

From Face-To-Face to Online Learning: The Experiences and Perceptions of Non-Traditional Students

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Abstract: There are great concerns about the sustainability of welfare systems and the supply of labour in many European member states due to increasingly aging populations. In the past decade, urged by the European Commission, national governments have tried to motivate more workers to remain in employment beyond their retirement age through various incentives and initiatives that included a more widespread provision of continuous education and training programmes. However, older workers face many challenges to attend classroom-based courses because of their employment, social and family commitments. They want courses that offer more accessibility and flexibility. Online courses can, in part, answer this demand. The transition from face-to-face education to online learning however presents many challenges. This paper attempts to identify these challenges and barriers by exploring the findings of a grounded theory investigation of an online course by the University of Malta. It reports on the students' experiences and perceptions of their transition from local face-to-face education characterised by schooling practices that are dominated by the transmission of knowledge teaching model, to an online course that uses methodologies inspired by constructivist learning theories. The findings indicate that this shift from brick-and-mortar to online courses may be problematic for non-traditional students who grew up, were educated and worked in a society where banking education practices are pervasive if this shift is not well-planned, gradual and involves a process of scaffolding. In this process, the instructor must play a central and determining role. Through his or her presence, the instructor must create activities, in which dialogue is a key element. These activities must create adequate social and cognitive presences in order to sustain an active and democratic community of enquiry. It is also essential that each student's motivation is maintained through constant communication and formative assessment tasks, and, above all, the students are treated as adults and their prior knowledge and experiences are built into the course.

Keywords: transition to online learning, e-learning, adult education, constructivism, Grounded Theory, Malta

1. Introduction

Malta, like many other member states of the European Union (EU), is ageing rapidly. Eurostat data for 2016 shows that the life expectancy in Malta has increased to 84.2 years for females and 79.8 years for males and now surpasses the EU-28 average (83.6 and 78.1, respectively) (Eurostat, 2018). At the start of 2016, one out of four Maltese was 60 or older (National Statistics Office, 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

The European Commission, echoing the demand made by many educational scholars for 'lifewide and lifelong learning' (Clark, 2005), has long been urging the member states of the European Union (EU) to increase the opportunities for the participation of adults in educational and training programmes. The 2002 Council Resolution on lifelong learning stressed the importance for competitiveness and employability, but also for social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. More recently, the European Union, as well as other international organisations, including the OECD and WHO, have stressed the importance for national policies that encourage older workers to stay longer in the workforce to safeguard economies and welfare systems, and sustain the workers' own active ageing process (European Union, 2011; Lindley & Duell, 2006). This notwithstanding, the participation of adults in education and training programmes remains very low and, through various communications, the EU has encouraged national education systems to promote alternative educational and training pathways which may fit better into the adult's lifestyle, including distance online learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

However, in a recent study the researcher found that, older workers in Malta (a EU member state) still prefer face-to-face classroom-based training courses, assuming that traditional courses are inherently better than any online course (Vancell, 2018). Yet, recent trends show that, in other European countries, workers are enrolling in distance online learning and training programmes in greater numbers. Indeed, the market for e-learning in Europe is growing rapidly (Docebo, 2014). This is happening because online courses are helping adult learners cope with workplace, family and social commitments (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 74).

Studies from Malta also indicate that most educational efforts, including adult education and training, are pervasively traditional as in schooling (Borg, Mayo and Raykov, 2016; Mayo, Pace and Zammit, 2008; Mayo,

2012). They also indicate that adults before joining any new educational programme – including those offered online – have already been moulded into passive learners who will resist active and constructivist teaching and learning practices that are essential in online courses.

The scope of this research was to explore the challenges that these mature workers face in their transition to a course that uses non-traditional pedagogies. This grounded theory investigation therefore addressed the following open question: How are adult learners experiencing and perceiving the transition from traditional face-to-face education to online learning?

2. Methodology

Using the initial findings of a larger three-year project that is investigating the opportunities and barriers of e-learning for older workers in the Maltese Islands, the researcher developed a pilot online course for non-traditional university students. The main objective of the course was to provide potential tutors with the foundations of online teaching and learning. The researcher delivered the course twice between 2016 and 2017 through the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of the University of Malta. The second course was adapted, in terms of content, course design, task deadlines, online accessibility and pedagogy, following the suggestions for improvement offered by the first cohort of participants. Nineteen adult students (10 women and 9 men) joined the two courses and they all accepted to participate in this research project. The main data-gathering tools were participant observation of the students' contributions - including their postings during asynchronous discussions, their online communications with the researcher (who was also the tutor), online surveys and semi-structured interviews at the end of the course.

The researcher was conscious, throughout this project, that since he was also the online instructor, his position would possibly interfere and, perhaps, contaminate the data collection, and later, the data analysis. He was constantly aware that, in his dual role as a researcher and educator, he could have an influence on the students' behaviour online, their responses to the course evaluation surveys and questionnaires, and in their interviews. He was also conscious that, his prior sensitivity about constructivist and adult learning theories, and his knowledge of good practice in online education, could also affect both the data collection process, and the data analysis. For these reasons, and to maintain scientific rigour and reliability, the researcher decided to use Grounded Theory (GT) data analysis approaches, including constant comparison, coding and memoing.

This methodology allowed the researcher to develop inductive theoretical constructions through the participants' own experiences and meanings. It also allowed the researcher to articulate his personal views and insights about the phenomenon explored, through constant reflexivity. Moreover, through this methodology, the conceptualisations were all grounded in the data.

For the interviews, the researcher followed the suggestions of Birks and Mills (2011, p. 75), who, banking on the work of Corbin & Strauss (2008) and Charmaz (2000, 2006), argued that the interview for a Grounded Theory investigation must be

dependent upon the ability of the researcher to travel a path through the interview with the participant. The greater the level of structure imposed, the less able the interviewer will be to take the optimal route. Less structure is better from the perspective of following where the conversation takes you. This is not to suggest that the interviewer should be passive in the interview process; the interviewer acts as coordinator of the conversation with an aim of generating fodder for the developing theory.

This research, thus, adopted 'intensive qualitative interviewing' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28), which, like GT methods, were 'open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted' (ibid.). The researcher went to the interviews with no complete and sequenced script of pre-formulated questions and allowed the encounters to develop into 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 2006, p. 84). This style permitted fluidity and flexibility and the interviewee could delve into unexpected and unplanned topics. The language used in the interviews was Maltese. In agreement with the respondents, the interviews were recorded, and then transcribed. Later, each interview was translated into English. The name of the respondents, in the findings below, were changed to ensure anonymity.

As is customary in GT studies, the literature review was performed concurrently with the data analysis and was mainly based on the inductive categories that emerged from the data (Dunne, 2011). It will be presented in the discussion of the results of this research.

3. Findings

A pre-course survey indicated that the students had different learning needs - ranging from gaining a university acknowledged certificate to 'following a course from the comfort on my home' (Sarah) - and expectations - ranging from creating a new course to 'learning what it means to be an online student' (Dylan). They also had a varied but shallow understanding of what online learning was, thinking it was no different to traditional forms of learning, except for its flexibility in terms of time and accessibility. Thus, to ensure that the students were well informed about the non-traditional course pedagogies and their new roles, and in order to start an effective transition from traditional to constructivist learning, an introductory meeting was held before each course. During this meeting, the students were introduced to the basic functions of Moodle - the Virtual Learning Environment of the University of Malta - and the course structure. The students' expected active participation in asynchronous discussion, the formative assessment tasks and collaborative online activities were also explained. This meeting, the students agreed in the post-course interviews, was very important for the start of a successful transition from schooling to the new pedagogies adopted in the course.

The pedagogies used in the course were inspired by social constructivist learning theories that consider learning as an active social process (Pritchard and Woolard, 2010, p. 16.), with dialogue, created and maintained through social interaction, cooperation and collaboration within a learning community, serving as the 'the vehicle by which ideas are considered, shared and developed' (Pritchard, 2009, p. 24). Thus, asynchronous text-based discussions, initiated and facilitated by the researcher, were the main teaching and learning approaches. This required the adult learners to assume different roles than those they were accustomed to, and/or comfortable with, during their previous classroom-based educational experiences. Some found this transition challenging - particularly at the initial stages of the course. Various reasons were identified.

In the first weeks of the first course, 4 of the 10 students, felt isolated and found it hard to beat the 'isolation trap' created by the 'lack of physical interaction' (Samuel), which, they admitted, they had never dealt with before in their classroom-based courses. The degree of isolation varied, with a few students, namely Alfred, Lily and Luisa, even considering dropping out of the course. Indeed, after the first month of the course Alfred appealed for help through a post addressed to the whole group, including the researcher:

For ... many years ... I have (only) been used to attend traditional classes where we could chat a bit before or after a lesson and during breaks but ... here it is kind of cold. I am trying hard to strive (sic.) on but I am finding it rather difficult.

This message received replies from all the other students and the researcher, and a week-long asynchronous discussion developed. Various suggestions were offered by the students as to how they could help each other out to beat the isolation trap. Camaraderie started to develop. It would develop further till the end of the course with the students and researcher helping each other out in times when technical, emotional and other non-course-related circumstances including social, family, health and on-the-job problems, affected the participation of one or more of the learners. On his part, the researcher, acting on the students' suggestions, added more interactive activities, including audio and video-enabled synchronous discussions (through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, Facebook Messenger and Skype) and collaborative formative assessment tasks, to counter and minimize the effects of isolation. The interviews confirmed that this strategy was successful. The changes were then introduced into the second course, and were also effective, according to the second group of students. This is corroborated by the zero-attrition rate in both courses.

The students also noted that the constructivist online pedagogy, which was new to them, required more time and commitment than they had anticipated. The students noted that they enrolled in the online course believing that it required less of their time than a face-to-face course 'because (they) did not need, for example, to drive from home (or work) to the University' (Thomas). They also believed strongly that the online course would allow them to cope better with job-related (including, in some cases, second jobs), social and family commitments. As Mary explained 'I thought that the online course would provide me with much more

time for doing household chores ... (including) cooking, and overseeing my children while they're doing their homework and studying ... and visiting my elderly mother' while Peter noted that 'I thought that I could cope better with my other job'. However, they were not prepared for the amount of time needed to participate actively in the course and most had a difficult time completing the tasks by the deadlines. Isabel and Samuel noted respectively that 'this course took a lot of my time ... far more than I expected', 'far more than any other course that I followed'. The students, directing their comments to future students, recommended that 'to feel (and) to be successful in such a course' (Dylan), 'you need to manage time as best you can' (Sarah), 'meet deadlines' (Rita), and, 'above all, avoid procrastination' (Reggie).

Despite that the required effort did not match their expectations when enrolling in the course, all the students, by the end of the program, agreed that the design of the course helped them form an active community of learning which not only helped to reduce isolation but also encouraged the students to 'reflect on ideas with others' (Emma). Alfred, for example, noted that

'a lot of the more conceptual stuff is hard to learn or get excited about when you're studying alone ... (or) when writing an assignment at the end of a course. On the other hand, when you discuss it with others, when you argue and debate with other students, you learn more, you learn at a higher level'.

In a similar vein, David noted that 'when you work with others, when you are involved in a discussion, you gain information from them ... (and) new understandings'.

The students also agreed that the course design, in which teacher-facilitated learning tasks were gradually replaced with learner-centred and group activities, 'helped make the move to online learning easier to handle' (Emma). In designing the course, the researcher followed the recommendations offered by many scholars, including Salmon (2003, 2005) and Garrison (2011), and created learning tasks which progressively required greater student autonomy, more active group interactions and less teacher presence. This learning strategy, which is often referred to as 'scaffolding' (Garrison, 2011, p. 69), was intended to lead the students to higher-order learning activities. Isabel and Peter explained

We were not thrown at the deep end. I appreciate that. Imagine what would have happened if (the researcher) told us at the start of the course 'you will create a short course (the final assignment), in a group. Choose a subject of your liking and create the course, as a group. You also need to create an online course using Google Sites'. I would have panicked! I was only used to lessons and lectures, where the teacher knew what was best for us, and I took notes. I always found it hard to work with others. But, with the way you structured the course ... you first introduced us to the forum, explained how to post, set deadlines ... and you were always there when needed ... helped a lot. When we came to work together as a group at the end of the course ... we were not afraid of the medium ... we also could work as a group (Isabel). (Words in italics are additions by the researcher. In the last two modules of the course, the students were asked to design and develop a short online course using the knowledge and skills learnt through course. This was the last learning and assessment task of the course.)

We moved from tasks where (the researcher) provided instructions, to tasks where we had to solve our own problems, to think out solutions when technical and task-related issues emerged. This was new to me. I learned a lot. However, if we started the course with activities ... like those in the last modules of the course, I would have suffered (Peter).

The student narratives also revealed that students experienced this transition in different ways. The students who were more familiar with higher education practices - for example, writing succinct and to-the-point postings supported by references from published work - mastered the asynchronous discussion faster than those who had no tertiary education experience. Those who were more familiar with computers and the Internet also found the transition easier. However, those who preferred 'working and studying on (their) own' (Peter), or who had respectively more social, family and job-related commitments, found the transition harder. On the other hand, age, gender and accessibility to technology did not affect the transition.

The students also noted that that the tutor's pedagogic choices and behaviour were crucial to a 'smoother change in teaching style' (Luisa). They insisted that the educator must be 'different from the usual lecturer' (Alex). This, for them meant that the online tutor, 'apart from being knowledgeable in his (sic.) subject' (Peter), needs also to be 'an expert in online teaching' (Reggie) and course design. This 'expertise in online teaching' (Luca) will allow the online tutor to 'motivate the students to take part in the discussions' (Lily), 'pace well the online course' (Thomas) and 'adapt the course if new needs arise' (Claire). The students also noted that, a good transition also occurs, if the online tutor 'treats (the students) as adults' (Reggie, Rita and Sarah) by 'valuing (their) ideas and contributions' (Mary). The need to 'build up the relationship' was a recurring expectation in the students' narratives. So was 'knowing that someone was available if help was needed' (Alfred).

These adult learners also indicated that this shift from 'a schooling mentality' (Lucas and Tania), that is, 'learning only by listening to the teacher ... and taking notes' (Mary) to a learner-centred education helped them engage more deeply with their peers, and instructor.

4. Discussion

All the adult students were highly motivated by the courses because its online accessibility and flexibility allowed them not to disrupt their social, family and workplace commitments. The students also possessed, although at different degrees, good academic and communication skills, the necessary computer and internet skills, as well as adequate technology and internet access at home and their workplace to participate effectively in the online course. This notwithstanding, some students suffered from loneliness and a sense of isolation during the first weeks of the course. The study by Duranton & Mason (2012) confirmed this phenomenon.

As the students themselves explained, in the online dimension, there was no physical interaction. Moreover, the online communication provided no visual cues other than words or images and lacked the sense of immediacy of real-time, verbal, face-to-face mode of communication. Garrison (2011, p. 31) explained that the main pedagogy, the asynchronous discussion, presents 'a special challenge in creating a social environment and a community of enquiry'. While Miller (1996, p. 41), though writing about distance education and not online learning in particular, argued that the educator must be conscious of 'the isolation of the individual learner' and must create 'opportunities for the learner to participate in a learning community', and thereby decreasing loneliness, and increasing the sense of belonging to a social group. This puts as much responsibility on the educator, for working against individual student isolation, as it does on the adult online learner. This study indicates that the online tutor must play a central role in creating and maintaining an environment which reduces isolation.

The students noted another key challenge in the transition to online education – they started this course unfamiliar with student-centred methodologies. They were more comfortable with educational experiences that were 'dominated by the teacher' (Reggie) and in which they gained knowledge offered by 'more-knowledgeable' others, that is, their teacher in the primary, secondary and post-secondary schools. Literature from the local context, as well as in international studies, including the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015, confirm this reality. Baldacchino and Mayo (1997, p. xxi), argue that, in the traditional Maltese classroom, 'the content and process of educational activity emanates from the teacher illuminary, while the pupils dutifully interface with the knowledge, values and mores of the formal and hidden curriculum'. More recently, the former Dean of the Faculty of Education, Professor Carmel Borg, noted that Maltese students are not faring well in international studies because 'generations of (Maltese) students have been schooled in lower order cognitive skills ... memory work and regurgitation' rather than being engaged in an education that develops their 'higher cognitive skills ... including problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, enquiry-based learning and reasoning' (Carabott, 2013: 3). Moreover, Borg also claims most Maltese 'students identify themselves with the traditional conservative transmission model, which sees teachers sitting upfront imparting knowledge while students absorb and consume the information passively'.

Paulo Freire (1970) called this teaching and learning model 'banking education'. He argued that this is

an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorise and repeat.

Freire argued that these 'prescriptive' methods encourage submissiveness, stifle creativity and critical thinking and therefore facilitate the reproduction of unequal social relations between students and educators (1970: 31). Under these conditions, 'even freedom becomes a fearful thing for the students' (Mayo, 1991: 20). Thus, 'banking education' serves to 'domesticate' rather than 'liberate' human beings (Freire, 1970: 179). This sort of education, the data indicated, moulded the students that were involved in this research into passive learners who, once engaged in a university course, preferred traditional over innovative forms of education. The data also showed that these students were fearful of new educational experiences – including constructivist e-learning.

Another key characteristic identified by the students to be important in the effective transition to student-centred online learning is the 'feeling that they were being treated as adults' (Peter). Olivia, for example, noted that this helped her feel more valued as an individual and created in her a stronger sense of belonging to the learning group. This key element is also considered as being indispensable in adult education theories including the andragogy model proposed by Malcolm Knowles. According to Knowles (1973, p. 45), an adult has a

reservoir of knowledge that causes him (sic.) to become an increasingly rich resource for learning, and at the same time provides him (sic.) with a broadening base to which to relate new learning.

It is therefore important that adult learners engage in collaborative activities in which every adult's experience is never devalued or ignored, otherwise the adult would not only perceive this as a rejection of his or her experience, but a rejection of him or her as a person (Knowles, 1973, p. 46). Each adult must thereby be valued within a community of learning. This concept is also a key element of the Community of Inquiry (COI) model proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001). This model assumes that the tutor's role, the learners' active participation through dialogue, and non-traditional teaching techniques are critical for ensuring an efficient transition from a traditional to a constructivist educational dimension. The model proposes that social, cognitive, and teaching presence all contribute significantly to learning effectiveness within an online community.

Social presence is defined as the ability of participants 'to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment and develop inter-personal relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities' (Garrison, 2009: 352). However, as the students in the current study insisted, and the literature confirms, it is more difficult to establish social presence in an online course than in a face-to-face learning project. The tutor must therefore take a central but non-authoritarian role to develop and maintain collaborative experiences, for example, by developing initial questions to stimulate group discussions, encouraging camaraderie between students, motivating students to participate actively in the academic inquiry and providing constant feedback without overly interfering in the discussion. Cognitive presence is defined 'as the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry'. Garrison (2011: 24) notes that 'reflection is consistent with the ability to think critically ... while discourse relies on trust, communicative relationships, and communication purposefully focused toward understanding a dilemma or problem'. Reflection and discourse, argues Garrison (ibid.), are inseparable in practice. In other words, 'cognitive presence is a condition of higher order thinking and learning' (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2001: 11-12). Teaching presence is defined as 'the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes' (Anderson et al., 2001: 5). Garrison (2011: 25) notes that the correct teaching presence in online learning brings together all the elements of a community of inquiry 'in a balanced and functional relationship congruent with the intended outcomes and the needs and capabilities of the learners'. The role of the educator is therefore crucial.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study conform with published research conclusions in that, for an online learning effort to be successful, pedagogies inspired by constructivist learning theories, in which discussions rather than the

delivery of knowledge predominate, are essential. However, online students, including older workers, who grew up, were trained and worked in a society where the 'banking' paradigm is pervasive might find it difficult to 'survive' the shift from schooling to online learning if 'thrown at the deep end' (Luca). The transition from schooling methodologies to constructivist ones must be gradual and involve a process of scaffolding. In this process, as also recommended by Freire (1970), Knowles (1973), Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) and Garrison (2011), the instructor must play a central and determining role. Through his or her presence, the instructor must create activities, in which dialogue is a key element. These activities must also create adequate social and cognitive presences in order to sustain an active community of enquiry. It is also essential that, at the start of an online programme, expectations are clarified, each student's motivation is maintained through constant communication and course evaluation, and, above all, the students are treated as adults and their prior knowledge and experiences are built into the course. The students must also make a paradigm shift in learning. They can no longer act as passive recipients of knowledge. They must also beat the isolation trap by engaging actively in the collective learning process.

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Statements on ethics, data and conflict of interest

The study was conducted and approved by the research ethics committees of both the University of Malta and the University of Hull. The participants were informed in writing about the research project and voluntarily agreed to participate without any duress prior to the study. The participants clearly understood their right to withdraw at any time, and their signed consent was obtained before the research and course started. As requested by the participants, and in agreement with the researcher, the data collected in this project is not accessible to the public.

There is no potential conflict of interest in the work being reported here.

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