
THE DIGITAL AND NETWORK SOCIETY NEEDS FOR OPEN ONLINE LEARNING

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Extended abstract for presentation

Educational reformers, innovators and researchers suggest that the appearance of digital technologies will radically transform what people learn, how they learn, and where they learn, yet there are existing disagreements on the speed and scope of this change. However, looking for answers to these questions, it is important to identify factors in society which drive the need for a changed role of learning, and analyse the role of open and online learning. The common practice is to identify the learning needs related to already existing services, relating them to formal (Bates, 2015; Krumsvik, 2009), non-formal (Quesada-Pineda et al., 2011) or informal learning (Conole, 2017; Morrison, 2015). Networks and digital technologies have become the main characteristics of our society and take an important role in the society transforming it into global economies and shaping educational systems, organizations and ways that people learn (Ehlers, 2013). In a learning society (Jarvis, 2007), learning plays an important role to mitigate risks of individuals to prosper, participate and unfold in their lives, e.g. in the labour market (Beck, 1986). At the same time, access to learning opportunities seems to diversify through digital technology. The aim of this presentation is to discuss and present theoretical findings on the needs of digital and network society for open and online learning. The presentation will present the results of theoretical research and empirical (quantitative) research implemented among Lithuanian digital and networked society to clarify their needs for open and online learning.

Different studies investigated membership, participation, knowledge building (Chunngam et al., 2014), experiences of online learners, perceptions of online adult learners' interaction with the instructor, content, and the other learners (Kuo & Belland, 2016), or support for adult learners (Leping & Wenzhen, 2012). Findings of these research publications suggest that open online learning taking place outside educational institutions is important for informal learning and makes it easier for individuals to build and share knowledge, because it disregards physical distance and makes it easier to share interests.

Open online learning can promote learner agency and autonomy (Suzuki, 2013), gives them an opportunity to balance different commitments (Zhang & Cheng, 2012), can facilitate the exchange of ideas and practices among people of different cultural backgrounds

(Koutsoupidou, 2014), highlights blended learning approach and online learner-learner interaction (Cocquyt et al., 2017).

With the progress in mobile technologies, rapid increase of mobile devices and mobile applications, mobile learning has gained interest among educators and learning material developers (Hsu et al., 2014) to examine acceptance, incidence, and use of digital mobile devices (Sevillano-García & Vázquez-Cano, 2015).

Application of adult learning principles may strengthen personal and professional development when organizing online learning. Learning experiences in open online learning of adults in general seems to be positive in most cases (Byington & Tannock, 2011; Reynolds, 2016) which is a clear direction for online course designers to create visual, multimedia, and social learning environments for digitally oriented adult learners and incorporate inquiry-based and experiential learning in the curriculum (Walter, 2013) also providing slower paced learning experiences that involve time for reflection.

The discussions about the meaning of open online learning and how it should be organized responding to the main needs of adult learners continue. However, researchers indicate that people (or employees, in general) are very positive about their experiences of using online learning and are more likely to use open online learning in the future. Employees are highly interested in receiving continuous professional training in online format, and open online learning is considered to have the added value of promoting lifelong learning for different groups of society. Even older adults tend to satisfy their learning needs on health and wellness, leisure interests using informal and self-directed open online learning experiences. It is suggested that greater emphasis should be placed on understanding sub-groups who may have different skills and knowledge than their own generation because of their past experiences and attitudes towards technologies.

Members of society, particularly adults, are diverse learners in their nature, needs, and preferences. Comparison and combination of digitally orientated adult learner needs for particular learning style, time, place and pace of learning with online delivery system give clear directions for online course designers how to create and organize courses according to society needs. Visual, multimedia, social learning environments with incorporated inquiry-based and experiential learning in the curriculum are essential to fulfil the needs of learners during open online learning.

The theoretical considerations of this paper will be complemented by empirical data in the further stages of a four year long scientific research project “Open Online Learning for Digital and Networked Society” (3.3-LMT-K-712-01-0189) funded by the ESF and Lithuanian Research Council under High Level R&D grant.

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