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Recommended Citation

Sharpe, Ramona T. and Kelley, Tamara L. (2014). "SDL and Technology: Implications for Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/roundtables/33>

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SDL and Technology: Implications for Adult Education

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Keywords: Self-directed learning (SDL), Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)

Abstract: As SDL is embraced and technology continually advances in organizations, new and improved skills and learning strategies will be required. This session will explore the anticipated change necessary for adult educators and related scholarly practitioners to be able to effectively support the learners in their organizations.

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning (SDL) is an adult learning theory which allows for individuals to have freedom within their unique learning experience. SDL as a process is most relevant to our discussion because it contains important steps/concepts such as planning, execution, and evaluation of the learning experience (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

SDL is already being used in a large number of organizations and institutes of higher learning as leaders and adult educators undertake to provide learning and development for their constituents while managing on shrinking budgets. The use of SDL allows for continuous learning to occur at a comfortable pace, without the financial burden associated with instructor-lead sessions (Ellinger, 2004). Technological advancement has occurred during the past twenty years, providing resources and tools to assist adult learners. This technological advancement has also assisted adult educators in addressing the needs of the organization, employees and students. Hope (2010) refers to an example of technology providing assistance to adult learners: "Adult education via situated e-learning in the workplace is driven by economic factors but provides opportunities for adult educators to develop on-line pedagogies tailored to workplace needs and delivered in a manner sensitive to time and location constraints" (p. 264).

Technology

The use of technology and social media in organizations is rapidly expanding. It has evolved over the last two decades, and constantly changes as innovative new ways to support SDL are continually developed. As more organizations embrace SDL and integrate it into their learning approaches, more advanced technology will be created to support it. This has already been evidenced by the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Learning Management Systems (LMS), and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). These continuous advancements in technology will create higher technical skill needs for adult learners, which may add to the growth of the already vast digital divide (Compaine, 2001). For adult educators, this means adding SDL skills to the content of their teaching and facilitation processes, keeping personal computing skills current, as well as facilitating organizational cultures that encourage SDL.

Cognitive Load

The required new technology and SDL skills create additional challenges for the adult learner. Adult educators should be aware of the typical symptoms of cognitive overload, and be trained in the prevention of it. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) focuses on the amount of work applied to the working memory. Adult educators can assist learners in finding the effective load, which presents the right amount of concepts to learn while minimizing that which is not pertinent. The importance of CLT and Constructivism lies in understanding the function of learning strategies in relation to learners as they acquire knowledge through SDL. “These strategies highlight the importance of acquiring learning strategies or methods used to aid knowledge acquisition as opposed to acquiring mere information” (Vogel et al., 2010, p.134).

Discussion

Discussions between adult educators and other scholarly practitioners are necessary as we work to prepare adult learners to embrace SDL and technology. These discussions must be inclusive of educators, practitioners and leaders to truly encourage and support SDL.

Areas of focus include:

- What SDL skills will adult educators and other scholarly practitioners need to add to the content of their teaching and facilitation processes?
- When using technology with learning solutions, how can adult educators and scholarly practitioners help prevent cognitive overload?
- How will embracing SDL theory impact organizations’ cultures?

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