OXFORD COLLEGE SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL
Volume 1, Issue 1 (2026) · Open access

REVIEW ARTICLE · EDUCATION

Sustaining Engagement of Working Professionals in Online Learning: Principles from Adult Learning Theory

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Published 24 November 2026 · Volume 1, Issue 1 (2026)

ABSTRACT

Online programmes allow working professionals to study alongside employment, but completion and sustained engagement remain persistent challenges. This review examines engagement in online learning through four complementary perspectives: adult learning theory (andragogy), the multidimensional concept of engagement, the Community of Inquiry framework and self-determination theory. It identifies the specific pressures faced by professionals — limited and fragmented time, competing work and family responsibilities, and the need for immediate relevance — and derives seven design principles for programmes and supervisors. These include relevance to the learner's work, flexible pacing with clear milestones, regular personal contact with a tutor or supervisor, structured peer interaction, frequent low-stakes feedback, visible progress and assessment based on authentic tasks. The article concludes that engagement is less a characteristic of the learner than a property of the learning environment, and can be deliberately designed.

Keywords: online learning; adult learners; engagement; andragogy; community of inquiry; self-determination theory

1. Introduction

Online education has widened access to further study for people who cannot attend a campus: employees with fixed working hours, parents, people in rural areas and those who change countries for work. For institutions that serve working professionals, online delivery is not an alternative mode but the main one. Yet the flexibility that makes online study possible also makes it fragile. Without the structure of a timetable and a physical classroom, learners can drift, postpone, and eventually stop.

This review asks how online programmes can sustain the engagement of working professionals. It brings together established theories of adult learning, engagement and online interaction, and derives practical principles for programme design and supervision.

2. Adult learners and andragogy

Knowles (1980) described adult learning — andragogy — as different from the teaching of children in several respects. Adults are increasingly self-directing; they bring substantial experience that is a resource for learning; their readiness to learn is linked to the tasks of their social and working roles; and they tend to be problem-centred rather than subject-centred. Later formulations added

that adults are motivated more by internal factors, such as competence and self-esteem, than by external pressure.

For working professionals, these assumptions have direct consequences. Learning that cannot be connected to the learner's work feels like an interruption rather than an investment. Learners' experience should be used, not ignored. And learners expect to be treated as responsible partners in their own development.

3. Engagement as a multidimensional concept

Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) described engagement as having three related dimensions: **behavioural** (participation, effort, persistence), **emotional** (interest, sense of belonging, attitudes towards learning) and **cognitive** (investment in understanding, use of deep learning strategies). The distinction is useful online, where behavioural signals such as log-ins can be counted easily, while emotional and cognitive engagement are harder to observe but equally important for persistence.

4. Interaction and the Community of Inquiry

Moore (1989) identified three types of interaction in distance education: learner–content, learner–instructor and learner–learner. Each contributes differently to learning and motivation. Building on this, the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) describes a successful online learning experience as the result of three overlapping "presences": **cognitive presence** (constructing meaning through reflection and discourse), **social presence** (the ability of participants to project themselves as real people and build relationships) and **teaching presence** (the design, facilitation and direction of learning).

For professionals studying largely on their own, teaching presence — in the form of a tutor or supervisor who is visibly present — is often the factor that prevents isolation.

5. Motivation and self-determination

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) proposes that people are most motivated when three basic psychological needs are met: **autonomy** (a sense of choice and ownership), **competence** (a sense of making progress and being effective) and **relatedness** (a sense of connection with others). Online programmes can support all three: choices of topics and timing support autonomy; clear feedback and visible progress support competence; personal contact and peer interaction support relatedness. Conversely, rigid schedules, unclear expectations and anonymous delivery can frustrate these needs.

6. Pressures specific to working professionals

Working learners face several recurring pressures:

- **Fragmented time.** Study happens in short periods between work and family obligations.
- **Unpredictable workloads.** Busy periods at work can interrupt study for weeks.
- **Need for immediate relevance.** Learners judge each activity by its usefulness.
- **Isolation.** Many study alone, without classmates in the same city or organisation.

7. Seven design principles

From the perspectives above, seven principles can be derived.

1. **Relevance to work.** Activities and assessments should allow learners to apply concepts to their own organisation or profession.
2. **Flexible pacing with clear milestones.** Flexibility should be combined with agreed deadlines and a visible plan, so that freedom does not become drift.
3. **Regular personal contact.** Scheduled meetings with a supervisor or tutor — even short ones — sustain teaching and social presence and allow early help when difficulties arise.
4. **Structured peer interaction.** Small discussion groups, peer review of drafts or shared case analyses build relatedness and expose learners to other perspectives.
5. **Frequent low-stakes feedback.** Short quizzes, comments on drafts and progress check-ins support competence without the anxiety of high-stakes assessment.
6. **Visible progress.** Dashboards, completed-module indicators and milestone confirmations make progress tangible and motivating.
7. **Authentic assessment.** Assessments based on realistic tasks — reports, projects, case studies and applied research — reflect professional practice and give learners outputs they can use.

8. Implications for institutions and supervisors

For institutions, the principles imply investing in the people around the content, not only in the content itself. Well-designed materials are necessary, but personal supervision and structured interaction are what sustain engagement over months. For supervisors, the implication is to act early: a missed meeting or a silent learner is often the first sign of difficulty, and a short personal message at that point can prevent withdrawal.

9. Limitations and future directions

This article synthesises established theory rather than reporting new data. The relative importance of the principles may vary by discipline, culture and programme length. Research that follows professional learners through complete programmes, and that combines learning analytics with learners' own accounts, would help to refine the principles.

10. Conclusion

Engagement in online learning is not simply a matter of learner motivation. It is strongly shaped by the design of the learning environment and by the presence of people who guide and support the learner. Programmes that are relevant, flexible but structured, personal and supportive can sustain the engagement of working professionals through to completion.

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Article information. This review article was prepared by the Oxford College Research Office with the assistance of generative AI tools, and was reviewed and approved by the editorial office of the Oxford College Scientific Journal. It synthesises published literature and does not report new empirical data.

How to cite. Oxford College Research Office (2026). Sustaining Engagement of Working Professionals in Online Learning: Principles from Adult Learning Theory. *Oxford College Scientific Journal*, 1(1).

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