MATURE AGE LEARNERS & SOCIAL MULTIMEDIA

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"In a few years, multimedia computers will be an anachronism because all computers will readily deal with images, sounds and motion video, seamlessly and smoothly integrated into what a computer is". (Vaughn, T, 2001).

Introduction "Changes in the nature of work and the impact of new technology mean that skills now become outdated more quickly, highlighting how important it is for individuals to upgrade their skills throughout their working life". (Brough, M, 2003). As a trainer of soldiers in the Australian Defence Force and of mature age learners in the welfare, employment and training industry, I have lived by this system of belief.

At ages 54 and 59, I became a university student and as such I am living proof of a mature age, lifelong learner. To encourage lifelong learning will require making fundamental changes in the workplace to accommodate the mature age learner/worker, just as the learning environment transformation began since the advent of multimedia. Additionally, we will need to adopt a new mindset that transcends all levels - industry, government, academia and society as a whole.

Aims In this article, I will demonstrate how information and communication technologies (ICT) have impacted on the mature age learner/worker. I will also address how multimedia can assist trainers to provide appropriate platforms to aid mature age learners/workers in their endeavours to remain abreast of emerging technologies. (The "learner" will also signify adult worker, while "trainer" will likewise mean educator/teacher throughout this paper).

In addition, I intend to briefly discuss the following key issues and how they affect the mature age learner's ability to learn and the trainer in providing the appropriate tools and environment:

- the trainer's ongoing learning
- the role of the government and industry
- strategies and use of multimedia in an ageing society
- creating a multimedia climate, including the benefits and pitfalls
- The future of multimedia and the mature age learner

Definitions I refer the adult learner to two schools of thought. The first, Gunton's definition of multimedia, "is that it is a term used to describe applications usually based on personal computers that present the user with a combination of moving pictures and/or sound, along with text and graphics displayed on the computer screen". (Gunton, T, 1990, p.101). The second, Microsoft's explanation, "is that it is the combination of sound, graphics, animation, and video. In the world of computers, multimedia is a subset of hypermedia, which combines the elements of multimedia with hypertext, which links the information". (Microsoft, 1991, p.234).

There is not much that separates the two, however a more concise explanation is one put forward by Hughes, B, Drury, J, & Barrett, who break up the two words as follows: "Multi, the prefix means many"; while "Media is one of the plural forms of the noun medium. Radio, television and newspapers are collectively known as the media, but each is a medium (that is a means) of communication". (Hughes, B, Drury, J, & Barrett, B, 1993 p. 339 & 354).

Mature age learner The demands and pressures of a competitive business environment in this century and the increased life expectancy will be some of the drivers for a more skilled workforce in Australia. Mature age learners will require to be provided with access to tools, skills training, knowledge, the appropriate environment to learn and remain

abreast of new technologies, and with the opportunities to remain in the workforce as a mature age worker.

Trainers The South Australian Secondary Principles Association president, Bob Heath is of the belief that "educators need to keep up with the times". (Heath, B, 2004). When we reflect back to when multimedia was first introduced into the education system, trainers and others were not prepared for the challenges that lay before them and found that students had a better understanding of the new technology and the concepts behind them. It was found that trainers and others, who did not have the technological knowledge and/or multimedia skills, were able to create a whole new and innovative learning environment by involving students in formulating the multimedia curriculum. This fresh approach to learning gave the students a sense of empowerment and its success was soon replicated throughout the education system.

Taking stock of this, I am of the opinion that adult educators must embrace new technology, become lifelong learners and reflective practitioners. In addition they must also become critical consumers of technology, while being creative and open to new learning techniques and training methodologies.

Government's Role According to John Brumby, Minister for State and Regional Development, we are led to believe that although "Australians are world leaders in the consumption of new technologies, we are behind most developed countries in the production and export of new technologies". (Brumby, J, 2001). While on the other, the Federal government appears to have taken the right steps in creating a technological awareness within society. Irrespective of who is right or wrong, governments must encourage industries to do more for mature age learners to ensure that their skills are up to date and can meet with the ever-changing global work environment.

Digital Divide "There has long been a concern that a barrier to the emergence of an equitable information society will be created by the existence of digital divides – a difference in the take-up, or effective use of, information and communication technologies (ICT) between social groups or nations". (Liff, S, 2004). If governments fail to take the initiative, a digital divide between the "haves" and "haves-not" will be created and it may lead governments subsidising mature age learners for re-skilling, computer training and possible telephone/internet connection discounts.

Private Industry Industry should also be seen as an active partner, in collaboration with government to assist in driving and introducing new technology into the workplace. The en masse introduction of multimedia technology to the adult learner will assist in breaking down entrenched workplace cultures, bridge cross-cultural boundaries, while creating a highly skilled, well-connected and self-governed mature age worker that can bring dividends to an employer.

Multimedia and job creation Technology is currently playing its part in creating new jobs. Technology aptitude and awareness will make it easier for people to work longer and it will enable the mature age learners to contribute to Australia's economic growth. Technology and its associated Multimedia platforms have now been designed to take an active rather than a passive role with the learner. Designers are creating multimedia software programs to ensure that the learner is challenged by thinking, analysing, doing, providing feedback, researching, and yes, even talking and not simply looking at the monitor and letting the program do all the work.

Strategies for the mature age learner For the mature age learners to remain active members will need to find ways that will make them competitive and attractive to industry. The application of the following strategies may assist the mature age learner to embrace new technologies in the workplace:

- Flexible working hours

- Work from home/Remote locations

- More part time/casual positions

- Job sharing opportunities

- Seasonal work

- Alternative work schedules

- Job redesigns

- Longer vacation times

- Subscribe to multimedia self help websites

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Mature age alternatives   Multimedia can play an enormous part in assisting the mature age learner to move from one field of expertise to another. Consider then, how a workplace environment can be transformed to include e-learning as a training tool with multimedia as the platform. Interactive multimedia can be useful for the understanding and interpretation of new training concepts and/or technology that is being used within industries. Furthermore, imagine working at home using multimedia concepts and the information/data being digitally transferred to the firm's main computer located elsewhere.

Multimedia and the training environment   Use of multimedia in the training and teaching environment is an alternative method of delivering skills, knowledge and instruction. Interactive multimedia learning is a learning process that enables learners to assimilate knowledge at their own pace. Trainers on the other hand have taken advantage of this technology to deliver a traditional pedagogy style of learning using computer and multimedia programs as an aid in the learning environment.

Learning paradigms   If traditional pedagogy approach to learning becomes obsolete due to emerging technologies as well as different approaches to learning techniques. Therefore, if this is found to be true, then the education paradigms of the past must be revisited, analysed and discarded if necessary to create a computer literate society.

Mature age learner needs   In order to identify the appropriate multimedia training and skills programs for the mature age learner, trainers must first assess and analyse their employment history and current needs. The following is a suggested basic list only:

- What kind of job they want
- Does the job require keeping abreast of technology
- Are they computer literate
- Current level of skills and knowledge of the mature age learner
- Life experiences and/or work history
- Do they have any disabilities that they need extra support
- Is language and literacy a barrier to multimedia training

Selecting a multimedia training site   In addition to the above mature age learner needs, the trainer must also ensure that the appropriate multimedia platform has been selected for the learner. There are two categories that a trainer must consider when selecting a multimedia training site. The first is from the learner's perspective and the second is whether the site is suitable for the learner. The following multimedia evaluation matrix is a basic outline only and can be adjusted to suit local requirements:

Title	Preferred option	Yes	No
Is there feedback & interaction?	Interaction promotes stimulation and reinforces learning		
Is the navigation appropriate?	Keep it simple to enable learner to retain control		
Are the colours applicable?	Use many colours may detract from learning		
Does it follow a logical sequence	Build on each learning environment		
Are the graphics in line with the subject material?	Use text or graphics together where possible (cartoons, for example, cut across all cultural and language barriers)		
Is animation necessary?	Appropriately used, it can retain the interest of the learner		
Does the audio detract from the learning aspects?	Audio enhances the program		
Does the video support the training?	Excellent tools to emphasise points of interest, whether of a historical or animated feature		

Mature age Learner's perspective: In addition to the above multimedia evaluation matrix, trainers need to look at the mature age learner's perspective to ensure that the multimedia program is suitable. The following is a suggested list only and is subject to modifications according to local requirements:

- Will it provide on line and/or face to face support

- Is the training effective and cost effective

- Is there any post training support

- Is the training credible and of value to the mature age learner

- Is the program interactive and challenging

- What are the learning outcomes

- Can it be accessed from home

Creating a multimedia climate Trainers must undertake training if the mature age learner is to successfully acclimatise to their new working environment. They must also have the applicable soft skills and technological knowledge to interact with the mature age learner. The following are suggestions to assist trainers in creating a multimedia environment.

- identify the mature age learner willing to be supported with career development

- motivate mature age learner to take advantage of training programs

- improved flexibility, environment and capacity of mature age learner to learn new skills

- modify training to accommodate the mature age learner

- determine the cost-effectiveness of training and development

- career changes require retraining to sharpen existing skills and/or develop new skills

- join professional development organisations and consider career contingency plans

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Benefits of multimedia The benefits of using multimedia by the mature age learner may include the following:

No boundaries; ability to reach others within the global electronic village via internet

- Transcends all cultural, social, religious and language barriers

- Catch-up and Just-in time capabilities that focus on the learning aspects

- Inexpensive and available on line without having to travel from home

- Learn at own pace

- Non stressful without being judgmental (no pass/fail attitude)

- Can be conducted in a group setting or individually

- Flexible outlook on delivery and levels of learning

- Multiple choices

- Easy to learn

- Marrying of multimedia with teaching, training, and learning process

Pitfalls   Multimedia training requires a certain amount of discipline and commitment to complete any learning. This is especially the case when a learner is isolated from any peer or support group. The following are some potential pitfalls that may occur during the course of the training that trainers should be made aware of:

- lack of self discipline and/or motivation towards learning

- lack of facilitation and/or support group

- poor understanding of technology and/or software packages

- poor language and literacy skills

- outcomes based on a false sense of expectations

- no guarantee that multimedia learning will lead to a job or job satisfaction

- the costs of remaining abreast with new technologies

- no recognition of mature age learner's abilities

The future of multimedia and the mature age learner   The mature age learner with multimedia understanding will have greater choices of employment. Multimedia will also be able to provide just-in-time training skills and knowledge to the mature age learner. The mature age learner/worker will no longer be able to survive in an environment where technology such as computers and multimedia are in place. Therefore, it is in their interests

to learn new skills quickly, as the succeeding generations develop more computer savvy. In the future, the majority of jobs will require some form of higher levels of computer skills.

Conclusion   During this paper, I have attempted to present the reader with the issues and barriers facing adult learners with respect to multimedia and other forms of information and communication technology. It has not been my intention to address all the issues, but merely to provide an awareness within the public and private sectors, so that they can appreciate the difficulties faced by the mature age learner and create opportunities and incentives necessary for a vibrant and exciting new future. As a result, it is hoped that once this has been realised, that the strategies and suggestions offered may provide a platform upon which appropriate multimedia training can be married up with the needs of the mature age learner. In addition, I have approached the subject of the trainer and the mature age learner to remain abreast of new and emerging technologies.

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