Inclusion of Older Adults in Higher Education...The Last Frontier

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Abstract

This paper addresses the difficulty older adults currently face in transitioning from a less technical communication environment to a “technology dependent” home and work environment. The older adult faces barriers such as poor eyesight, lack of manual dexterity, and a lack of self-confidence in dealing with technology. Seven steps are proposed as a concise methodology for assisting the older adult in dealing with the technology environment.

Introduction

In the last decade the rapid advance of technology has obviously opened many doors for learning and exchange of information. Simultaneously the technological advance has created barriers for the older adult. Older adults grew up and worked much of their adult life in a work environment of “snail mail,” face-to-face communication, and limited and expensive long distance phone contact. Research was confined to card catalogs and hardbound bibliographic materials with limited resources in smaller communities. In contrast, the older adult now must adjust to instant messaging and mounds of information on the Internet combined with virtual training environments.

Although the new environment provides so many opportunities for knowledge and growth, the older adult faces barriers such as loss of motor skills. Such a loss of motor skills makes it difficult to negotiate the sensitive mouse or even smaller laptop key boards. Age has been said to be “a measure of the deterioration of the body.” As the older adult attempts to forge through an Internet search, this statement of deterioration becomes more evident and understandable.

This paper will address these technical challenges in three categories. They are as follows:

I. The Traditional Type will maintain his or her lifestyle much as it had been twenty years ago. These individuals may live in the same house, have the same furniture, and could even drive the same car. Some may view them as living in a time warp.

II. The Pseudo-Youth Type will attempt to look as though he or she is up to date. More modern hairstyles, newer cars and houses, and a contemporary lifestyle would mark this type. However, these individuals would likely not use a computer and would avoid transitioning to technology that they do not understand or feel comfortable using. Although others may believe these individuals are consistently up to date, they are actually avoiding technical updates.

III. The Accepter Type is the individual who is more receptive to change both in styles and in technology in society. These individuals do not hold on to the past and attempt to “think forward” rather than reflecting so often on the ways that “things used to be done.”
All of these types of individuals may be within the workplace or living out their lives at their homes or in some cases long-term care facilities. The last frontier to be crossed in technology is to promote inclusion of these older adults no matter what category they may be in. It is clear that poor eyesight, soft buttons on the keyboards, lack of manual dexterity and simply being embarrassed about not being able to perform a task are clear barriers to each of these types. How the barriers are handled individually and also how we as educators assist the older adults are the keys to bringing them into the 21st century.

Whether any of these or other barriers is real or perceived, the ultimate result is the same. The older adult is excluded from a quality of life and communication system that should be available. If we accept the premise that to be computer literate is both positive and essential in this society the challenge remains clear. Therefore, there are seven strategies that are recommended to bring the older adults into the mainstream.

- First, it is important to instill confidence in the older adult. When discussing or teaching technology, it is important that adults feel confident. This may require more “icebreakers” in teaching them. Go back to their past experiences and show them how they have adapted to many new developments in their lives, and therefore they can now adapt to the computing age as well.

- A second method to use with the older adults is to remember to teach in small blocks of time. Any adult has trouble staying attuned to lectures...an older adult cannot stay on task for long periods of time. It is better to have short periods of teaching and then go back to the teaching at later points. Consider the person being taught rather than the amount of the material to be covered.

- One of the other issues in working on a PC revolves around the font and the sound. Because of the inability to focus on small areas and the loss of hearing, it is imperative that the machines used for instruction be set for large font and higher volume. This may create an issue for others in the same instructional environment; however, it can be handled through “creative scheduling.”

- It is essential to “review and repeat” often. The old saying about making a speech is related to this particular statement. “Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.” When starting the next class period or session with the older adult...don’t put them on the spot by singling them out for a question. They may embarrass easy because of the way they were taught when they were children. In those years “recitation of lessons” was more common, so painful memories may reappear when confronted by a direct question.

- A fifth point is that we must teach with the view the older adult will use the computer in his or her life. We must never assume that the class or training is in vain. We must convey to the older adult that we believe he or she will improve his or her quality of life by learning the e-mail and surfing the Internet. Radiating confidence is one of the more important points we must consider.

Although the normal programs and hardware have some features that can be helpful to the adult...it is essential that features that will enhance or assist the adult’s computing experience be utilized. Sticky icons and slow rates of the mouse are two of the early features that can be useful to the older person.

Finally, consider bringing children in to learn with the elderly. Preteens often have excellent skills and have more patience in helping the older adult than do teens and even younger adults. Younger adults and teens may not want to be bothered with teaching and reteaching the material. The elderly and the young both face some of the same obstacles: there are things they are both told not to do and things they now cannot do. By teaming these two age groups together, they can share in each other’s success.
Conclusion

There is no set method to promote inclusion of the older adult within the mainstream of technology. However, higher education because of its very nature of providing opportunity must recognize that this group of individuals has been left out of the technological loop. The last frontier remains, and it is our responsibility to cross that frontier and offer the helping hand of confidence and friendship to the older adults.

References:


