

Reflections of Adult Learners in Asynchronous Online Degree Programs Jonathan Tyler Baker, Miami University, bakerjt@miamioh.edu Sophya Tukhvatulina, Independent Researcher

Abstract. The growing prevalence of online higher education courses has attracted millions of students, many of whom fall outside the traditional student demographic. This investigative study aims to close the existing knowledge gap about the experiences and preferences of adult asynchronous learners. The study was conducted as a series of semi-structured interviews with adult students enrolled in free-tuition online asynchronous programs (N = 26). The interviews were then coded using the content analysis technique. The findings suggest that the lack of consistent communication with faculty and university staff is the biggest issue faced by adult students online. Respondents also reported missing the sense of community. Despite that, it is the ability to do work on one's own schedule and flexibility in choosing the format for learning materials and assignments that are valued the most by adult students. Other findings and their implications are discussed further in the article.

Keywords: adult education; online degree program; asynchronous learning

The aim of this paper is to provide insights into the experiences of adult learners enrolled in asynchronous online degree programs at both the Associates and Baccalaureate levels as well as provide recommendations from adult learners for faculty, university support staff, and institutions currently offering, or considering the option of offering, online asynchronous degree programs. Whereas some research focuses on the medium of online instruction, best practices for online course delivery, or the needs of adults in continuing online higher education, no study has documented the reflections of adult learners enrolled in asynchronous online degree programs or their suggestions to improve asynchronous online learning.

To define adult learners, we relied on the definition of nontraditional students provided by the National Center for Education Statistics. In this study, we define an adult learner as a student over the age of 24 ("Nontraditional Undergraduates/Definitions and Data," n.d.). Though age is the main criterion for identifying an adult student, students who fall into this category often share similar circumstances in their educational journey: they return to education after taking a break, they have a full- or part-time job, and/or they have family responsibilities while being enrolled in educational institutions ("Nontraditional Undergraduates/Definitions and Data," n.d.). This project seeks to provide insights into the preferences adult learners in asynchronous online degree programs have about assignments, course organization, communication with faculty and university staff, methods of learning and evaluation, and interaction with classmates. This project also highlights the challenges and difficulties that adult learners have in asynchronous online degree programs, which include isolation from university resources, faculty, and staff as well as a longing for a sense of community and

inclusion. The students who participated in this study also offered key insights about how to improve the effectiveness of asynchronous online courses and degree programs for adult learners.

Since 2020, the demand for and relevance of distance education—namely, courses and degree programs delivered fully online where teachers and students are separated by time and distance—is noticeably higher than pre-pandemic levels. Presently, 12.5 percent of all undergraduate students in the United States take all their courses online (Smalley, 2021). The Coronavirus Pandemic also accelerated the pace at which American colleges and universities offer online degree programs; the number of such programs now stands at roughly 2,500 (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). The most recent numbers indicate that nearly 16.8 million adults over the age of twenty are enrolled in at least one course in an online degree program (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Review of Literature

Compared to the traditional in-person experience on brick-and-mortar campuses or in synchronous online courses, asynchronous online education is not dictated by time, and distance students are not required to be on campus and are responsible for completing their coursework when it is most convenient for them. For adult learners, especially those with full-time jobs or family commitments, asynchronous online college programs are an ideal way to earn a degree (Hannon, 2021; Liu, 2012). It is important to note that online degree programs, and even courses within those programs, can be offered either synchronously—with scheduled online virtual meeting times—or asynchronously wherein students and teachers do not have required meeting times. Research shows that the method of online course delivery—synchronous or asynchronous—does not make a statistically significant difference in student learning outcomes (Johnston et al., 2005; Means et al., 2010; Nguyen, 2015).

Although there is a substantial amount of literature addressing topics within adult online education, such as retention, motivation practices within specific subjects, self-esteem, and resilience, no study has focused exclusively on the experiences of adult learners enrolled in asynchronous online degree programs and the suggestions adult learners have for the improvement of asynchronous online degree programs (Allen & Zhang, 2018; Essary, 2014; Rapchak et al., 2015; Rogers, 2018). There is also little research that discusses adult learners' opinions on modes of delivery for their coursework—whether face-to-face, hybrid, synchronous online, or asynchronous online—or preferences on receiving live instruction from their professors (Gysbers et al., 2011).

An extensive body of research exists covering the benefits of taking online courses, which include better access to college degree programs, the convenience of scheduling, the flexibility to study and learn at their own pace, and the potential to earn a credential for employment or promotion within their occupation (Conceição, 2006; Michael, 2012). This study is, in a way, building on the work of Kellogg and Smith (2009) who argue that the needs and expectations of adult learners online

are different than those of typical college-aged students, especially those on-campus. The reported experiences of participants of this study, particularly their thoughts on how to improve asynchronous online learning, parallel Riggs and Linder's (2016) argument that adult learners want to see active learning in their coursework and want to see more freedom in how they complete their assignments.

Despite the significant number of adult learners enrolled in online degree programs and the growing popularity of using online distance education to earn a college degree, there is little research about their experiences in asynchronous online degree programs or what they would like to see changed in asynchronous online distance education to make it more advantageous to them. As more adults enroll in asynchronous online degree programs, gaining insights into their experiences and reflections is imperative to better the overall quality of coursework, best instructional methods, communication strategies, and outcomes of asynchronous online degree programs.

Methods and Procedures

Research participants were all adults over the age of 30 and were enrolled in online degree programs at multiple institutions of higher education in the American Midwest. All participants were receiving their education at no cost due to their labor union having a partnership with these institutions, which provided them access to the no-cost asynchronous online associate or bachelor's degree programs. To ensure the privacy of the participants, the names of the institutions they attended will not be shared. For the same reason, participants' demographic information will not be shared individually. Participation in this study was voluntary as participants were invited through email to answer a questionnaire about their experiences in an online asynchronous degree program.

The interviews were conducted either over the phone or through a video conferencing platform at the participants' convenience and lasted between 35–75 minutes. Each participant received and signed an IRB-approved consent form prior to the interview. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and represent the present research. Data collection for this study served to answer the following research questions: (1) How would adult learners describe their experiences with asynchronous online degree programs? (2) What aspects of an asynchronous online curriculum were most helpful to adult learners? and (3) What would adult learners want to change about their asynchronous online degree programs?

The total sample consisted of 26 participants who were either currently enrolled in Midwest University's no-cost asynchronous online degree program or had recently graduated from the program. Nineteen participants (73%) identified as women while seven (27%) identified as men. There were 16 participants (61%) who identified as White (non-Hispanic), seven participants (27%) who identified as Hispanic/Latinx, two participants (8%) who identified as African American, and one participant (3%) who identified as Asian-American. Twenty-five participants (96%) indicated that they had a full-time job while one participant (3%) was a stay-at-

home parent to a child with special needs. Combined, 22 participants (84%) indicated that they had both a full-time job and children living in the home with them. Twenty-one participants (80%) indicated that they previously attended college either in-person or online in the last two decades. There were also 20 participants (73%) who indicated that they were first-generation college students.

The present study is built on data collected from a 26-question semi-structured in-depth interview where questions were grouped into three categories: demographic information, background in higher education, and general reflections on asynchronous online learning. Within the category of general reflections, participants were asked about their expectations of asynchronous online learning, the benefits and detriments of asynchronous online learning, coursework (e.g., written papers, tests, discussion posts) that they found to be the most helpful to their learning, their experience with faculty assigned to teach their courses, experiences communicating with university staff, and the changes that could be made to asynchronous online learning to make it more advantageous to them. Due to the nature of both semi-structured and in-depth interviews, both the researcher and participant asked follow-up questions or requested further elaboration on the topic. Participants were also given the opportunity to share any reflections not touched upon within the interview.

Data collected from the interviews were then coded and categorized into three descriptive themes that run throughout the first section of this study: reflections on the effectiveness of coursework, experiences communicating with faculty and staff, and the extent to which asynchronous online learning provides a sense of community and belonging to adult learners. The final section of this paper highlights a fourth and more analytical theme—suggestions for the improvement of asynchronous online degree programs and courses for adult learners.

The Experience of Adult Learners in Asynchronous Online Degree Programs

Difficulties of Asynchronous Online Learning

Participants were asked what they believed to be the detriments of asynchronous online learning. Their responses fell into five categories: not feeling as prioritized as in-person students, communication with faculty and the university, course organization, time zone differences, and internet connectivity/reliability.

Lack of Human Connection with Professors

There are a myriad of studies highlighting the pivotal role of instructors' support and involvement in facilitating online learning and increasing student satisfaction among the typically-aged student population (De Smet et al., 2008; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai, 2007; Sun & Chen, 2016; Shea et al., 2010). Our participants indicated that the lack of connectivity with professors was one of the detriments of asynchronous online learning. When asked what they believed was the biggest impediment to asynchronous learning, participants remarked that they "can't walk up and knock on a door and get a human being," or weren't "able to actually go see

the professor in person in the office." Most participants could contact their professors virtually but lamented that "it's still not the same because the person's not there with you to help you figure certain things out" and that the ability to build relationships with professors was "kind of lost."

Trouble Receiving Responses from Faculty or Staff

The availability of faculty and university staff and the presence of timely communication are integral parts of student support (Croxton, 2014; Lee et al., 2011). Participants reported that the distance created by the geographic separation from their campuses and contact with universities being limited to telephone or email was further aggravated by communication breakdowns from faculty or staff. Four participants (15.4%) said their professors were not putting any effort into communication and expected that communication with professors each semester, as one participant put it, was "gonna be a disaster." When asked how long they usually waited for a response from faculty, 3 participants (11.5%) indicated that they would usually hear from their professors on the fourth or fifth day after they sent their initial email. Participants also pointed out that "it's really tricky to get an answer" from staff members from various offices at their universities. A total of 17 participants (65.4%) reported having issues getting a response from the universities' staff. Their universities' failure to communicate made participants feel like they were "just a number" or were "not valued as much as an on-campus traditional student." One respondent said, "I'm a real person, a real student. Please care about me for five minutes."

Issues with Technology and Internet

Despite the advances in technology surrounding learning management systems where online courses are delivered, wireless internet access, and modes of communicating from a distance, 3 of the participants (11.5%) in this study reported that technology was the biggest detriment of asynchronous online learning and that internet access "is the most important thing" because, as one participant stated, "if you don't have the internet," the online coursework "is not gonna go really well for you." Another 6 respondents (23.1%) cited problems including "email is down" or when "the learning platform is down" as major barriers to completing their coursework. While some technical issues, like access to the internet, cannot be resolved with the availability of technical support, technical support is vital for effective asynchronous online learning, especially for the older population of students (Netanda et al., 2017).

Experience with Coursework

Participants were asked what type of coursework (e.g., tests, discussions, essays) they found most helpful and unhelpful to their learning. Their responses indicate that adult learners find all types of assignments helpful—it just depends on the preferences of the student. What was more certain, though, is that adult learners want the following: (1) clear connections between assignments and a course's learning objectives; (2) constructive feedback from professors; (3) consistent and

reasonable amount of assignments each week; (4) assignments that allow them to reflect on their career or personal experiences; and (5) professor-created content, like pre-recorded lectures, as an alternative or supplemental assignment to reading a textbook or watching content not created by the professor online.

Malcolm Knowles (1984), who worked in the field of andragogy and adult learning theory, allocated five characteristics of adult learners differentiating them from child learners: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation on learning, and motivation to learn. Participants' preferences in coursework content and organization are partly consistent with Knowles' view on adult learners. The main source of participants' dissatisfaction with coursework came from a lack of understanding of how assigned tasks can be applied outside of the classroom setting. The life experience of learners plays a great role in their learning—so do the readiness, orientation, and motivation to learn. More than half of adult students who participated in the study (15 participants, 57.7%) want the coursework and the way it is organized to reflect their life experiences, responsibilities, and roles outside of the classroom. For 22 participants (84.6%) the type of assignments given often did not play a significant role if the assignments were perceived as "relevant," which meant that the tasks required critical reflection and/or were problem-based.

The responses of our participants stand in contradiction with adult learning theory when it comes to adult learners' self-concept. Based on the interviews analyzed in this paper, nontraditional online students might need more instructor support than previously thought (El-Amin, 2020; Saudelli et al., 2015). Being enrolled in a formal education institution, adult learners in this study were expecting to be evaluated by the faculty assigned to teach their courses. The overwhelming majority of participants in the study reported the importance of timely constructive feedback from their instructors, which was viewed both as an important part of acquiring knowledge and positive communication with faculty.

Connecting Assignments to Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

Participants often did not care about the type of assignment they were asked to complete for a course, but they did care about how an assignment aided their learning. Eleven participants (42.3%) believed assignments aided their learning most when they felt like they were "actually participating," "putting tools to use" to "create," "build," and "present" assignments rather than doing coursework that's "not interesting" or "pointless" such as when professors ask students to "read and digest the textbook and spit it all back out." Twelve participants (46.2%) wanted their professors to make the requirements and evaluation criteria for course learning objects to be "one hundred percent clear," and 9 participants (34.6%) believed that the goal of each course should be to do assignments that are "meaningful" to students.

Receiving Feedback from Professors

Respondents expressed their preference for receiving written feedback from professors as opposed to a numerical grade. Participants explained that a “professor’s feedback on [assignments] is paramount” and do not like when their only feedback “is just a number” professors put into “the grade book.” Participants “really appreciate faculty members that give feedback on assignments,” want to understand what they “got wrong,” what “they did right,” or what they “can improve upon in the future.” As one respondent put it, “As opposed to not telling me what I got wrong, help me learn...I like to know what I can improve on or what I can keep working at.” Fourteen respondents (53.8%) reported feeling “kind of upset” if “there’s no feedback.” Twelve participants (46.2%) report feeling “unmotivated” when “professors are not giving feedback,” and 6 participants (23%) indicated that they were “gonna get a 100% no matter what,” which they described as “disappointing.”

The Amount of Coursework and Deadlines

Adult learners in this study, most of whom had jobs and children, believed that coursework should accommodate those realities and that professors should be mindful of the demands on the time of adult learners outside of coursework. Participants felt that their courses were “very much designed for students who are only going to school as opposed to people like [adult learners] who are obviously working full-time.” Participants wondered if their professor assumed participants were “stay-at-home moms” or unemployed and “online at home doing [courses],” not students who were “working full-time” with “families and other commitments” and should be considered as “working professionals.”

What tended to aggravate a number of the participants were professors who “expected a lot of things” to be submitted during the work week like discussion boards, exams, and quizzes, which, according to participants, “makes no sense” because they are “working professionals.” A total of 8 participants (30.8%) reported taking at least one course in which their work responsibilities during the week and expectations of online education came into conflict with their professors’ expectations for assignments to be submitted between Monday and Friday. Things like “having discussion questions due on a Wednesday” or “having to log in to the class three times a week” were “upsetting” to participants because “the beginning of the week...is the busiest” time of the week making it hard to schedule time to work on classes. Others asked questions like, “As a working parent, when do I do my homework?”

Seven out of 8 participants (26.9%) who had an experience of attending classes with mid-week deadlines said that if they wanted multiple assignments due throughout the week, they “would’ve gone to a brick and mortar” school. All participants agreed that assignments should be due on Sundays at 11:59pm because it is assumed by adult online learners to be “the standard.” As one respondent said, “It’s just easier and it makes the most sense for people. The way that we live our lives—we’re busy.”

Assignments That Connect to Careers or Personal Experiences

The participants in this study found value in assignments that connect to what they are doing in their careers or allow them to highlight a personal academic interest or personal experiences. Eleven adult learners (42.3%) who have spent years in their fields found value in being able to elaborate on their personal experiences because they could share “a different view of the world” with their classmates. Roughly 10% of participants felt that since many of them already had field/job experience in their degree program they could share a perspective not reflected in a book or a classroom setting. The same share of participants—around 10%—also wanted to know how they were going to use course information in their jobs or careers and wanted practical, helpful information and skills they could use in their field.

Professor-Created Content

Professor-created content was cited as one of the main types of coursework or assignments that the adult learners in this study found to be the most beneficial to their learning. Although the most preferred type of professor-created content for the participants in this study is a lecture (expressed by 20 participants, 76.9%), 2 participants (7.7%) found value in voice-over PowerPoints because they, as one participant pointed out, “condensed what [participants] had to learn” each week and “made it easier ... to do the assignments.” However, only 3 participants said they were offered the option to learn via voice-over PowerPoints.

Nonetheless, this sample of adult learners found that their learning was most benefited by professors who recorded lectures and required students to view them because it made them feel as if they were in a college course. Participants describe recorded lectures as “awesome” and “great” because lectures “actually break [the content] down” (17 participants, 65.4%) and serve as an “eye-opener” to information students “initially didn’t understand” (11 participants, 42.3%). Some preferred recorded lectures because they made them feel a connection with their professors. Participants deeply enjoyed when professors recorded themselves exposing their thought processes behind the material (18 participants, 69.2%). In the words of one participant, they valued their professors “sitting down and going over the coursework” because students “could see [professors] talking, ...their inflection, how they’re thinking about what it is they’re trying to portray to you.” Respondents argued that the recorded lectures “really reach people” because they feel like they “have a personal connection with the professor.”

Communication is Key

The theme of communication, namely the speed in which students receive a response and how helpful the response is to the student, stood out in this sample of adult learners enrolled in asynchronous online education. Participants in this study emphasized their insecurity caused by being geographically separated from their campuses and indicated that communication is a major difficulty of asynchronous online learning. As a result, identifying how communication can be improved is key to understanding how to make asynchronous online learning more effective for

adult learners. Respondents were asked to describe their experiences with communication, and most of their responses focused on various aspects of communication within the professor-student relationship.

All Faculty Interaction is Viewed as Communication

The adult learners participating in this study classified several types of interactions with professors as "communication," including feedback on assignments, response time for emails, the personalization of their courses, and weekly announcements. In other words, participants had a broad view of communication and viewed communication with their professors as much more than individual correspondence via email. Asked what makes a professor a good communicator, respondents described a professor that will interact (25 participants, 96.2%), try to make [students] think outside the box (11 participants, 42.3%), and set very clear expectations (14 participants, 53.8%) with rubrics, responses, and feedback. Some participants reported feeling isolated from their professor's lack of communication (10 participants, 38.5%), with one of them saying that they were left wondering if their "class is being taught by A.I." because they did not receive "any kind of human response or interaction" from their professor. A total of 18 students (69.2%) reported having a similar experience in at least one of their classes. In all instances, professors either would not respond or would refer students to the syllabus if they had any questions. Nine respondents (34.6%) also told of courses where they felt abandoned by their professor. One participant said they "just submit assignments, get a grade and that's it," and questioned if the professor "actually looked" at their assignments "or just ran on autopilot all semester."

Inconsistent Grading is Inconsistent Communication

Other participants pointed to a lack of grading as sign of poor communication. Ten participants (38.5%) explained how they had courses, sometimes multiple, wherein the professor would, as one participant said, "grade for the 1st week" and then "not grade again 'till the last week," leaving the students to reach out to classmates asking, "Has anyone heard from the professor?" When a professor did not grade in a timely manner, participants describe feeling isolated and without direction, asking questions like "Is anybody even hearing us?" or "What are we even doing here?" Not having consistent communication about grades from professors was identified as a huge issue by 13 students (50%) because it left them with "no idea of what kind of progress they were making and how to correct any of their work along the way." Five participants (19.2%) indicated that they had "resorted to reaching out to other peers" for help with assignments in courses, like math, because they knew they were not "gonna hear from the professor" and needed to know if they were doing assignments correctly.

Professor Communication is Key

In cases when faculty did provide communication, or made themselves available for students to contact them, participants described their experiences with communication in a positive light. Overall, communication with professors was

deemed as “good” when professors responded in a timely manner (22 participants, 84.6%) and directly addressed students’ questions or concerns (17 participants, 65.4%). When professors did communicate effectively, participants reported feeling supported by their professors (23 participants, 88.5%). One of the participants said that professors’ consistent presence in the course left them feeling “like [professors] actually wanted [students] to learn something” and that their professors were “here to help.” Communication from professors left participants wanting to “pay more attention” (20 participants, 76.9%) in their courses because their professors were “actually helping” and made students feel like professors “care.”

Sense of Community and Belonging

Participants in this study were not directly asked about their relationships with classmates or if they felt a sense of belonging while enrolled in an asynchronous online degree program, but respondents continually referenced a lack of community within their courses and degree programs. Roughly 40% of respondents either brought up their isolation from fellow classmates, a sense of not belonging to the institution that would potentially be their alma mater, or the benefits of interacting with classmates and/or professors through video conferencing platforms.

Existing research points to the positive effects the sense of community has on students’ satisfaction with and engagement in courses (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Ritushree & Correia, 2020). In online classrooms where all communication is mediated by technology, technological self-efficacy plays an important role in promoting a sense of community among students (MacLeod et al., 2017). Thus, it is crucial that the responsibility for creating a community is not carried only by the students. This principle becomes ever more relevant in relation to adult students as they may experience a greater need for support with technologies involved in online education (Netanda et al., 2017).

No Community, No Problem

The lack of interaction with classmates, while noticeable, did not present a problem for some participants who preferred the individualized nature of asynchronous online learning and focusing solely on their coursework. Eight participants (30.8%) reported seeing some of the same names’ of classmates a few times but were primarily, as one participant stated, “just focused on doing what [they] had to do” to pass the courses. Some respondents would send private messages or emails back and forth, yet, as one participant said, “with a lot of asynchronous learning, everybody is just trying to get it done; [they] all have families [and] all have jobs [and are] just trying to get it done.” Across all interviewees, 9 (34.6%) expressed the idea of non-traditional students not having enough time to seek peer-to-peer communication outside of class interactions. Perhaps this sentiment is best illustrated by a participant who said, “I mean, not to sound like I wouldn’t wanna foster relationships, but I kind of wanna come in and, and do the work and get it done.”

Isolation from Peers and Institutions

Other respondents (10 participants, 38.5%) felt isolated from their classmates and wished they had more chances for peer-to-peer interaction. For some participants, more interaction with classmates would have made them feel more like they were an active member of a college classroom and filled in for the missed ability to get together and work on projects (9 participants, 34.6%). The lack of interaction with classmates made some students (8 participants, 30.8%) miss exchanging ideas and learning from other students. One participant put it this way: “[I] miss exploring [my] personality in a way where [I could] experience a group dynamic and learn from other people.” Instead, these participants said that they “don’t make friends” in their courses. Despite being enrolled to receive an associate or bachelor’s degree, some participants of this study also reported not feeling a sense of belonging or connection to their potential alma mater. Their argument is that they are “not there” on-campus, so the institution “doesn’t mean anything” to them. These participants said they felt isolated from their potential alma maters because the communication they receive from the institutions “really only pertain to the on-campus students,” which makes some participants feel like they are “missing out” and “don’t get the feeling that” they “belong to a school or an organization” but are instead “just in the wind” by themselves.

Voluntary Virtual Class Meetings

Respondents often brought up the benefits of professors holding voluntary online meetings to discuss course content or answer questions (8 participants, 30.8%). For the participants in this study, optional online meetings with professors were described as fun, increased their sense of belonging, and provided them an opportunity to bond with their peers. Participants reported that having even one voluntary virtual meeting at the beginning of the semester would make them feel like “they’re part of something.” One participant said they would be happy if every professor started the semester with a voluntary virtual meeting wherein the professor said, “Hi everybody. I’m the teacher. This is the course. These are your classmates.” Ten participants (38.5%) reported that voluntary virtual meetings do not necessarily have to be a curriculum-focused thing, but something where students are getting that real-time in-person interaction. Or, as one student said, they would like their professors to hold voluntary meeting where they can put “faces with names” and get “a little bit of background other than the introductory post,” which helps them learn “a lot about different classmates.”

Some Adult Learners Want Companionship in Courses

Almost half of participants (11 participants, 42.3%) in this study reported that they wanted to make friendships with classmates and often initiated conversation with classmates to make connections. Almost all these student-initiated friendships were cited as a benefit to their learning because they can get together offline, chat, and talk about classes or compare notes about different classes. These participants wanted to make friendships with their online classmates because, as one student noted, “learning from other people, their experiences, their subjects, their topics” is

“very interesting.” But much of the onus to make relationships with peers rested on students initiating the interaction on their own time and said they would not get those out-of-class friendships unless the students themselves initiated it.

Making Asynchronous Online Education More Effective

Students in this study were asked, “What could be changed about asynchronous learning to make it more advantageous for you?” Their responses highlight the specific areas where professors, university administrators and staff, and course designers can make changes to their online degree program to make them more effective for adult learners taking asynchronous courses.

Recording Classroom Material

Participants in this study were vocal about their desire for professors to record voiceover PowerPoints, demonstrations, or lectures because the material was perceived as beneficial to their learning. Asked what could be changed about asynchronous learning, respondents (18 participants, 69.2%) brought up their hope to see more instructors who recorded videos using the whiteboard or various recorded lectures for the lessons each week so students could follow each section of the course through 30-minute lecture videos each week. Eight students (30.8%) said they liked the recorded lectures/demonstrations because the video format allowed them to go back to the material at any time. One of these students even suggested that having a recording may be more beneficial than attending a traditional lecture as they “could go back and look at those [lectures] and do those” at their “own pace as opposed to sitting in class” where, if they “missed something,” that “was it.” A study conducted by Gysbers et al. (2011) with traditional college students also suggests that recorded lectures can be a good substitute for on-campus lectures for students who cannot attend in-person.

Allowing for Multimedia Assignment Submissions

Being able to submit certain assignments, like discussion posts, reflections, and large projects, through the adult learner’s desired medium—voice recording, written response, or visual presentation—is important to this sample of adult learners. That is not to say participants wanted to record a video in lieu of writing a paper. In fact, 2 out of 6 students who mentioned having assignments which required recording a video disliked the idea of personal recordings being the main format by which they completed assignments because they did not like being on camera. Additionally, one of them felt video assignments took even more time away from their family and created unnecessary complications of finding space and time to make the recordings without being interrupted or having to expose their family members.

Almost 40% of the participants conveyed a desire for freedom in how they completed their assignments, with professors giving them the option to write or record. Students expressed their frustration that discussion boards could not include recorded content and blamed professors for their lack of creativity. Five participants (19.2%) reported feeling like their professors had no experience

learning online and could not relate to the experiences of online students, which was reflected in the requirements that faculty have for their students. Participants couched their rationale for multiple assignment submission options in the fact that asynchronous online courses for adult learners should provide more freedom, allowing students to exercise their agency by getting the work completed on a timetable that best fits their schedule (8 participants, 30.8%). Thirteen participants (50%) want professors to provide them with the assignments necessary to demonstrate comprehension.

Establishing and Maintaining a Presence

Respondents indicated that they wanted to see weekly interactions from professors in their courses, such as recorded announcements, replying to discussion posts, providing feedback, or organizing voluntary meetings. Participants were not happy that there were professors who are not posting real announcements (9 participants, 34.6%) and not giving feedback on homework (17 participants, 65.4%). Ten students (38.5%) wanted to see a weekly video from the professor so that, as one student said, they know the professor "is a human being and alive" or doing "a check-in." It seems that there is no overdoing the amount of interaction a professor has with adult learners in asynchronous online education as participants wanted to see constant updates from their professors.

The adult learners in this study also appreciated any level of interaction from their professors. When asked how asynchronous learning could be improved, a respondent replied, "For me, a pretty important part of school is to get feedback from my professors in terms of how I'm doing in the class, because I can be really self-critical...And when you don't get any feedback for all that work that you're doing and all that time and effort that you're putting into this, it just feels like a waste of time."

Arranging voluntary meetings with students and professors was also a priority for this sample of adult learners. Reflecting on what they would change about asynchronous learning, one respondent wanted to see "some more interaction with the instructor, some legitimate interaction, like at least once a week, having a video call with them" or "just to talk to them and sort of see where we're at." Overall, 7 respondents (26.9%) wanted to have an opportunity to meet with their professors and ask them questions at least once every one or two weeks, and 13 participants (50%) expressed their desire to see their professors at least a few times during a course to get an update on the course and work that they are doing. Another participant formulated a similar response, "I know that it's hard for professors to do that, to carve that time, but if it's just an hour every other week or something just to like do a check-in, especially if you're about to have a midterm, you know? Like, it does make a difference." Sixteen participants (61.5%) said that they didn't care when or how professors showed their faces, they just wanted to see them because it brought "humanity into the conversation," which meant students were "not just looking at [the professor's] little picture and name and bio." Instead, they said they "know that [the professor] has a heart" and "really cares about my education."

Allowing Students to Work Ahead

Eight participants (30.8%) reported that they liked being able to move ahead on coursework during the semester and expressed frustration when they had to move week-to-week or couldn't move ahead because the instructor had not opened future modules. Respondents argued that having all modules or weeks of a course open for the entirety of the semester was "really beneficial" because they are adults that are juggling kids, full-time jobs, a commute to work, and when all of the course content is available throughout the semester, students reported being able to work ahead, sometimes "two to three weeks ahead, so they would be able to tend to other areas of their life, like having a weekend with the kids." This assessment of the obstacles faced by non-traditional students online appears to be relevant to the sample for this study. Twenty-five out of 26 respondents (96.2%) who participated in the study reported having a job during the time they were enrolled in the online program. Fifteen respondents (57.7%) reported having at least one child under the age of 18, and 13 of these 15 participants (50%) said that the child (children) were living in the same household as them.

Ensuring Consistency Between Courses

Nearly 50% of respondents brought up that they wanted more consistency between the way courses are delivered and organized. While it is a difficult task to have all faculty teach in a similar pedagogy, the participants raised a good point about following a template or using a set of standards that faculty follow for all online courses. Participants hoped that there is some sort of standardization of the requirement for getting credit or getting through a class because the rigor of their courses varied wildly from classes where all they did was watch YouTube videos to course where students, as one participant said, "really had to read and digest and, and critically think through material and really engage in the content in order just to do well." Students reported that from "the outside, it feels like there's no real standardization" and wished to see more solid online course design so that assignments, grading standards, and the rigor of courses would be consistent.

Overcoming the Reluctance to Ask for Help

A theme that came through the interviews was the reluctance of some adult learners to ask for academic help despite resources being readily available to them. To some, the reluctance came from ingrained beliefs about being a self-sufficient learner and an adult, which made them "feel like [they] should already know [the answer]" to their question." Two participants (7.7%) believed there is a stigma surrounding adult learners who need academic assistance. As one participant said, "I'm an adult I will get through this myself." Three other participants (11.5%) stated that they tend to be stubbornly self-sufficient" or, as one respondent said of their situation, "You're a grown-up, your son's going through math at fifteen or sixteen [years old]. You can do it as an adult. You can figure this out." Nonetheless, 12 participants (46.2%) indicated that they would be more likely to ask for help if their professors initiated the contact. As one participant said, "put that ask out there, like, if you need help or if you have questions, please reach out" to me.

Providing Assistance With Mathematics

Despite the fact that the questionnaire used in the study did not include any questions regarding specific disciplines, 7 interviewees (26.9%) brought up the dislike of mathematics courses. More than any other subject, participants bemoaned having to take mathematics courses and cited their inability to understand or perform mathematics as their primary reason for avoiding or disliking the subject. Seven participants claimed that they were bad at mathematics in general. One participant called mathematics courses “super challenging,” while another proclaimed that they “never, ever could do math” or felt like mathematics courses were something that they did not understand. None of the participants could explain why they felt they struggled with mathematics, but their dislike of the subject indicates that mathematics may be an area of academic struggle for adult students in asynchronous online learning, which may require providing students with more support.

Conclusions

Findings from this study highlight the experiences of adult learners in online asynchronous degree programs and provide useful implications for institutions of higher education already offering, or looking to offer, distance learning to adults seeking a college degree. When institutions evaluate the effectiveness of their asynchronous distance education degree programs, consideration should be given to the types of students enrolling in their courses. Adult learners often have competing interests for their time, such as children and full-time jobs, which change the characteristics of online learning. Evaluation of any online degree program that caters to non-traditional learners should consider the areas of course organization, expectations for faculty communication with students, the type of coursework assigned, and the need for alternative instructional methods.

This study suggests that online programs for adult learners should be more focused on self-directed learning. The major finding of this study is that adult learners want access to as much material as possible and interactions with their professors but want to work on assignments at a pace that fits their schedule. Moreover, adult students need to see how the work they are doing in college relates to their life and work outside of the classroom. The experience of adult learners is crucial for their education and should direct the development of the coursework for this population of students. As 15 participants (57.7%) stated, adult learners also need their education to coordinate with the work and family responsibilities they have.

However, in contradiction to existing research on adult learners, despite their high degree of independence, adult students in asynchronous online programs require support from their instructors and institutions to guide their self-learning and help them overcome the obstacles created by the often-unfamiliar environment of an online classroom and the system of formal higher education in large (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Non-traditional students are not expecting their instructors to organize and structure their work; if anything, they expect their instructors to give

much freedom to schedule and organize their own work to students. Nevertheless, adult students are expecting the instructors to provide them with study materials and consistent and constructive feedback to guide their learning. This does not mean that this population of students is dependent on the instructor but highlights that self-directed education should be done in student-instructor collaboration (Garrison, 1992). Non-traditional students online also need consistent support from university staff to compensate for the geographical distance and obstacles created by constantly reemerging digital technologies. The rapid change in digital technologies implemented in asynchronous online programs also requires support for faculty members.

As the number of adult learners enrolled in online education continues to grow, it is crucial to ensure that the quality of that educational experience is in sync with the reality of the students' lives enrolled in online degree programs. Future researchers, especially those interested in providing more accessible and quality education from a distance, should focus on ways in which asynchronous online coursework is best delivered for adult learners and what barriers remain to providing quality instruction suitable for non-traditional students. Researchers could also focus on how to build and deliver quality education for faculty teaching online courses, especially those enrolling adult learners.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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