoral program. The paper offers suggestions applicable to other online, research-intensive programs catering to the working learner population.

Keywords: adult education, graduate, doctoral program, online learning, United States

Introduction

Fully online or distance education was almost unimaginable only a few years ago. While there were online-based courses offered pre-2019, mostly at the postsecondary level, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way online education is perceived, evident in the number of courses and programs that continue to be delivered through online platforms and modes of instruction. Notably, in comparison to 2019, 2020 saw a 186 percent increase in the number of undergraduate students who were enrolled exclusively in online education in the United States (US) (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This means that 44 percent of undergraduate students were studying fully online. As for graduate students, the increase was less significant (around 20 percent), still, 52 percent of those students were taking exclusively online courses in fall 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

While the pandemic might have caused a significant shift in undergraduate education, for graduate students, notably adult learners, the flexibility and practicality of online education was evident even before 2019 and continues to be so as many programs continue to offer fully online programs at the graduate level.

In this paper, we share insights from one such Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program. We focus on how this program is training adult education researchers through the use of technology, following the principles of self-directed learning, and embracing the fact that online education plays an integral role in the educational landscape of the future.

Adult learning and distance education

Distance education was conceptualized in the 1800s to refer to correspondence study programs and later the education delivered via the radio and television (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2013). Today, distance education is typically delivered via the Internet and so, in this paper, we use the terms online and distance education as synonymous, to refer to education delivered through the Internet and in which students and instructors are separated by space and potentially time (in case of asynchronous learning). This mode of learning is particularly appealing to the so called “non-traditional learner”, the adult over the age of 25 who has full-time professional responsibilities, in addition to family responsibilities, and is more likely to pursue further education as a part-time endeavor. These are the students who opt for online learning because of the benefits this mode of delivery has in relation to their lives.

Ritt (2008) suggested that online learning addresses personal, professional, and institutional barriers that would otherwise prevent adult learners from obtaining a higher education degree. In terms of personal barriers, the author argued that online learning removes the need for learners to relocate in order to pursue further education. Learning from home, which eliminates the need to commute to campus, also helps address family responsibilities and may reduce the financial challenge, which is an institutional barrier imposed on those pursuing a degree in person (Ritt, 2008). With regard to professional barriers, individuals who may not be able to leave their workplace to attend in-person class meetings may learn online on their own time.

Additional proof that online learning is appealing to full-time working adults is the fact that career start, advancement, or change, as well as increasing job prospects are the key reasons adults pursue online programs (Capranos et al., 2022). In fact, a national, US survey of 2,500 adult learners who were either studying online, recently graduated from an online program, or were planning to enroll in one indicated that 77 percent of these individuals decided to study online before making any other decision relevant to their studies, inclusive of selecting a university (Capranos et al., 2022). This means that most adult learners who are currently enrolled in online education have reasons other than the pandemic to study online. Because online learning is likely even more popular for adult graduate students than traditional, in person education, graduate faculty who teach in online programs need a specific skillset to support and guide these learners.

The context

The scenario for analysis presented in this paper is the remote Adult Learning and Leadership PhD Program at Kansas State University (KSU), encompassing challenges and opportunities in training adult education researchers in remote education globally. KSU is a Research I institution and the first land-grant institution founded in the US in 1863. Of course, educator and researcher preparation has changed significantly since the university was founded. In a predominantly rural state, remote access has the potential to give learners who are not able to access a brick-and-mortar campus the opportunity to engage in a doctoral program, addressing our land-grant mission to serve individuals in the state of Kansas (Kansas State University, n.d.). The program also is borderless and reaches learners throughout the world.

The impetus behind the remote model, which was in place even prior to the pandemic, was twofold: to increase access and ensure program sustainability. Both are

necessary within an ethical and a fiscally responsible framework to maintain a thriving program in an environment where most higher education programs are unsustainable through a local population with traditional access to a campus for in-person learning. Although the adult learning and leadership of doctoral program was remote prior to the pandemic, the number of students interested post-pandemic has increased. The reasons for this increase, as suggested by Capranos et al. (2022) and based on Ritt (2008), could be the experiences all learners have had during the pandemic with remote work and learning as well as the opportunity to better balance personal life, work, and education. At this point, the idea of an online program may be a more appealing option, whereby adults realize that the quality, rigor, and flexibility of an online program is achievable.

We describe our program as remote; however, while pursuing their degree, students need to enroll in two in-person, one-week residencies within two different summers. The purpose of the residencies is to engage learners with peers and faculty, and to create an intense scaffolding to move forward within the program. There is a flexible timeline for completion within seven years, without a cohort model; therefore, this connecting time in-person serves multiples purposes.

Administratively, the program is categorized as 100% online; therefore, within federal and foreign country guidelines, many graduate assistantships that regularly support international doctoral students and student visas are often unavailable to international students, making recruitment for international learners difficult. In addition, although the US is making progress in addressing broadband equity in rural areas, these regions still do not have the same access (Lee et al., 2022). These adaptive challenges are also present in many parts of the world. Therefore, creating a conversation about how to develop successful remote doctoral programs to train adult education researchers can inform worldwide initiatives.

Framework

We framed our analysis of the remote Adult Learning and Leadership PhD Program using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UNSDG) 4, which posits that we should “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, n.d., para. 1). This lens helped us focus on understanding how online learning can be embedded into doctoral-level programs in a way that is engaging, socially inclusive, and accessible to all. Specifically, we wanted to examine how quality doctoral education can be delivered remotely and which benefits this method of instruction brings to adult learners who are being training to become adult education scholars and researchers.

Bearing in mind the role that the COVID-19 pandemic has played in the increase in online learning opportunities, as highlighted by the United Nations (n.d.), we consider how the pandemic has informed the development of online post-secondary programs. Still, it is important to highlight that, for the program on which we focus, the pandemic was not the cause for developing an online-based program, but rather the needs of the students that the program serves. As such, in addition to the UNSDG 4, as another element of our framework, we turn to one of the key principles of adult learning—self-directedness. Self-directed learning is based on the premise that the learner will be motivated, show initiative, and demonstrate autonomy and independence in the learning process (Knowles, 1975). Therefore, we consider self-directedness to be an important lens for examining an online doctoral-level program, given that the goals of

such a program is to train autonomous researchers, and considering the fact that the learners and the instructor have fewer opportunities to share the same learning space and time, given the nature of online learning, than it would be the case in an in-person program.

Embedding technology into the curriculum

Online learning is largely technology-dependent, still we argue that in well-rounded online education, technology plays a larger role than that of a facilitative tool. Notably, the Adult Learning and Leadership Program at KSU uses a web-based learning management system, Canvas, to deliver instruction online, exchange learning materials, and communicate with students. Canvas serves as an online learning space, similar to a brick-and-mortar classroom, in addition to Zoom, the video communication platform used for engaging in synchronous learning opportunities and for online office hours. In addition to using technology to facilitate the learning, we realize that embedding technology into the curriculum is equally important to ensure that the learners are acquiring all the necessary skills that researchers in the 21st century need.

Specifically, all graduate programs in Adult Learning and Leadership at KSU expect students to demonstrate knowledge of the impact of technology on adult education learning and the skills relevant to online adult education. Students are often required to create digital content to demonstrate their learning and are asked to use digital tools in collaborative projects. As a culmination of their PhD program, in dissertation proposal and defense meetings, students are expected to use technological tools to deliver the content to their committee.

Further, and pertaining specifically to research, the Department of Educational Leadership at KSU, which houses the Adult Learning and Leadership Program, embeds technology into the research methods courses taught by the faculty in the department. The most notable example is the course that focuses on qualitative data management and analysis using NVivo, a computer software used for qualitative data analysis. Examples of other courses in which the use of technology is a central outcome include *Adult Learners and Integrating Technology into the Curriculum*, *Teaching Online in Adult Learning*, and *Social Media in the 21st Century*, among others.

Fostering connections in a research-intensive program

Fostering connections on multiple levels is important within a research-intensive program, even more so in a program taught at a distance. Facilitating personal connections with faculty and students is critical to support socio-emotional encouragement within the program (Hill & Conceição, 2019). Summer in-person residencies and monthly virtual doctoral group meetings are structured within the program to purposefully create connections with students and faculty. The intent of these structured formal and nonformal learning opportunities is to foster more informal peer learning and mentoring, a critical component of doctoral work. As Cherrstrom et al. (2018, p. 43) note, “This group is vital”. Peer sharing about how students are developing research skills and managing work – school – life balance, can provide important information as well as emotional support.

Although the program can be completed completely online, synchronous and asynchronous opportunities to form connections within different courses are possible. While this diversity in modalities and format create positive opportunities to meet

multiple student preferences, a challenge is that instructors need to be well versed in different pedagogies. Teaching a course that is completely asynchronous, online in Canvas, requires different strategies to foster connections than a course in which learners may be present in remote Zoom meeting rooms and can see each other in real time. Instructors and students need to constantly learn how to adjust within these different formats to foster connections, often in self-directed ways.

Fostering self-directedness and developing autonomous researchers

All doctoral programs, both in-person and remote, aim to support students to become self-directed, autonomous scholars (Conceição & Swaminathan, 2011). Online doctoral programs have a 10 – 20% higher attrition rate than face-to-face programs (Graham & Massyn, 2019); therefore, faculty need to pay special attention to the process of learning so that students do not make it through course work, and then languish, unable to move forward with a proposal. A doctoral program needs to scaffold experiences to move a student first to an independent researcher and then to an autonomous scholar (Conceição & Swaminathan, 2011). The mindset of a student needs to move from one of completing assignments to independently directing and taking ownership of creativity in scholarly work. Course work needs to provide scaffolding and instructors need to provide feedback to support that shift in mindset.

Fostering self-directedness and developing autonomous researchers should be integrated within any doctoral program given that students eventually need to conduct independent research. An online doctoral program needs to scaffold these competencies within online pedagogy and create socio-emotional support. Faculty–student mentoring relationships are critical within that learning process. Setting expectations, creating regular remote meetings, and developing a relationship are important inputs into supporting the student to those ends.

When it comes to adult learning programs, self-directedness is a concept embedded into the curriculum as well as the teaching and facilitation process, in that the students are expanding their knowledge about the characteristics of adult learners, one of which is self-directedness, all the while focused on becoming self-directed, autonomous learners themselves, as they work toward becoming independent researchers. And so, while the online learning environment may pose challenges and require greater effort to establish connections than is the case in programs delivered in person, the distance embedded in online learning may actually be conducive to developing self-directedness.

Moving forward “post-pandemic”

Even for graduate programs that operated (fully) online prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic has created challenges and made faculty and administrators reflect on their teaching and facilitation strategies and the ways that these online programs operate and are structured. Specifically, considering the disruption that the pandemic caused to work – life – study balance and the social context of learning, putting additional emotional pressure especially on non-traditional learners with full-time jobs, practicing emotional literacy in teaching became more important than ever (Robinson & Stojanović, 2021). As online learners showed the need for socio-emotional support, both from peers and faculty, it became imperative to create opportunities for synchronous connections, especially in long-term, demanding,

research-intensive programs, such as an online PhD program. This poses the question of sustainability of online and hybrid doctoral programs “post-pandemic”, which we are currently facing. It also calls for establishing opportunities to learn from each other and understand best practices in online educational programs globally. This paper makes a step forward in the knowledge sharing that may be beneficial to others who are either establishing or working on maintaining online educational programs in the current socio-economic settings.

Conclusion: Implications for other programs

In this paper, we shared experiences while reflecting on best practices related to training adult education researchers in an adult learning and leadership PhD program at a Research I in the United States. While our paper is focused on a single program and a specific context, it offers suggestions applicable to other similar programs, specifically online, research-intensive programs catering to the working learner population.

Employing the UNSDG 4—focused on ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, n.d., para. 1)—and self-directed learning to frame our reflections and analysis, we discussed the importance of embedding technology into the curriculum, fostering connections, and developing autonomous researchers as key focus areas of a research-intensive online adult education program that caters to the adult, working learner population. Similarly to Dzubinski et al. (2012, p. 108), we stressed the importance of supporting students in co-creating “online learning environments that are predicated upon intentional community and mutuality, and provide learning opportunities for faculty and students to develop these capacities”. The sense of community emerged as especially important in planning educational opportunities “post-pandemic” and calls for a need to balance asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities.

While we focused on fully online courses (either delivered synchronously or asynchronously) in this paper, a potential area of development in online doctoral education is a hy-flex model of instruction—a situation in which one faculty member delivers a course to online and in-person students simultaneously, calling for a different and unique skillset. Hy-flex models provide an opportunity for future discussion and analysis as we learn how best to create accessible learning environments.

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