



Creating Connections with Online Adult Learners in Business Administration Programs

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Abstract

It is not always easy for adult learners to navigate an online learning experience. Adult learners enrolled in online graduate programs may become vulnerable and overwhelmed with the expectations that lie ahead. At first glance, the expectations and assignments may seem insurmountable, which may negatively impact learners' self-esteem and ability to complete the course. Learners may lose the motivation to learn, become frustrated, and may decide to drop out of the course and ultimately withdraw from their program. However, all of this may be avoided if the instructor takes the time to incorporate strategies that create a positive instructor-learner connection. Using over thirty years of combined teaching experience, the authors have identified opportunities and strategies to connect with learners and provide positive feedback throughout the course. Holding at least one meeting at the beginning of the term will build connections and trust while creating a collegial learning environment. When a connection exists, adult learners may be less hesitant to discuss and accept the feedback. The words instructors use in responding to learners make the difference between superficial and insignificant feedback or feedback that inspires learners to become more reflective, think more critically, and question their assumptions. It is the responsibility of the instructor to provide feedback that encourages learners to be reflective while expanding their thoughts and ideas. Feedback should validate the learners' current knowledge and experience. The words used in feedback may have the power to move learners forward in their thought processes or thwart opportunities for growth and introspection. The goal is to inspire instructors to recognize the importance of connections as well as the importance of words they use and how both impact the learning experience.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Online Learning, Connecting with Learners, Feedback

Introduction

Your online course has started, and two days into the week, you have initial discussion board posts due. Some learners write an essay-length post, while others write a few sentences. Regardless of the length and quality of the post, your job as an instructor is to provide feedback that encourages learners to be reflective while expanding their thoughts and ideas. In addition, feedback should also validate learners' current knowledge.

The words you use in your feedback may have the power to move learners forward in their thought processes or thwart their ability for opportunities for growth and introspection. Typically, adult learners enrolled in graduate programs have established careers and/or hold positions of authority. They may be respected in their fields, but when entering a new learning environment, they may become more vulnerable and question their abilities. As an instructor, you know that adult learners can be apprehensive when navigating new learning experiences. It is not surprising that they become vulnerable and overwhelmed with the tasks that lie ahead.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

According to Brookfield (1991), instructors should recognize and honor the characteristics of adult learners. These characteristics include the following:

- Learners are self-directed and empowered
- Adult learners want their experiences to be valued
- Adult learners want their knowledge to be validated
- Adult learners want what they learn to be relevant
- Adult learners want to build upon their current knowledge base
- Adult learners do not want to feel embarrassed; egos and self-esteem are on the line

Feedback has been provided with the assumption that you, as the instructor, understand as well as honor the characteristics of adult learners. However, you have noticed that some students have not internalized your feedback. Is it because the feedback you are providing is not precise and in-depth? Is it because the students do not consider the feedback beneficial for their growth and development? Is the adult learner embarrassed or feeling devalued after reading your feedback? As a reflective practitioner, you wonder what you can do differently.

When you realize feedback may be inadequate or is missing the target, it is essential to take action to rectify the situation. Engaging and connecting with learners should be a priority, and Schwartz (n.d.) discovered that adult learners valued the instructor-learner relationship when instructors were genuine, approachable, and available. Schwartz further suggested that learners feel validated when their instructors recognize and respect the wealth of experience and knowledge that they bring to the table. Providing feedback that reflects those qualities should be the goal of every instructor.

Connecting with Adult Learners

Radovan and Makoyec reported it is commonly accepted that connecting with learners is important because it increases the motivation to learn, increases student engagement, and increases performance (2015). The words instructors use in responding to learners make the difference between superficial and insignificant feedback or feedback that inspires learners to become more reflective, think more critically, and question their assumptions. Rabidoux and Rottman (2017) opined that meaningful feedback inspires learners to think more critically, reflect more deeply, and aids in the development of a stronger instructor-student connection.

There are many opportunities and strategies to connect with learners throughout the course. Scheduling virtual meetings will pave the way for deeper learner engagement. While it is important to respect the busy lives of adult learners, scheduling at least one virtual meeting should be required. In the first meeting, the goal is to build connections between the instructor and the learner. Holding multiple meetings throughout the term strengthens connections, builds trust, and creates a collegial learning environment. Peer-to-peer connections can be equally important in creating a learning community where ideas and thoughts may be exchanged among the learners. Peer-to-peer collaboration, problem-solving, and sharing experiences enhance the richness of the meetings. Rabidoux and Rottman (2017) asked learners to reflect and write about their experiences within the online environment, and a common theme emerged. The learners shared, "...there was a feeling of being connected to the community because they had the comradery of their peers combined with the support of their instructor" (Rabidoux & Rottman, para. 10).

The following are a set of suggested strategies for holding a virtual meeting:

- Request that learners keep their cameras on. This allows everyone to connect a face with a name. This helps personalize the learning environment.
- Begin with an icebreaker or ask learners to share something positive. By doing this, you are creating a sense of community and a level of comfort to exchange thoughts and ideas.
- Set expectations that establish the parameters of the course.
- Invite learners to share their expectations. This allows them to become an active participant in their learning experience.

A second strategy to connect and engage with learners is to provide personalized written feedback in the discussion board and assignments. The goal is to provide explicit language beyond, for example, "good job, excellent response, or I agree." Instructors should give feedback that is personal, positive, and constructive. Certain words engage learners, while other words can demotivate them. It is important to consider that feedback and grades may impact a learner's self-esteem.

The following are suggested or example phrases to use when providing positive written feedback

- Wonderful job with the phraseology in this section. There is clarity in the words you chose to use when you expressed your thoughts.
- Your expertise in language arts (math, science, etc.) is supporting your writing in a variety of ways. Your words are clear and concise.

Suggested phrases for constructive feedback are as follows:

- This is a relevant topic, but have you considered expanding your thoughts and/or discussion to help your outside reader fully understand the benefits of XYZ?
- A bias may be showing here. It is important to remain objective and be open to what the data tells you. Remember to let the data speak for itself.
- It appears you did not cite here. It is important to respect and give credit to the person(s) who conducted the research you are using here to support your point..
- The content was relevant and comprehensive, but what you wrote was difficult to follow because your paper lacked organization. Headings would have improved the flow and readability of the paper. Please refer to pages XXX in the *APA Manual* (7th ed.) for additional guidance

Conclusion

The words you choose will affect the learners. The examples shared above provide a starting point for building connections with learners. As instructors, you have the power with your words to inspire and encourage learners to push past their assumptions and current knowledge or to deflate and/or demotivate them. Encourage adult learners with the words you choose to use in your feedback. Your goal should be to help them realize there are no failures, only discoveries.

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