



Reaching Back While Looking Forward: Purposeful Integration of Soft Skills in Support of Online Adult Learners and a Global Workforce

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Abstract

In light of the aims of Sustainable Development Goal #4 and a growing global workforce, online higher education programs should consider ways to support adult learners' orientation toward relevant instruction and lifelong skills. While separated by physical space, learners are more connected now than ever due to online and digital platforms that bring learners together from across state and nation lines. Based on the tenets of Connectivism, learning is reliant on social and relational aspects and this holds true beyond brick and mortar classrooms. One way for online course developers and instructors to encourage social connections while acknowledging a global workforce is to incorporate intentional opportunities for students to discover and practice soft skills, particularly those that are people-facing such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. This paper introduces a conceptual framework, provides theory-to-practice application, discusses the implications for higher education institutions, and makes a call for future research to continue the conversation on ways to advance UNESCO's commitment to foster development through sustainable education.

Keywords: Higher education, adult learners, global workforce, soft skills, Sustainable Development Goal #4, Connectivism

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the problem

There is a need for adult online programs to foster and cultivate soft skills, particularly those that are others-facing, and that take into account the global nature of

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education and the workforce. The understanding of and ways to form connections has been greatly influenced by digital, virtual, and online opportunities in the workplace and in the education sector. Social interaction no longer requires a shared physical space, yet it does still require effort and can therefore help or hinder the exchange of ideas. The authors of this paper will suggest a conceptual framework that takes into account a particular population, a specific goal, and theoretical support regarding the need for social connection as integral to the learning process. It might seem counterintuitive to make an argument for integrating soft skills in adult online programs, and the authors of this paper plan to establish support for purposeful integration of the skills of leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. Implications and benefits will be discussed and rationale provided to establish not only reality but also relevance. This conceptual paper introduces a novel research space. Therefore, a pathway to future research will be suggested and a call given for empirical data and evidence regarding the theoretical and practical merits of an approach to online adult education that purposefully integrates soft skills to prepare students for a global workforce.

1.2. Framework

Frameworks assist in defining and organizing information for better understanding. This is especially important for bridging the gap between scholarly research and practical application thereby offering a common language and points of reference associated with a topic (Marcionetti & Castelli, 2022). In this paper the authors will discuss the relationship between adult learners in the online environment and connectivism theory in supporting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal #4 (SDG#4). The importance of developing and utilizing soft skills will be stressed as a viable means for enhancing efforts towards developing global citizens.

1.3. Adult Learning Theory

Knowles et al. (2020) popularized the term andragogy which means the skill or craft of teaching adult learners. Conversely, pedagogy indicates the art or craft of teaching children. According to Knowles et al. (2020) adult learners, typically aged twenty-five or older, experience learning quite differently than younger learners. Knowles suggested that adult learning was affected by six influential principles; 1) learner's need to know, 2) learner's self concept, 3) learner's prior experience, 4) learner's motivation to learn, 5) learner's readiness to learn, and 6) learner's orientation to learning. Adult learners bring an array of life experiences to the classroom including past career exposure and family responsibilities. Educators who embrace and adopt a posture for understanding the unique nuances of teaching adult learners foster better learning outcomes and more positive overall experiences for learners (Moore & Shemberger, 2019).

1.4. Sustainable Development Goal #4

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) implemented seventeen goals in 2015 focused on sustainable development with 2030 in mind as a completion point (Moul, 2017). The following is a definition of SDG#4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (The United Nations, 2023, Goal 4 section). This is a key aspect of UNESCO’s agenda specific to the development of quality education. Furthermore, at the center of SDG#4 is a focus on global citizenship as paramount to success in this area (Moul, 2017).

The United Nations (2024) placed a heavy responsibility on universities to foster global citizenship and suggested careful time and attention be paid to teaching skills necessary for contributing to an ever-expanding global community. A similar call to action for higher education institutions was issued by the Association of International Educators (Connell, 2016).

The relevance as well as timeliness of using online learning platforms and strategically creating programs for adult learners has direct implications on the work of enhancing global citizenship (Tarbutton & Doyle, 2022). The authors of the current paper aim to extend this notion by highlighting key soft skills for today’s global learners.

2. Connectivism

The importance of forming relationships and networking with others is a key factor for any learning experience (Alam, 2023) and such connections can and must also take place for adult learners, and in today’s virtual and digital contexts, which were described by Peter and Ogunlade (2024) as diverse and interconnected. The theory of connectivism stresses the relational aspects of learning and the construction of knowledge that can only happen through social exchange and by utilizing the inherent connections between learners (Hendricks, 2019). Hendricks (2019) went on to assert that the tenets of connectivism are multiplied in virtual learning spaces due to the ways in which challenges such as time and location are removed and opportunities such as those provided through immediate connectivity are utilized. Global connections no longer require shared spaces or specific moments in time; therefore, traditional learning theories (i.e., behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism) must be expanded upon due to the dynamic nature of learning spaces in a digital age (Peter & Ogunlade, 2024).

Seminal research on connectivism theory provided direct implications for digital learning spaces and pathways that include human and non-human networks (Downes, 2022). “Connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is constituted of the sets of connections between entities, such that a change in one entity may result in a change in the other entity, and that learning is the growth, development, modification or strengthening of those connections” (Downes, 2022, abstract). In light of this description of learning, the

context of online programs that cater to a population of adult learners should be considered ripe for the opportunity of fostering soft skills necessary in a global workforce.

3. Context

A conceptual framework was established based firstly on the tenets of adult learning theory and the work of Knowles et al. (2020) in popularizing the term, andragogy, and principles specific to ways in which adults learn. Secondly, UNESCO's SDG#4 brought in the overarching foci of global education and citizenship as factors that must be fostered by HEIs. Lastly, Connectivism was introduced due to the ways in which learning takes place in communities and because of the direct implications for virtual learning spaces and opportunities for social interaction on a global level. This conceptual framework will be applied within the specific context of adult learners, online learning environments, and a global workforce.

4. Adult Learners

Building upon Knowles et al. (2020) assumptions of adult learners the authors posit that adult learners want to know why and how the learning will impact them. This principle, need to know, exposes the purpose behind the learning and addresses the learner's questions about why the content should be absorbed. Once learners understand why the learning is impactful they can embrace the learning experience. The next principle, learner's self concept suggests that learners have autonomy over their learning as they have preformulated concepts or notions of what they want to learn and how it relates to them. Similarly, the following principle, a learner's prior experience, welcomes and considers the learner's past events and embraces the importance of incorporating the learning from these lived encounters. The principle, learner's motivation to learn, recognizes the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for adult learners such as professional promotions and personal accomplishment. By the same token, the next principle, a learner's readiness to learn, underscores the importance of immediate and practical applications of the learning for personal benefit. Adult learners anticipate being able to swiftly implement their new learning for positive gains. Finally, the remaining principle, learner's orientation to learning, suggests that learners want to acquire knowledge valuable for authentic problem solving as opposed to learning about abstract concepts or issues (Knowles et al., 2020).

Although Knowles' et al. (2020) assumptions of adults learners precedes the concepts encapsulated within SDG#4, the two notions share common foundational underpinnings rooted in the value of personalized, relevant and meaningful lifelong educational opportunities for learners. SDG#4 aims to level the playing field for all learners regardless of socioeconomic standing, gender, age, address, or the like. In part

this goal seeks to provide quality higher education and vocational opportunities for all in an effort to reduce the poverty gap and elevate every individual's quality of life (Department of Global Communications, 2023). This does not begin and end with K-12 educational institutions; rather, it spans post secondary opportunities including graduate studies. The relevant and meaningful learning proposed in SDG#4 speaks directly to the adult learner population and nods to Knowles' et al. (2020) principles of adult learners. Educators of adult learners are perfectly positioned to build momentum and make strides towards accomplishing this goal, as they are preparing today's workforce and leaders, empowered to make immediate change. Educated adults are better prepared to contribute to society, propel their communities forward, and participate as global citizens when SDG#4 is executed with fidelity.

5. Online Learning Environments

Online learning environments have gained popularity since the COVID-19 global pandemic when brick and mortar settings had to pivot and adapt to online learning management systems for educating students. Often noted as non-traditional learning environments, online educational platforms have expanded to encompass public, private, and non-profit institutions at all levels (World Economic Forum, 2022; Salama & Hinton, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Data suggested that in 2022 approximately 49% of post-secondary students enrolled in at least one online course (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The percentage of full-time students enrolled in virtual K-12 settings was smaller at roughly 2.5% albeit significant with 14 million students participating in at least one online class offerings. These robust figures speak to the desire for online learning and suggest that the future of education is anchored, in part, in virtual learning environments.

Online learning environments inherently afford opportunities that are not as readily available in traditional educational settings. These include increased flexibility (i.e., select days), affordability (i.e., reduced cost), and accessibility (i.e., remote or rural communities). Online environments typically offer more flexible timelines for logging in and submitting assignments, generally are less costly than traditional platforms, and extend opportunities to isolated or less mobile individuals. Clearly, consumers are encouraged by these unique characteristics emphasizing the relevance of non-traditional education and the possibilities within. One such possibility rests in developing global citizens, learners who are not defined by borders or boundaries but rather identify as connected and collaborative participants belonging to an online community.

6. Global Workforce

The trajectory of the American workforce has shifted over past centuries evolving from a mostly agrarian workforce focused on local and familial farming and agricultural practices to include a more connected workforce. The advancement of the industrial revolution expanded the focus of the localized workforce to include a broader landscape as individuals began traveling for employment, bridging the gap between communities and beyond. With the progression of the industrial revolution came a focus on worker welfare resulting in the creation of the United States Department of Labor in 1913 (U.S. Department of Labor n.d.). During the next decades American workers experienced the challenges associated with the struggles of a devastating depression followed by the fruits of a consumer-driven economy. During these periods the country's economy expanded beyond its borders as goods and services could be traded between countries and across continents. Fast forward to the twenty-first century when technology and information began to shape the workforce in unprecedented ways. Technological progress transcended the workforce into a new era where employees were connected and collaborating at the global level. This global workforce continues to be dynamic and expansive, infiltrating every inch of the globe.

Understanding this progression of events is important as the future of employment is changing. A country's human capital is no longer bound by residential or country lines as workers seek opportunities outside of their environments. Higher Education Institutions (HEI)s can lean into the progress and work to prepare students with the skills necessary for working in a multicultural or foreign environment. A seismic shift is entering the global workforce whereby employees must be prepared as digital citizens, able to navigate complex cultural landscapes, and the ever-changing demands of the work environment while successfully communicating and collaborating with others. According to the World Economic Forum (2024) the demand for online jobs will increase 25% by 2030 equating to 92 million jobs. The demand for digital employees is growing at the national and global levels and educational institutions can help address this need. Educational institutions must prioritize fulfilling the needs of adult learners in the online environment so that they are able to enter and contribute to the global economy.

7. Moving from Theory to Practice

Peter and Ogunlade (2024) focused on the implications of connectivism during the curriculum development phase, and higher education directors are wise to proactively build assignments, courses, and programs that help prepare adult learners for the global workforce. Soft skills are free and within reach for all. A distinguishing feature of an online program used to be ways in which technology skills were taught and utilized. However, in a digital age where technological prowess is more of an assumption than a

gap, the needle is moving backward in the direction of soft skills yet still in a forward-moving way as the skills must translate and forge connections in virtual spaces. A need exists for teaching strategies that acknowledge a learning landscape where skills must translate in a digital age (Peter & Ogunlade, 2024).

8. Soft Skills for Today's Global Learners

According to a recent report, there are 11 essential soft skills that foster healthy relationships between those who work together in a professional setting (Forbes, 2025). The same study mentioned soft skills as necessary for success in diverse settings as well as with others from around the world. The list of skills includes creativity, time management, adaptability, problem-solving, work ethic, critical thinking, and conflict management. Soft skills are free, available, within reach for all, and can be fostered in any learning environment to include virtual classrooms. Soft skills have outlasted technological advancements and should be integrated with purpose. While all 11 skills are effective and important, some are particularly people-facing and relational to an even greater degree. The four soft skills that will be discussed in the next section of this paper are leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence.

9. Leadership

The ability to successfully lead is often touted as a valuable soft skill (Ngang, 2012). Essential leadership is critical in all realms of an organization including digital spaces. Impactful leaders understand how to align efforts and inspire individuals toward a shared vision. Prosperous leaders can influence and inspire others thereby making strides toward core goals and values. Digital workers can enhance leadership skills by strengthening their managerial practices, sharpening problem solving, and adopting coaching and mentoring models (Danao & Main, 2024). In the virtual learning environment, leadership skills can be elevated via cooperative problem solving projects, collaborative role play scenarios, and purposeful assignments geared at influencing and aligning efforts, individuals, and a shared vision. One example is a collaborative project that demands students to assume key leadership roles (i.e. data analyst, innovator, researcher) in developing an action-based plan designed to address an authentic problem of practice. Once acquired, digital learners can transfer their leadership skill set from the virtual classroom to the online workplace using online collaboration tools.

10. Communication

Effective communication is an essential soft skill for individuals in the global workforce. Individuals working within a digital platform are limited in their opportunity

to communicate face-to-face and garnish physical cues and body language signals. To overcome this limitation digital workers must be adept at conveying clear messaging using verbal, written, and presentation skills (Danao & Main, 2024). In the online learning environment, effective communication can be heightened through intentional virtual etiquette efforts such as being punctual for virtual meetings, displaying respectful dialog during online discussions, appropriately engaging and contributing, as well as preparing concise and informative content. In the virtual environment, examples include requiring students to turn on their video during meetings, recording meetings and disseminating information as appropriate, and the use of comments or tracking tools to show changes and updates within documents. These practices are adopted and modeled within the virtual platform and can be easily applied to a work environment that is not limited by location. The soft skill, communication, can have direct application from the virtual learning environment to the global digital economic market. Adult learners can be encouraged to consider the format and tools most applicable in their field and experience the autonomy to choose between those most appropriate in their chosen career.

11. Teamwork

The ability to successfully navigate and work in a team is recognized as a paramount skill in the global economy (Vogler et al., 2018). The current focus on strategic planning, cross division projects, and collaborative initiatives within the workforce requires effective teamwork. Teamwork embodies shared initiatives, collaborative thinking, compromise, and accountability (Danao & Main, 2024). Teamwork is essential in physical environments as well as virtual spaces where communication, transparency, and authenticity may be interpreted erroneously. The U.S. Department of Labor (2023) noted one in five adults over age twenty-five possessing a graduate degree has or works virtually. Virtual employment, once popular only nationally, has expanded to include transnational markets. The global economy, composed of individuals from different countries, is rich with opportunity. However, employees must be knowledgeable about traversing environments where many ethnicities and cultures work collectively. Virtual learning environments initiate this learning process as individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures, varied socio-economic upbringings and unique communities come together with a common goal; education. One example is the intentional requirement of a group project within each course where students must work together although never meeting in the same physical space. Students must navigate different personalities, time zones, and personal experiences virtually in order to converge and successfully complete the assignment. The soft skills, relative to teamwork, acquired in virtual learning environments can be applied to the global work setting. Employees can benefit from the application of transferable soft skills obtained through virtual studies.

12. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) also known as emotional quotient is a soft skill that, when honed, can elevate relationships (Dimitrov & Vazova, 2020). An individual thought to have high EI can understand, navigate, and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others. This skill cultivates awareness of self and others, includes empathy and an elevated understanding of social skills and dynamic relationships (Danao & Main, 2024). Individuals possessing EI are motivated to understand others, respond with sensitivity, and work on maintaining positive relationships. In the virtual environment, this skill must be cultivated through persistent efforts including authentic clear communication, interacting with compassion and grace, and consistently appropriate responses. Within the online learning platform, an example may include asking students to interview and introduce each other. Another example may be the adoption of icebreakers that can include sharing personal photos, responding to personal discussion prompts, or presenting unique videos in response to open-ended questions. Orchestrating considerate personal dialogue opportunities can enhance EI in a common environment. This soft skill is transferable from the online classroom to the digital workforce as employees must work together and build healthy relationships to accomplish professional goals and objectives. According to Yasmeen et al. (2024), when leaders in the virtual space foster EI and relationship building in teams, productivity and employee engagement increases. Just as online students begin as strangers, so do digital employees.

13. Implications

One of the main aspects of SDG#4 is the promotion of lifelong learning (The United Nations, 2023) and this applies to and includes all ages and modalities. This paper has been focused on ways to address Goal #4 with a population of adult learners who are enrolled in online or virtual programs. One of Knowles' et al. (2020) principles for adult learners is orientation to learning which describes adults' desire for learning experiences that provide authentic opportunities for problem-solving. The soft skills discussed in this paper (i.e., leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence) can be integrated in the curriculum to provide real-world relevance through course learning outcomes, assignments, and activities built to encourage not only recognition of problems of practice but solutions with purpose. Non-traditional learning environments to include virtual and online are here to stay and are expanding (Salama & Hinton, 2023) as is the demand for a workforce ready to embrace and thrive in the online arena (World Economic Forum, 2024). A global learning and working landscape is a reality for current and future students and employees; yet, it does not negate the ways in which learning is reliant on relationships and social connection (Alam, 2023). Hendricks (2019) argued that the tenets of connectivism theory are multiplied in virtual spaces due

to the removal of constraints such as time and location. This serves as even more encouragement to capitalize on social connections in online programs where it can be a temptation for students to hide behind screens or turn off cameras. Utilizing soft skills with adult learners in online programs is one way for HEIs to acknowledge and support SDG#4. Acknowledging a global workforce where people-forward skills are paramount for forming social connections has theoretical and empirical as well as practical implications for HEIs.

14. Future Research

This paper was intended as a call to future research based on using SDG#4 as a goal post. Practical implications have been discussed due to a workforce that is increasingly more not less connected due to fewer physical constraints. There is a need for HEIs to promote social connection for adult learners in online programs due to the global nature of the workforce and Knowles' et al. (2020) directive to acknowledge adult learners' orientation toward learning experiences that are rooted in relevancy. The need for people-facing soft skills is more important than ever and this should be accounted for when creating and maintaining online programs for adult learners. Theoretical implications can be linked to a need for more evidence regarding the principles of connectivism specific to the context of higher education, adult learners, and online programs. Research designs that incorporate and measure the purposeful integration of soft skills, specifically those that are most people-facing such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, can push the body of literature forward regarding ways to accomplish SDG#4 specific to a population of adult learners. A qualitative survey could be created to determine adult learners' perceptions regarding the integration of assignments that encourage understanding and application of soft skills. A mixed methods study could request demographic information such as age, gender, current field of occupation, and program of study as additional data to reveal areas for greater support or focus.

15. Conclusions

The shifting and dynamic nature of the workforce has created opportunities for individuals to connect and collaborate across nations. Educators, particularly those in HEIs, who teach adult learners in online delivery systems, are positioned to cultivate soft skills among virtual learners. Technology has profoundly impacted how the workforce functions at the national and international levels. To capitalize on this, employees must be competent at communicating and building relationships with others who may be located thousands of miles away, a concept supported by the theory of connectivism. The authors of this paper have argued that one way to enhance and build a digitally connected community for employees in the virtual, global workforce is to intentionally

develop the skills of leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. Once these soft skills are acquired, students are empowered for success in the classroom and workplace thereby fulfilling the foundational vision of the United Nations SDG#4. More work needs to be done to fully comprehend the potential that awaits HEIs who espouse a model where soft skills are fundamental to preparing adult learners in the online environment for career readiness. Ironically, moving the needle forward and leaning into this change denotes a step back to the basics.

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