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Published in:

Proceedings of the 15th European Conference on e-Learning, Charles University, Prague

Publication date:

2016

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Vanslambrouck, S., Zhu, C., Tondeur, J., Philipsen, B., & Lombaerts, K. (2016). Adult learners' motivation to participate and perception of online and blended environments. In J. Novotná, & A. Jancarík (Eds.), Proceedings of the 15th European Conference on e-Learning, Charles University, Prague. (pp. 750 - 757). Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited.

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Adult learners' motivation to participate and perception of online and blended environments.

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Abstract: Adult learners are an important segment of learners in online or blended learning (OBL) environments. But at the same time, this group is very heterogeneous with regard to (1) the digital skills which are diverse due to different ages or previous educational opportunities and can lead to different perceptions of working in OBL environments, and (2) the motives to enroll and persist in adult education which can be influenced by previous work and life experiences. Therefore, the present study aims to identify the learner diversity by applying the self-determination theory (SDT) of Deci and Ryan (2000) in order to explore their motives to participate in adult education. Next, this study also examined the perceptions of learners to learn in OBL environments. Qualitative content analysis was conducted on nine semi-structured interviews. The participants were adult learners enrolled in an OBL program in an adult education center in Flanders, Belgium. The adult learners indicate that the face-to-face moments are highly valued because they can learn more and better this way. However, sometimes they prefer distance moments since the content can sometimes be learned independently. Furthermore, the participants agreed on the practical benefits of OBL and the difficulty of working in groups, and provided tips to be successful in OBL environments. Regarding the motives to enroll and persist in adult education, the adult learners generally participate to be able to continue their current job, to have an alternative job possibility, or because they want a new job. The current study informs institutions and teachers about the motives of adults to participate in adult education and their experienced benefits or challenges in OBL. This is relevant since it gives an indication of components to be attentive to or to work on in online and blended adult education, specifically when trying to meet the needs of the adult learners.

Keywords: adult education, motivation, online and blended learning, self-determination theory, perceptions

1 Introduction

Originally, adult learners (AL) have been the main target group in online and blended education (Stavredes 2011). The flexibility and convenience of OBL makes education more accessible for these non-traditional learners. However, younger, more dynamic learners, who are more responsive to rapid technological innovations are increasingly using OBL, which brings changes in the online learning population (Dabbagh 2007). Furthermore, due to family and work related responsibilities (Noel-Levitz 2014), online or blended AL have different previous work, life and educational experiences. This makes them a heterogeneous group of learners with a multiplicity of motivations, learning styles and generational differences, even within the same class. The OBL environment aims to be a flexible environment to meet the needs of this heterogeneity. While teachers try to adjust their pedagogy and the OBL environment to meet the needs of the individual learners, they still lack knowledge about their diverse learners. A first step is to know why the AL participate in education and what they like or dislike about the OBL environment. Seeking to address this problem, the current study aims at exploring the perceptions that adult learners hold towards the OBL environment and their motives to participate in adult education.

1.1 Perceptions of online and blended learning

Perceptions of OBL environments, in which courses are delivered purely online or in combination with face-to-face interventions (Boelens, Van Laer, De Wever & Elen, 2015), can be expressed as preferences, difficulties or advantages. People can have different preferences and experiences because of their personal diversity. For example, their age or previous educational possibilities can create different levels of technology skills

(Stavredes 2011). This can cause some learners to prefer other learning methods as they perceive them more effective (Fryer, Bovee & Nakao 2014). Furthermore, learners can experience difficulties or advantages during their learning process. Important advantages of OBL for AL with work or family responsibilities is the flexibility in time, place and pace of learning, which gives them more control on working individually (Noel-Levitz 2014; Styer 2009). According to their perceptions of OBL, learners will indicate needs to be successful in this specific environment. Dabbagh (2007) states that a successful online learner should have (1) online communication and collaborative skills, (2) a strong academic self-concept, (3) appreciation for the learning opportunities afforded by technology and, (4) self-directed learning skills.

1.2 Adults' motivation to participate in adult education

A frequently used motivation theory is the self-determination theory (SDT) of Deci and Ryan (2000). This theory questions why people initiate and persist in a certain behavior. According to the SDT, people can have a sense of autonomous or controlled motivation. When they are autonomously motivated, people act with a full sense of volition and choice. This is also called 'self-determined behavior'. On the other side, when people behave because they feel pressured, their motivation is controlled or non-self-determined. Next to this, people can also lack the intention to behave in a certain way which is called amotivation (Deci & Ryan 2000). In this study, 'behavior' is seen as participation in an adult education program. It entails both the enrollment and persistence in that program. While it is stated that online AL are autonomously motivated (Styer 2009), it is possible for people to be motivated by different kinds of motivations at once (Boiché & Stephan, 2014).

1.3 Present research

The perceptions of the OBL environment and the motivation of learners to participate in adult education are linked to each other. If learners perceive the OBL environment to be positive and valuable, they will be more motivated to persist (Fryer, Bovee & Nakao 2014). Since motivated students seem to perform better, it is useful for teachers to prepare and use their OBL courses in a way which support learner motivation. This study aims to meet the need to understand the AL perceptions of OBL environments and their motivation to participate. To achieve this aim, following research questions are explored:

- 1) How do adult learners perceive online or blended learning environments?
 - a. Which positive aspects do they perceive?
 - b. Which negative aspects do they perceive?
 - c. Which 'needs' do they ascribe to successful online learners?
- 2) What motivations do the adult learners attribute to their participation in a program in adult education?
 - a. Which autonomous motives do they have?
 - b. Which controlled motives do they have?

2 Method

2.1 Sample

The sample of this study exists of nine AL who are enrolled in an online or blended course of the teacher training program in an adult education center in Flanders, Belgium. They were contacted through a previous conducted survey in OBL classes at the end of a school year in which they indicated that they were willing to participate in further research. The interviews took place at the beginning of the next school year which gave certainty that the participants in the current study have experience with OBL. The participants comprise a wide range of ages (from 23 to 53 years old) and have different educational backgrounds (from no degree to a master diploma). A short summary of participants' biographies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample overview: marital status, employment status and educational degree

Joren (25) lives with his parents, has a higher secondary degree and has been working for 1 year as a carpenter before enrolling in adult education. He still works as a carpenter while studying.

Achilles (27) lives with his girlfriend and has a master in graphic design. He is self-employed and also works as a teacher in adult education. He has been working for 3 years before enrolling in adult education.

Brahim (40) lives with his girlfriend and son. He always worked as a welder but because of health problems, he became a teacher in part-time secondary education.

Claudia (23) works a few hours a week in a pharmacy while still doing a master. She lives with her parents.

Amelie (29) has a master's degree and has been working for 4 years as a social worker before enrolling in adult education. She recently cohabits with strangers.

Philip (46) has a master's degree in communication sciences and is unemployed. He has a wife and three kids.

Myriam (32) lives with her son and boyfriend. She has a master's degree and has been working as a teacher both in Belgium as abroad.

Charlotte (24) is doing a PhD and lives together with her boyfriend.

Gustavo (53) lives with his two kids and girlfriend. He has a professional bachelor's degree and currently works as a teacher in secondary education.

Note: names have been changed to provide anonymity.

2.2 Procedure and analysis

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. There was a broad guideline and the interviews took on average 60 minutes. The interviews covered participants' personal background, motives to enroll in adult education and their perceptions of learning in an OBL environment. Before interviewing, the participants were informed about the goals and the processing of their data. They all signed an informed consent. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and anonymized. The analysis was conducted with Nvivo10. To display the adults' (1) motives to participate in education and (2) their perceptions of OBL, qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) was used. Regarding the analysis of motivation, the researchers used pre-determined deductive categories. This means that a priori existing categories identified from the SDT (Deci & Ryan 2000) were used. The categories were: autonomous motivation, controlled motivation and amotivation. Additionally, these categories were further differentiated in inductively derived smaller categories. This means that we constructed smaller categories based on the inductive codes used during the analysis of the data. This is done to enrich the deductive derived categories. For the analysis of the perceptions of OBL, we inductively identified three main categories from the data. These three main categories were then further specified into smaller categories, based on similarities or specific differences. The constructed main and smaller categories of motivation and perceptions were then used to develop an answer to the research questions.

3 Results

3.1 Perceptions of OBL

Most participants did not have a choice to follow their course in an OBL or non-OBL environment. Joren stated that he was not aware of being enrolled in OBL until the course started. Also Amelie mentioned that "it did not feel like blended learning". However, they all have experiences with OBL and could easily point out some positive and negative aspects. Table 3 gives an overview on the final set of categories on the perceptions of OBL. The perceptions were divided into three inductively derived categories, namely 'positive aspects', 'negative aspects' and 'needs'. Each category was further divided into different smaller categories to be able to give more detailed information.

Table 3: Categories on perceptions of OBL

Inductively derived categories	Smaller inductively derived categories
Positive aspects	Freedom
	Face-to-face moments
	New skills
Negative aspects	Interaction
	Organization distance moments
	Technology
Necessities	Self-discipline
	Skills
	Personality traits
	Infrastructure

Overall, there was controversy about the ability to combine OBL with other responsibilities. While some participants stated that "it was not hard to combine with the personal life", others were disappointed and

indicated that OBL was “totally not combinable”. Two of them complained that their family situation suffers from their participation. These learners also indicated that they will spend more time to the program than the institution promised. “It is demotivating”, said Myriam.

3.1.1 Positive aspects

Albeit this general negative aspect, many participants mentioned positive aspects of OBL. More specifically, the freedom they obtain is really appreciated. This sense of freedom refers to different things. In this respect Myriam said: “I can do it [learning] on my own pace, my moments”, while Philip referred to the freedom of space by saying: “You are not in traffic if you have a [distance] moment”. Joren talked about the freedom of time while saying:

Sometimes, for face-to-face moments, I had to stop working a bit earlier to get there but if it's a distance moment I could work a bit longer and start my course a bit later, I was more free.

The participants also like the freedom because they love to work independently. Furthermore, the participants indicated that through the freedom they obtain in OBL environments, they have learned new skills. Gustavo said: “Because you learn independently and you learn to plan things”, while Joren said: “If you have a problem, you will search yourself what the problem is. You will investigate more on your own, while in a classroom, you will just ask the question and you will get an answer.” Even though the participants like the autonomy they get, they also still value the face-to-face moments. This was supported by quotes like “sometimes the content is really abstract so I guess it is sometimes easier if someone can explain it”, “you get a lot of life experiences from the teachers” or “questions arise in class, everyone asks questions and you learn from each other”.

3.1.2 Negative aspects

The participants indicated that the interaction during face-to-face moments is appreciated, albeit that they sometimes perceived it as waste of time. An example is that they viewed theory as something they can learn by themselves, hence making it unnecessary to organize face-to-face moments to cover the theory. Regarding the distance moments, the participants also indicated some concerns. The distance can act as a threshold to participate in online interaction and one participant reported on a forum that has never been used. The quote from Myriam illustrates this threshold:

I then think to myself: have I sent this e-mail only to the teacher or can everyone see this? Is this a relevant question or would I even ask it in the first place? You then think it's maybe a silly question and then you don't ask it and you stay bothered with the question.

Another negative aspect is the organization of the distance moments. In line with their appreciation for face-to-face moments, the AL sometimes argued that there are too much distance moments. As Philip explained:

Fifty percent distance moments, that was a lot [...] we had to learn that by ourselves and it had been chasing us [...] We had the feeling we missed something because we did not discuss it in class. [...] a few teaching methods [the content they had to learn in the distance moment] were not clear, we understood it differently.

Next to this, the link between the distance and the face-to-face moment was not always clear. Achilles called for more relevant tasks in distance moments. Furthermore, due to the distance moments the participants complained about the difficult organization of group work. Achilles even said: “Group work like that should be avoided in a blended learning trajectory”. The last negative aspect, which is only mentioned by two learners, is the technology. They mentioned that technology is not infallible and gave as a limitation that when they are evaluated on their progress in learning paths, it was possible to cheat.

3.1.3 Necessities

Finally, based on their experiences with OBL, learners also provided some necessities that online or blended learners should possess to be successful. Firstly, it is important to have the right infrastructure. A computer with internet connection is required. Secondly, as Philip mentioned: “The fact that you get autonomy means that you have to possess some kind of self-discipline”. Every participant talked about the need of having perseverance and not procrastinate tasks. They need motivation to work on their tasks, even if there is no teacher to encourage them at the moment. Joren illustrated this by saying: “They should not procrastinate

their distance education”. Thirdly, multiple skills were mentioned by the participants. Computer skills were mostly mentioned, next to organization and communication skills and “being able to plan things”. To conclude, there are a few personality traits which were mentioned less, but which are not less important. The participants indicated the need to be curious to search for information by yourself and to have self-confidence. In line with this, Philip said: “[Be] self-assertive in case you have something on your mind. Throw it on the forum, don’t swallow it”.

3.2 Motivation to participate in adult education

The importance of motivation is strongly indicated in the interviews, as stated by one of the interviewees: “you need to be motivated otherwise I don’t think you persist that long”. The overall results not only confirm the presence of the three motivations – autonomous, controlled and amotivation – of the SDT theory (Deci & Ryan 2000), but also provide more detailed information into the diversity of motives within each of these motivations, as Achilles stated: “there is always a reason to follow a course”. Table 2 gives an overview on the final set of the aforementioned deductively derived categories and inductively derived categories on the motivation to participate in adult education.

Table 2: Categories and codes of motivation to participate and persist in adult education

Deductively derived category	Inductively derived category	Description
Autonomous motivation	Knowledge increase	Participating or persisting because of a personal desire to learn new knowledge.
	Future possibilities	Participating and persisting because of a personal desire for future possibilities that arise with the degree.
	Interest and pleasure	Participating and persisting because of personal interest and pleasure to follow a program.
Controlled motivation	Psychological punishments / rewards	Participating and persisting to avoid external psychological punishments like shame or to attain external psychological rewards like pride.
	Social support / persuasion / pressure	Participating and persisting because others encourage, persuade or force you.
	Job consequences	Participating and persisting to avoid external punishments with regard to the job like dismissal or to attain external rewards like job security.
Amotivation	Personal life consequences	Participating and persisting to attain external rewards for the personal life like a more free time.
	Content	Doubts to participate or persist that arise because of the content of the program.
	Workload	Doubts to participate or persist that arise because of the amount of work in the program.
	Social influences	Doubts to participate and persist that arise because of others.

3.2.1 Autonomous motivation

With regard to autonomous motivation, results show that the majority of the participants indicated that they participate in adult education because of the increase in knowledge it offers. They stated that “it is useful because I keep learning and studying will not become strange to me in this way”, “I always like to learn new things” or “I can enrich my knowledge”. Another frequently mentioned aspect of autonomous motivation is the future possibilities. The participants see their participation as a valuable opportunity to create future life prospects. An example is to obtain a job that they will like more and make them feel better than their current situation. The following quote from Philip elaborates on this: “At a certain point, I made the switch, I want to do something entirely different.” However, these autonomous motives are means to acquire more external goals. For example, when asking about their interest and pleasure in participating in adult education, the participants stated that the course was interesting because “I’m interested in the job” or like Brahim responded: “This [participating in adult education] is really for my job and not for fun, believe me”. They do not think the course is fun but follow it as a means to achieve more external things.

3.2.2 Controlled motivation

Following a course to achieve an external stated goal can be seen as the controlled motivation. Firstly, the job and personal life consequences are the most mentioned motive to participate and persist. Three participants are performing the job already but need the degree to be able to continue. So their participation in adult education is “useful, for job security”. Furthermore, some participants want to obtain the job later on. To illustrate this, Claudia for instance stated that:

It's the first thing they ask for and look for, the thing on which they select you, the degree. So that's why the degree is useful if you want the job later on.

Others, like Joren, see the degree as an alternative to their current job. He said: “You have an extra possibility for a job. You can perform another job if you want.” Furthermore, the wage and the free time that comes with this possible new job or higher degree are also mentioned a few times. Philip mentioned it very clearly, stating:

Yes, in first place the wage. You don't get payed badly in education, that is a nice bonus with regard to your retirement.

With the earned degree, Amelie stated that she can perform a job that she likes “because of the vacations”. Two female and one male participant mentioned that it would be great to perform the job they are currently learning for because it would be convenient in time if they would have children. Secondly, all participants expressed that psychological punishments and rewards play some kind of role in their persistence and participation. In this regard, Myriam said: “If I will finish the program, I will be proud because I can say to others: look I'm doing it”. Furthermore, most of the participants stated that they would feel some kind of guilt or shame if they would not succeed in their program. Thirdly, none of the participants was pressured by others but the recommendations they received from family, friends and employers, sometimes pursued them to enroll. The following quote from Amelie illustrates this:

[After a job application] I had received a phone call from the principal to say: We did not select you, [...] but if I can give you a hint: obtain a teachers' degree.

Also Joren was supported by family and friends. He indicated that “they all said, if I wanted to do that, I should certainly do it”. Furthermore, social support also helps to persist, as Philip mentioned: “You get feedback like: It's going to work out for you, you are able to do that”. Myriam also referred to similar feedback and expressed that it is “useful and motivating” receiving it.

3.2.3 Amotivation

The participants in this study showed that they have specific motives to participate in the program. However, most of them indicated that they do have some doubts during their program. Myriam even stated that she “constantly has doubts to persist”. She thinks it is useless because she already has a teachers' degree but from another country, and it is invalid in Belgium.

Other answers to the question if a participant ever had doubts to persist refer to the workload, for example: “yes, if you are working late in the night, then you think: what am I getting myself into?” or to the content of the course, for example: “I have been doubting during my education to drop out because I really think it is a boring program”. Another reason to doubt to participate are social influences, as Joren stated:

Yes [I have doubted to participate] because, normally I would start with that education the moment I graduated from high school but I haven't done that because when I went to my solicitation interview, my boss had told me: if you think about enrolling for an education and just work here for a couple of years, I rather want you to find another job. So, then I doubted a lot to enroll and I waited for a year but I did it anyway.

4 Discussion

This study aimed at providing an insight into the perceptions of AL of the OBL environment and their motives to participate in adult education in general. In contrast to the results of Fryer, Bovee and Nakao (2014), findings from this study show that the learners do value their learning method. The freedom they get in terms of time, place and pace flexibility is highly appreciated, which motivates them to enroll and persist in online courses (Styer 2009). Additionally, the participants contradict themselves by stating that too much freedom in terms of distance moments is not desirable. Face-to-face moments are still valued (López-Pérez, Pérez-López & Rodríguez-Ariza 2011). This indicates that the organization of blended learning should consider a good balance between face-to-face and distance moments. Furthermore, a negative aspect mentioned by the participants was that the interaction is very difficult in distance moments. It creates thresholds to ask questions online and it complicates the group work. Synchronous online activities can be a demotivator for online AL because they feel a kind of uncertainty to communicate online (Styer 2009). Participants in this study also advocate – like Styer (2009) - for less team activities or to make them optional because it decreases their perception of freedom and with this their motivation.

The needed skills and traits that the participants describe, are aligned with the required skills proposed by Dabbagh (2007). One participant mentions the communication skills but other participants complain about the lack of interaction in OBL, which indirectly stresses the importance of good communication (Styer 2009). Next to that, the participants indicate the need for self-discipline and other self-behaviors like self-determination and self-regulation (Dabbagh 2007). Because OBL environments provide a lot of autonomy, learners suggest that good time and organization skills are needed.

The second part of the study explored the motives of AL to participate in adult education. Findings clearly show that people can have multiple motives to do something (Boiché & Stephan 2014), in this case to participate and persist in adult education. The main motives of the participants in this study are linked to controlled motivation. This contradicts with some authors who state that AL are mostly autonomous or intrinsically motivated (e.g. Merriam & Caffarella 1999). An explanation for this can refer to the type of course. The program that the participants are following – teacher training program - is not a program that learners do for fun. It is a program that aims to prepare for future job opportunities. Furthermore, this study identified some similarities with the report of Noel-Levitz (2014), namely: that one of the motives to participate is because of future employment possibilities and recommendations from employers.

4.1 Limitations and future research

A first limitation is the small sample size. Hereby, it is not possible to generalize the findings from this study. The study also only focusses on the teacher education program, so we have to bear in mind that insights, results and thoughts can be different in other programs. Further research should focus on more AL, preferably from different programs in different levels like for example secondary adult education and higher vocational adult education. Furthermore, the context should be taken into account. This is due to the fact that OBL can take many forms with regard to the amount of distance versus face-to-face moments or the kind of activities performed during those moments. Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of this study. We only interviewed the learners one time but perceptions of OBL can change due to more experiences so multiple data collection moments is desirable. Also, some learners have already had more courses in OBL environments than others. Future research should therefore take into account the (amount) of experiences of the learners as a control variable.

5 Conclusion

This study contributes to the scientific research concerning adults' learning motivation to engage in adult education. Moreover, it indicates the preferences, advantages and challenges that learners experience within their OBL environment. These preferences, advantages and challenges function as motivators for the learners and can be used as indicators for the educational practice to adjust their pedagogy and OBL environment. For example, learners experience that OBL is not easily combinable with other responsibilities and time-investment to get the degree is a lot higher than expected, which demotivates them. Institutions can anticipate on this by being more realistic when informing the learners about the program. They could perform intake conversations

before enrollment to help estimating if the combination would be easy and which difficulties AL could encounter. This will prepare learners for possible barriers and prevent them from being demotivated.

Teachers and institutions can benefit from this study by anticipating the challenges and advantages indicated by the learners. If challenges are not tackled well by adult educators, it may lead to demotivation and drop out of adult learners. The advantages and preferences of learners may inform the institutions on the important components of online and blended education, which can inform the development of OBL programs to meet the needs and desires of AL. This can be helpful to reduce dropout and increase quality of the OBL environment.

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