

Adult Learning in Higher Education: A Case Study of Online MBA Learners

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Abstract

The designing of online subject for adult learners, educators need to ensure that Online Learning Facilitator and Subject Coordinator can play an effective role in creating opportunities for social learning, fostering engagement and interconnectivity while maintaining a delicate balance between technology (Learning Management System) and the human agency in the e-learning environment. Subject content should encourage active learning and creation of knowledge between adult learners (via interactive/live webinars and class forums, learning modules containing a balanced amount of readings/textbook, videos, activities, and avoiding information overload. Tasks (i.e, assessments and activities) need to be perceived as authentic by adult learners capturing work-relevance, currency and centered on students' life experiences. Prompt, understandable, unambiguous feedback and feasible timing (material coverage, assessment due dates) are of importance to the time poor adult learners. Alignments between these important elements contribute to more effective e-learning for adult MBA participants engaged into fully online business education program.

1. Introduction

Online education is expanding, and it is projected to continue growing over the next five years (2021-2026). Considering the advantages online learning provides such as access, convenience and flexibility, adult learners constitute the largest segment of online education. However, the number of studies focusing on them, especially elements of subject design they value, in the context of higher online education is limited [1]. This study will contribute to the literature by identifying core elements of successful subject design for adult learners in the context of a fully online MBA program.

2. Body of Knowledge and Analysis Results

The study utilizes the seven principles for good practice to examine the quality of subject design, nam-

ely: encourage contact between learners and faculty, develop cooperation between learners, encourage active learning, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task, communicate high expectations and respect diverse ways of learning [2]. While the application of the face to face principles has been explored in an online context, previous studies focused on younger students' perceptions of a singular subject in an undergraduate level [3]. Moreover, while there is no one overarching theory of adult learning, the study will also apply a set of adult learning principles to adult centered course design to determine application as well as contrast with the face to face good practice principles. The adult learning principles include tailoring course design to student needs and experiences, creating authentic assessments, helping learners construct knowledge and fostering interaction (peer-peer and peer-instructor) [4].

To address the question of what subject design elements (perceived as subject strengths or subject weaknesses if underdelivered) can facilitate adult learning while studying a fully online MBA program, a range of subjects typically offered in a general MBA program were captured (Financial Management, Strategic Human Resource Management, Marketing etc.). Responses to open ended questions, obtained by adult learners (N 870) studying from one of the largest online education providers in Australia, were analyzed using both theme-based and text mining approaches. Leximancer, a text mining software, was used to conduct semantic and relational analyses of text corpuses to identify themes, and observe how they relate to one another. The thematic analysis, conducted independently by the research team members, further assisted in data triangulation. The text mining analysis revealed fourteen themes related to the subject design elements (perceived as subject strengths or subject weaknesses if under delivered) (see Figure 1). Among dominant themes, the theme of *Subject* was identified (frequency 405 hits; count 326; relevance 100%), which directly interconnected with the themes of *Online Learning Facilitator (OLF)* (313 hits; count 257, relevance 79%); *Assessment* (155 hits; relevance 46%); *Content* (180 hits, relevance 37%); *Textbook* (175 hits, relevance 36%), and *Webinars*

(172 hits; relevance 33%).

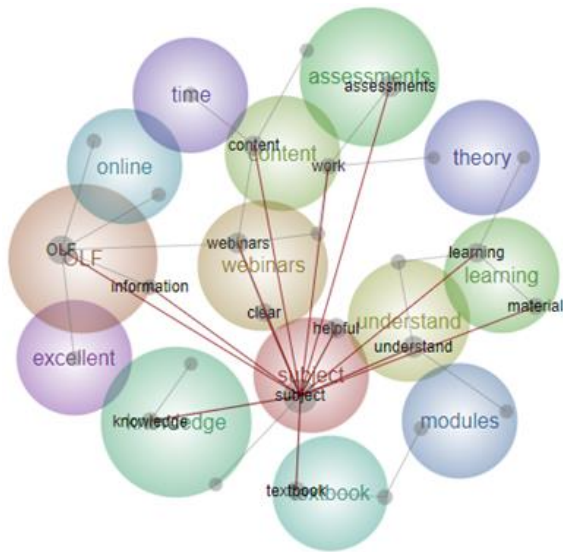


Figure 1. Relational analysis of theme *subject*

Another dominant theme emerged was *Learning* (192 hits), which was affiliated with concepts such as *relevant* (32%), *current* (29%), *practical* (15%), *work* (12%) and *time* (11%). A relational analysis (see Figure 2) identified a direct interconnection of the adult learning theme with *knowledge* (via *subject theme*), relevant *information* gained via *webinars*, meaningful interaction with *OLFs*, *practical content* (via *subject theme*), and *assessments* (capturing both *theory* and *work-applied* subthemes). Adult learning was also interlinked with *textbook*.

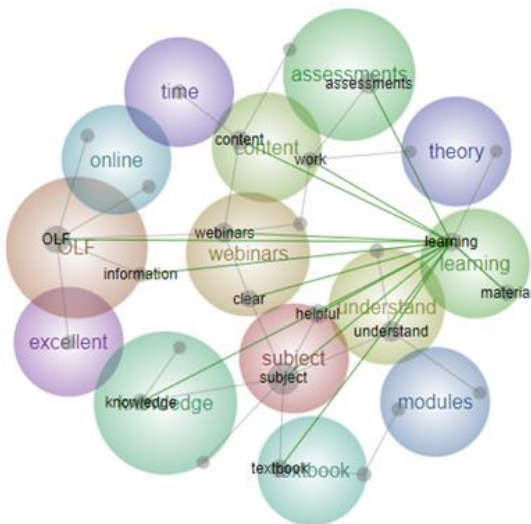


Figure 2. Relational analysis of theme *Learning*

Similarly, when adult students perceived that the subject design could benefit from further improvements to enhance their e-learning, the *Assignment* theme (1053 hits; count 865; relevance 100 %) emerged as the most dominant (see Figure 3).

If perceived to be underdelivered as a subject design element, the assessment theme appeared to be one of the critical elements impeding their learning via subthemes of *difficult* [to relate from the *work-applied* perspective] and lacking *clear* instructions and feasibility [via *time* commitment]. Overall, suggested improvements appeared to focus on perceived subject design alignment between *assignment*, *subject content* (including subthemes of *readings*, *videos*, *examples*, *learning modules*), *textbook*, *webinars*, and *clear and helpful* input from *OLF* (via *feedback* and *answer questions* subthemes).

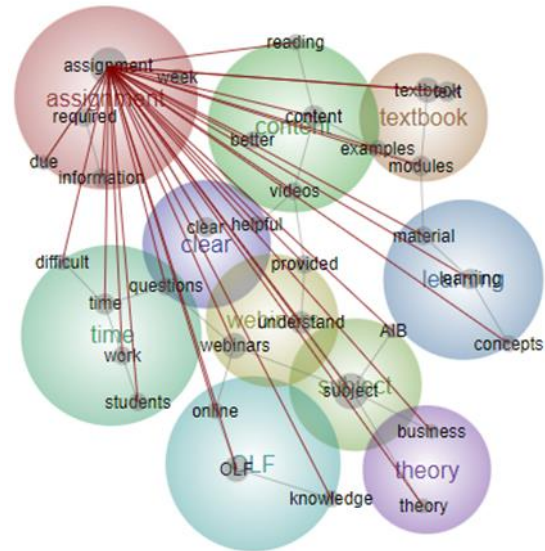


Figure 3. Relational analysis of theme *Assignment*

Further thematic analysis highlighted (irrespective of the MBA discipline) the theme of *frequency and quality of learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction* (via *webinars*, *class forum* or *personal messaging*): ‘A core strength of the subject included lots of engagement from the OLF who was very responsive to questions and giving of his time to assist students.’ ‘Breakout sessions in the webinars to discuss topics with classmates were amazing.’ This showcases the application of the ‘peer to peer and peer to instructor interaction’ adult learning principle which is very much aligned with the teaching practices of ‘cooperation and encouragement of contact’ as well as ‘giving prompt feedback’. Another theme centered around importance of *flow/cohesion of subject content* as well as *real world examples*: ‘The learning material had a natural flow’. ‘I liked the linkage between the modules, book, and webinars’. ‘The structure of it seemed very real world applicable.’ ‘The content would be better received with more real-world examples. I feel like at times the theory was hard to relate back and the textbook didn’t always feel like it flowed with the online module layout.’ This highlights the application of the adult learning principle of ‘helping learners construct

knowledge' by incorporating a logical flow in the content as well as embedding real work examples [4] and is aligned with the teaching principle of 'encouraging active learning'. Finally, the theme of *practical, engaged with real world contexts and personally meaningful assessments* emerged: *'I enjoyed the fact that I was able to incorporate the assignment with my business and marketing plan at my work.'* *'The practical application of the assignment to a real work example really helps to solidify the learning for me.'* This theme showcases the application of the adult learning principles of 'creating authentic assessments' and 'tailoring course design to learner's life experiences'. Moreover, the theme directly aligns with the teaching practice of 'respecting diverse ways of learning' considering how adult learners are inclined to relate new concepts to their own experiences [4].

3. Conclusion

The emerging findings in this work-in progress research support Crews et al. [3] in highlighting the importance of incorporating the seven principles for good practice to subject design (in business education) and showcase their application in the adult learner online graduate context. Moreover, the findings indicate that the adult learning principles can also be used in guiding the creation of online subject design and regardless of the context, both sets of principles are aligned and applicable.

4. References

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