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Distance Education Research in Adult Education Journals: A Content Analysis

David S. Stein, Constance E. Wanstreet, and Candi Krisch

This study examines adult-centered distance education research articles in two adult education journals: *Adult Education Quarterly* and the *American Journal of Distance Education*. Results show that studies of delivery modes and systems; i.e., asynchronous and synchronous modes, learning management systems, television and Web delivery, and course design were most prevalent in both journals. Among topics of interest to adult educators, the self-directed nature of distance learning was predominant. Other topics traditionally associated with adult education, such as access, equity, and social change themes in distance education, were least prevalent in both journals.

Introduction

Online enrollment in American higher education has continued to grow in the last 10 years. During the autumn of 2009, more than 8.5 million adult learners 25 and older were enrolled in at least one online course at a college or university (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). This represents a 16% increase from 2008, when more than 82% of the online adult learners were undergraduates (NCES, 2010). In addition, the demand for online courses has increased. Sixty-six percent of institutions reported new courses and programs online, and 73% of degree-granting postsecondary institutions noted that existing online courses and programs show increased enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Enrollment for adults 25 and over is expected to increase by several hundred thousand between 2011 and 2019 (NCES, 2010).

Traditionally, adults' learning needs were primarily met outside of the traditional classroom setting (Huang, 2002) using strategies such as correspondence study and, later, various combinations of print, audio, video, and computer technologies that provided access to education and training at a distance (Gibson, 2000). Adult distance education was identified from its beginnings as a form of adult education (Moore, 2003). Distance education provided entrée to educational opportunities not available from traditional sources. The flexibility of distance education made it ideal for adult learners who have to balance other life priorities.

Articles in research journals reflect the state of understanding on phenomena important to a particular field. Given that distance education is an important form of adult education, and given that adults are increasing their engagement in distance learning to obtain degrees and other credentials, an examination of adult-centered distance education research in adult education journals is a worthwhile way to assess what is important and valued in this research community.

Two leading journals were chosen for this study: *Adult Education Quarterly* (*AEQ*) and the *American Journal of Distance Education* (*AJDE*). *AEQ* has been the predominant journal for adult educators since 1950 (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education [AAACE], 2011). With a mission to advance the knowledge and practice of continuing and adult education, *AEQ* might be expected to publish articles related to adult distance education (AAACE, 2011). *AJDE* has covered all aspects of online pedagogy in American distance education since its inception in 1987 (Moore, 1987). *AJDE* has been an available channel for adult educators interested in publishing their research on distance education.

Method and Procedures

Research Questions

This study explores the following research primary research question: To what extent are adult education journals addressing adult-related issues in distance education? Secondary research questions include, What content is covered in *Adult Education Quarterly* and the *American Journal of Distance Education*? and What research approaches are used to study adult and distance education environments?

In this exploratory, inductive study, we asked an open-ended question about the extent to which adult education journals address distance education issues. We approached the data with the intent to discover categories of issues relating to adults and distance education. Prior research and knowledge of adult and distance education issues were also considered in developing the research protocol.

A quantitative content analysis of adult distance education empirical research in *AEQ* and *AJDE* for the past 10 years was used to identify the presence or absence of categories and patterns in the type of research. Quantitative content analysis is a systematic, replicable method to measure communication and assign numeric values to it in order to use statistical methods for purposes of description or inference (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). In addition, an open-ended “Other” category was included to enable discovery of unanticipated categories.

A codebook measuring fourteen elements that are indicative of adult and distance education was developed. The fourteen elements are: access to learning opportunities; equity; social change; self-directed nature of learning; vocations; delivery systems; course design; distance education theories and framework; achievement; satisfaction; interaction; institutional culture; administrative and policy issues, including institutional support; and other category not anticipated.

Data Collection

The journal publishers’ Web sites were used to identify articles addressing adult-centered distance education issues. Sage Journals Online was the source for *Adult Education Quarterly*, and Taylor and Francis Online was the source for the *American Journal of Distance Education*. Descriptors used were *adult plus distance education*, *adult plus online*, *adult plus online learning*, and *adult plus e-learning*, combined with each journal’s name. Each descriptor set was searched by date: from 2001—the year Web 2.0 course management systems became prevalent (Ice, 2010)—to 2011. The searches were conducted on July 27, 2011, and yielded 294 articles.

Duplicate titles and articles containing the descriptors in reference citations only were eliminated. In addition, the descriptor *online* resulted in articles that referred to surveys completed online, online resources, and other references that were not indicative of online learning research. The descriptor *adult* resulted in articles that included *adult* in the references or in a literature review citation, not as a focus of the research being reported. In those cases, the articles were eliminated.

To be included in this content analysis, research articles specifically identified as adults or as learners who have one or more of these characteristics: 25 years of age or older, delayed enrolling in college after graduating from high school, primarily studying part time and working full time, returned to formal education after a period of non-involvement (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006) or are pursuing graduate or professional degrees.

Eliminating the duplicate and non-applicable articles resulted in 98 articles to review: 39 from *Adult Education Quarterly*, and 59 from the *American Journal of Distance Education*. Of that total, 35 articles represented empirical research and were coded (see Table 1).

Table 1. Adult-centered Distance Education Final Search Results.

Journal	Type of Article				Total
	Empirical research	Interview	Essay/ Editorial	Book review	
<i>AEQ</i>	6	0	2	31	39
<i>AJDE</i>	29	15	9	6	59
Total	35	15	11	37	98

Two researchers working independently coded the content. Interrater reliability was conducted on the results using Krippendorff's (2004) alpha ($\alpha = .95$) and surpassed the theoretical minimum of 80% (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005).

Results

Research question 1

The primary research question was: To what extent are adult education journals addressing adult-related issues in distance education? Of 174 total empirical studies published in *AEQ* between 2001 and August 2011, six (3.4%) addressed adult-related issues in distance education. Of 130 total empirical studies published in *AJDE* during the same period, 29 (22%)

Table 2. Content Categories by Number of Observations and Percentage of Articles Coded.

Research Category	<i>AEQ</i>		<i>AJDE</i>	
	No.	%	No.	%
Access to learning opportunities	1	16	3	10
Equity	2	33	3	10
Social change	1	16	0	0
Self-directed nature of learning	2	33	17	59
Vocations	2	33	5	17
Delivery systems	6	100	27	93
Course design	4	67	16	55
Distance education theories and frameworks	1	16	15	52
Achievement	1	16	8	28
Satisfaction	2	33	13	45
Interaction	3	50	19	66
Institutional culture	2	33	3	10
Administrative and policy issues	2	33	8	28

addressed adult-related issues in distance education.

Research question 2

The second research question was: What content is covered in *Adult Education Quarterly* and the *American Journal of Distance Education*? Each research study addressed multiple content categories (See Table 2). Most prevalent in both journals were studies of delivery modes and systems; i.e., asynchronous and synchronous modes, learning management systems, and television and Web delivery. Issues around interaction were present in at least half of the studies. More than half of the studies published in *AJDE* addressed the self-directed nature of learning, including references to critical thinking, self-efficacy, learner autonomy, learner control, the reflective learner, and academic motivation. Least prevalent were studies addressing other issues traditionally associated with adult education, such as access to learning opportunities, equity, and social change.

Numerous articles in both journals were ground in constructivism and group collaboration. Both journals published articles related to critical reflection, and in three cases *AJDE* published articles specifically featuring adult education theoretical frameworks (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002; Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Conrad, 2002).

Research question 3

The third research question was, What research approaches are used to study adult and distance education environments? Qualitative research was more prevalent in *AEQ*, and quantitative and mixed-methods research approaches were more prevalent in *AJDE* (See Table 3).

Table 3. Research Approaches by Number of Observations and Percentage of Articles Coded.

Journal	Qualitative		Quantitative		Mixed	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>AEQ</i>	3	50	2	33	1	17
<i>AJDE</i>	3	10	19	66	7	24

Conclusions

Among issues traditionally associated with adult education, the findings show that the self-directed nature of learning was predominant in the context of these distance education studies. This may be accounted for by the nature of theories historically associated with distance education, which feature learner autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-direction.

Access to learning opportunities and equity issues, while present to a degree, were not as frequent as articles concerned with delivery systems, course design, and interaction were. This finding may be influenced by the time period of this study, which began in 2001 when Web 2.0 course management systems became prevalent. Issues related to hardware, software, and learner interaction with instructors, content, the computer interface, and other learners emerged at that time.

Results suggest that 3% of the research articles published by *AEQ* addressed adult-related distance education issues. This may be due partially to the search criteria including the term *adult* and not including other adult-related terms, such as *professional*, *worker*, etc. Nevertheless, with adult online enrollment projected to increase significantly by 2019 (NCES, 2010), one would expect increased attention to adult-related distance education issues in that journal.

With their predominant interest in delivery systems, course design, interaction, and the self-directed nature of learning, this study found that *AEQ* and *AJDE* are more alike than different in the research they publish that addresses adult-related distance education issues. However, there is a noticeable lack of research articles in both journals on distance education as it relates to adult learners.

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