Online Learning Environments:
What do Adult Learners Think About Them?

Maria de Fátima Goulão

Universidade Aberta, Le@d , Portugal

Abstract

Online education has undergone major developments in recent decades. This is due not only to the need for training and updating of skills to face the labor market, but also to the advances that technology has achieved. Nowadays, more and more higher education institutions, and not only these, are resorting to this type of education. For its main frequenters, this modality has been a powerful ally that allows them to face the challenges of society and, at the same time, reconcile the different aspects of their personal and professional life. Allied to the development of online education, it was necessary to work and adapt the pedagogical issues that arise from it. It was in this context that we sought to identify the perception of a group of first-year undergraduate students in online learning modality of this education system. Thus, our sample was composed of 84 students, 89.3% female and 10.7% male, with an average age of 40.2 years (SD=8.5). As an instrument for data collection, we used a questionnaire with 3 questions - Defining online teaching in 3 or 4 concepts; what the added value of online teaching is and whether it allows for the development of digital skills. The thematic analysis of the answer's points to a concept of online teaching which emphasizes Flexibility and the possibility of managing time and spaces, the learner's autonomy, but which does not take away discipline, focus and the need for self-regulation. Technology has an important weight and allows a practical, dynamic, asynchronous teaching, an opportunity. Finally, 61.9% of students totally agree that online teaching allows the development of digital skills. In short, our students seem to be aware of the characteristics, and advantages, of online education, as well as of the demands that exist, as learners, who attend it. It is also worth highlighting its role at the societal level in helping to develop skills - digital skills - that are transversal to the global society and one of the key skills for the 21st century.

Keywords: *Online learning; Digital Competencies; Adults' Learners.*

1. Introduction

The idea behind the knowledge thought to an individual through his professional life not suffering any change can no longer be applied. Now a day we have the need to keep learning, to improve our gaps created by the society changes [1]. New challenges are created to the ones who look to have the correct answers. New ways of learning have been put in place, where the concept of localization and time of traditional learning have grown [2]. A procura de autonomia do aprendente ganha, cada vez mais, papel de destaque na sociedade em que vivemos The learner need to be autonomous have been growing in our society. We are in a time where the learner must have a main role in its own learning process [3]. The evolution on the way of living and mentality crossed with the scientific, technological and economic evolution didn´t leave much space for the traditional ways of learning. Distant learning, started in XIX century, from mailing has come a long way. The growth of information and communication technology in the learning system have allowed the opportunity for new ways of better serve the learning system. When talking about distant learning, we cannot forget to mention some of its main characteristics, the lack of space-time constraint and the flexibility in the learning timings [4]. A couple of questions come up, like *Who is learning? Who is teaching? What to learn? When? Where?* and *how to learn?* From connecting all the previous questions, we get different scenarios that show us a independent or learner. These sceneries make us redefine the teacher job as well the way of transmitting the content to learn.

The changes in the pedagogical relationship the system takes are because of the absence of space-time constraints in which the appropriation of knowledge is done through mediated channels. The goal

is to have a "social learner subject", where the emphasis is placed on its autonomy. The new way of looking at the teacher-student relationship and the mediation of teaching invite the learner to demonstrate greater autonomy and to take a more active role in the construction of knowledge [5].

The absence of space-time constraints are responsible for the changes in the pedagogical relationship in online learning, in which the appropriation of knowledge is done through mediated channels. The goal is to build a "learning social learner", with emphasis placed on its autonomy. This must take charge of his study process. This new way of looking at the relationship teacher-student and the mediation of teaching, invites the learner to demonstrate a greater autonomy and to take a more active role in learning skills. Autonomy and individualization are two keywords throughout this process [6].

2. Methods
2.1. Research objectives

Our research's aim were:
   a) Identify the main online learning characteristics for that student group.
   b) Identify for that group of students the potentialities online learning can bring, and for last,
   c) Find out what is the students opinion regarding the help they can get from online learning to develop their digital knowledge.

2.2. Procedures and Instrument

We create a questionnaire with two parts to helps us achieve our goal. The first part was to collect data about gender and age. The second part has the next three questions:
   1. Identify three to four words/concepts, that best identify online learning.
   2. Identify what is the biggest advantage of online learning.
   3. Online learning allows the development of digital competences (1 – totally disagree; 5 – totally agree)

The questionnaire was built in Google docs and the link was left in the platform for the class for the class X. The link was available from half of the first semester. We asked the students to participate in the questionnaire.

3. Results
3.1. Our sample

84 students answered the questionnaire making part of our student sample. All of them are online students and are for the first time enrolling on this type of learning. Our sample is 89,3% female and 10,7% male. Their average age is 40,2 (SD = 8,5), with a minimum of 21 and a maximum of 62 years.

3.2. We will proceed to the presentation of the data from parts 2. We will proceed to present the following data

We used a thematic analysis for both first and second questions. To do that, we had to collect all the given answers. Staring with the first question.

Question 1. Identify three to four words/concepts that best identify online learning

We got 197 entries. When analysing the frequency, we got to see that the Flexibility was highlighted concept, as the schedule flexibility. We grouped the words/concepts found in three big category/themes. According to our study, online learning is connected to a category regarding its Accessibility, another category regarding the methodology and a category regarding the pedagogy – Fig 1
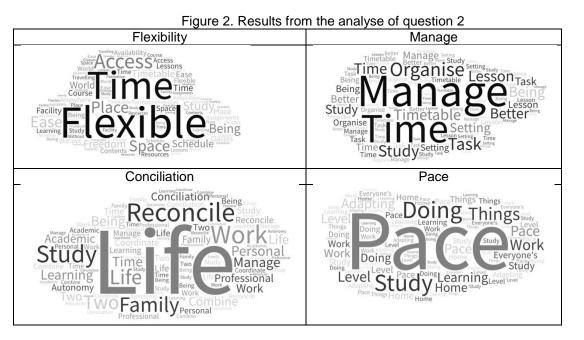
Figure 1. Results from the analyse of question 1

Accessibility	Methodology	Pedagogy

Next we have the results from the second question.

Question 2. Identify what is the biggest advantage of online learning

We used the same principles to analyse the answers of the second question. The analysis allowed us to group the answers in four different categories. The first category is Flexibility – the most robust – that is represented in online learning by the lack of space-time constraints. Next, we have the self-management category linked to the learning process – Management. The third category is related to the possibility to reconcile different aspects of a student life – Reconcilement. Lastly, we have the Rhythm category. In this category, we have all the aspects related with the possibility for everyone to follow its own rhythm. You can see in Figure 2, all the categories represented in the words cloud.

Figure 2. Results from the analyse of question 2

Flexibility	Manage
Conciliation	Pace

The analysis of the answers to question 2 allows us to highlight the elements that in the literature are considered essential in this education system and that made it an ally when we talk about lifelong learning.
Next we have the results from the third question.

Question 3. Online learning allows the development of digital competences

We believe the students that attend online learning will not only gain knowledge about the classes they are taking but also other skills. Online learning also promotes the development of digital skills, that are essential in a digital society, avoiding info-exclusion.
Table 1 show our sample opinion about this subject.
.

Table 1. Results from the analyse of question 3

		%	Cumulative %
item	5	61,9	61,9
	4	29,8	91,7
	3	6,0	97,6
	1	1,2	98,8
	2	1,2	100,0
	Total	100,0	

We can check, in the table above, that 90% of our sample agrees that online learning promotes the development of digital skills.

4. Final remarks

One of ours goals with this study was to understand how online learning is seen by its students. The other goal was to understand the benefits online learning can bring in the growth of digital skills. For this group of students, online learning is defined by the potential coming from its accessibility, allowing a flexibility between time and space, and with that potentially increasing the number of participants. In the second order of characteristics, we have technological issues, efficiency, interaction, a demanding but effective model. Lastly, the queries focused on the student, such as determination, motivation, self-regulation, organization, between others.

The analysis of the results showed us three big areas. The accessibility, where the primacy of flexibility, space and time predominates.

Once again, the benefit of online learning was considered flexibility, which, combined with management issues, allow a reconciliation of the different areas of the subjects' lives. In this way, they can have their own study rhythm. In addition to these characteristics, according to these students, online learning combats info-exclusion by promoting the acquisition of digital skills.

In short, our students seem to be aware of the characteristics, and advantages, of online education, as well as of the demands that exist, as learners, who attend it. It is also worth highlighting its role at the societal level in helping to develop skills - digital skills - that are transversal to the global society and one of the key skills for the 21st century.

References

[1] Jarvis,P. (2010). *Adults Education and lifelong learning – Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge
[2] López-Barajas, E. (coord.) (2008).*Estrategias de formación em siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Ariel Educación
[3] Mason,R. & Rennie,F. (2008). *E-learning and Social Networking Handbook-Resources for Higher Education.* London:Routledge
[4] Morgan-Klein, B & Osborne,M. (2007). "Informational and communication technology and lifelong learning". In *The concepts and practices of lifelong learning*, 129-142. London: Routledge
[5] Ko, S.& Rossen, S. (2017). *Teaching online – A practical guide.* New York:Routledge
[6] Coll,C. & Monere, C (Eds). *Psicología de la Educación Virtual.* Madrid: Morata