Learning Issues for Online Graduate Students

CIDER Presentation

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Background

- Research part of dissertation
  - Higher Ed Leadership
  - Online learning focus
  - UofC, 2009
- Online experience
  - 3 online degrees from UofA and UofC
  - Some online courses from AU
  - Over 30 online academic courses
  - Online instructor and designer
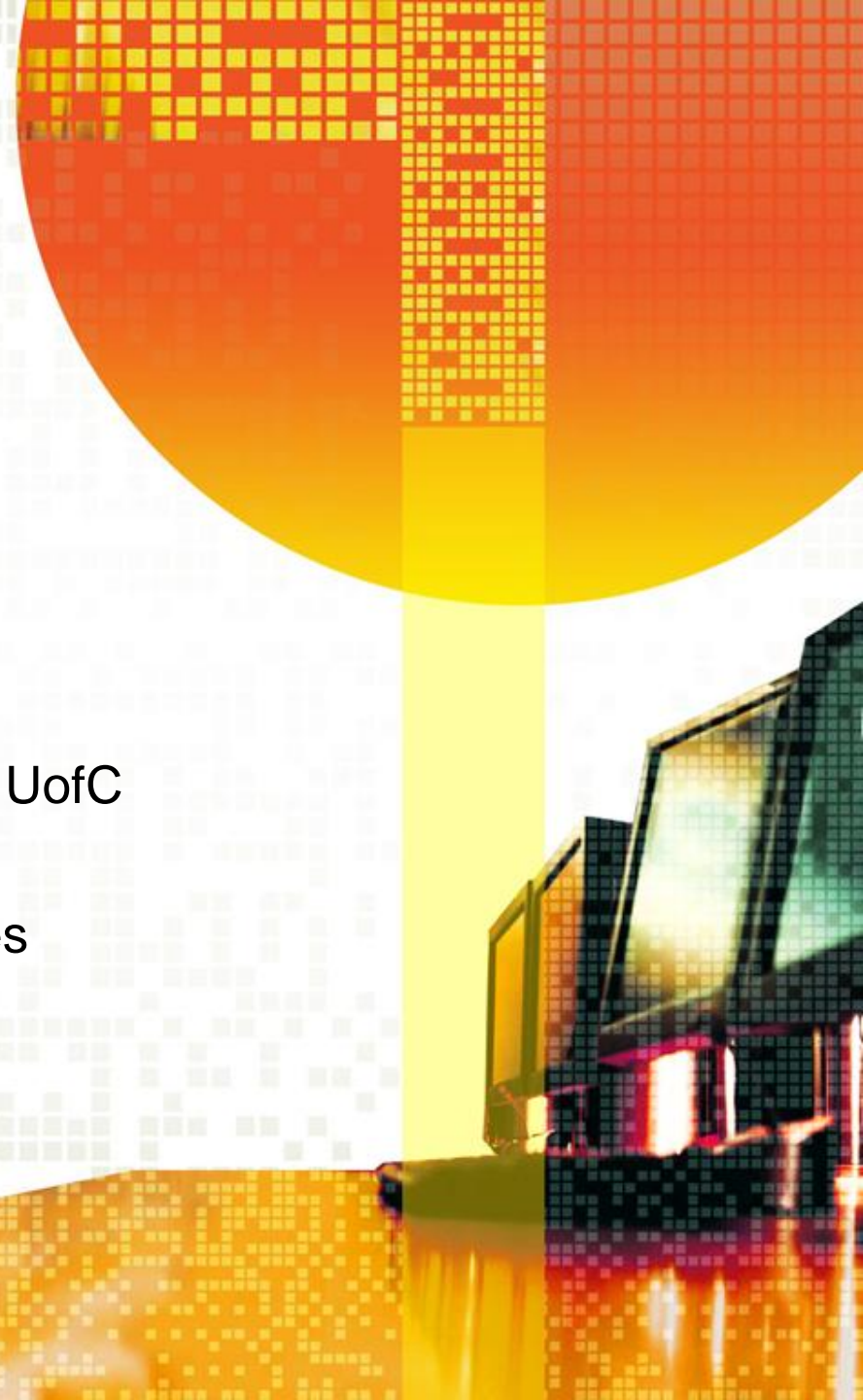
Research Methods

- 163 graduate students
- Western Canadian university
- Analyzed:
  - Student characteristics
  - Motives for and perceptions of online learning

- Mixed method
- 3 stages
  - Online survey
  - Virtual focus groups
  - Virtual and f2f interviews

Participant Characteristics

- Middle aged
- Female
- Married
- Work full-time in education
- North America
  - Rural
  - Urban
- Online at night and weekends

- Master and doctoral degrees
- Education programs
- 7 years since formal education
- 4 fully online courses
- Adequate technology and info literacy skills

OVERVIEW OF 3 ISSUES

• contentious online learning activities

• requested blended learning opportunities

• difficulty defining online pedagogical strategies

Learner Issues

Participant Needs	Leadership Focus
Contentious learning activities	Examining overwhelming discussion postings, unfavourable group work, and balanced workloads
Blended learning	Exploring the feasibility of multiple site visits
Online pedagogy	Defining institutional specific online pedagogy Determining best practices online

Contentious Learning Activities

Online Discussions

- Most enjoyed online discussions, interactions and collaboration

- Participants were motivated by interacting with others and exploring beliefs, values, and practices together (Brookfield,1986; Vanderbilt, 2009)

However …

- However many …..
  - found the number of discussion postings overwhelming
    - inhibited learning

  - did not enjoy online group work
    - negatively affected progress
    - tardy or absent members

Online Discussion
Solutions

Learning activities should consider the level of self-directed learning desired by <u>adult learners</u> along with their need to interact and collaborate with others

(Cranton, 1992; Cross, 1981; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam, 2003).

- Reduce overuse of activities
  – Create variety
- Monitor online discussions
  – Facilitate more
- Allow choice on how to participate

Contentious Learning Activities

Workloads

- Busy schedules of adult students
- More time required to work online (vs. f2f)
- Some learning activities demand too much time

Workload
Solutions

Like other studies, participants thought online graduate students had <u>higher workloads</u> than face-to-face graduate students.

(Bowman, 2006; Campbell & Khalideen, 2008; Dove, 2006; Loeffler, 2005; Klinger, 2003; McPherson & Nunes, 2004),

- Allow time to:
  - Reflect and discuss topics
  - Read text
  - Compose assignments
- Be flexible with attendance and assignment dates
- Socialize online more

Blended Learning Opportunities

- Graduate programs mostly delivered online

- Some participants sought to create blended learning opportunities
    - Take more campus courses
    - Pursue blended programs
    - Increased bond between fellow students
    - Improved working relationship once rejoined online.

- However…
    - Others chose program due to lack of residency requirement (full lives, live abroad)

**Blended Learning
Solutions**

Offering campus-based visits for a select number of participants might not be feasible in terms of faculty and staff time, costs, and scheduling

(Webber, 2008)

- Offer gatherings in simulated and virtual reality environments delivered online in order to emulate face-to-face meetings

Online Pedagogy Defined

- Participants asked for courses to be designed with online pedagogy strategies
  - Instructors and designers to consider the distance learner and online environment
  - To not simply copy f2f course to online environment

- However….
  - Difficult to determine how participants defined an online form of teaching and learning

Learning Needs

Online learning

- Requested engaging and interactive activities

Face-to-face learning

- Interaction such as with collaborative activities are desired by adult learners

- (Brookfield, 1986; Ramsden, 2003; Chickering & Gamson, 1999; and, Chickering & Ehrmann,1986).

Learning Needs

Online learning

- Requested opportunities for live communication to compensate for the loss of face-to-face dialogue

Face-to-face learning

- Contradicts their request that online pedagogy be different from classroom settings

Learning Needs

Online learning

- Requested an organized curriculum maintained by the instructor

- Requested a clear syllabus with explicit information about instructors' expectations

Face-to-face learning

- Adult learners need clear learning objectives and expectations, and a well organized learning environment

- (Abdul-Hamid & Lewis, 2005; Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004; Conrad, 2002; ; Garcia and Qin, 2007; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Ramsden, 2003; Stewart, 2006; Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006; Vafa, 2002)

Possible Online Pedagogical Difference

- 'Communication' to participants more than timely responses to questions and feedback
- Important to:
  - Connect, socialize, and build relationships with others
  - Have course time and the communication technology to engage
- They felt connection online might not be as easily replicated as in f2f courses.

However….

However…

- Blended learning offers continued connection via online means (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007).

- Online learners had restricted time to engage frequently (as found by Anderson, 2008).

- Lack of time found as a learning barrier for adult students (Merriam, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Cross,1981) .

- Contradictory to their statements about wanting rigorous learning programs (Young & Norgard, 2006; Ukpokodu, 2008).

Solution

- Continue to explore notion of online pedagogy to determine
  - distinct qualities compared to a classroom setting
  - potential to improve learning via online
  - while considering the needs of adult learners
    - Gender?
    - Generational?
    - Role/level of communication and collaboration?

Learning Issues

DISCUSSION

Recap of Issues

- Discussion posting issues
- Workload issues
- Blended learning opportunities

- Determine uniqueness of online learning
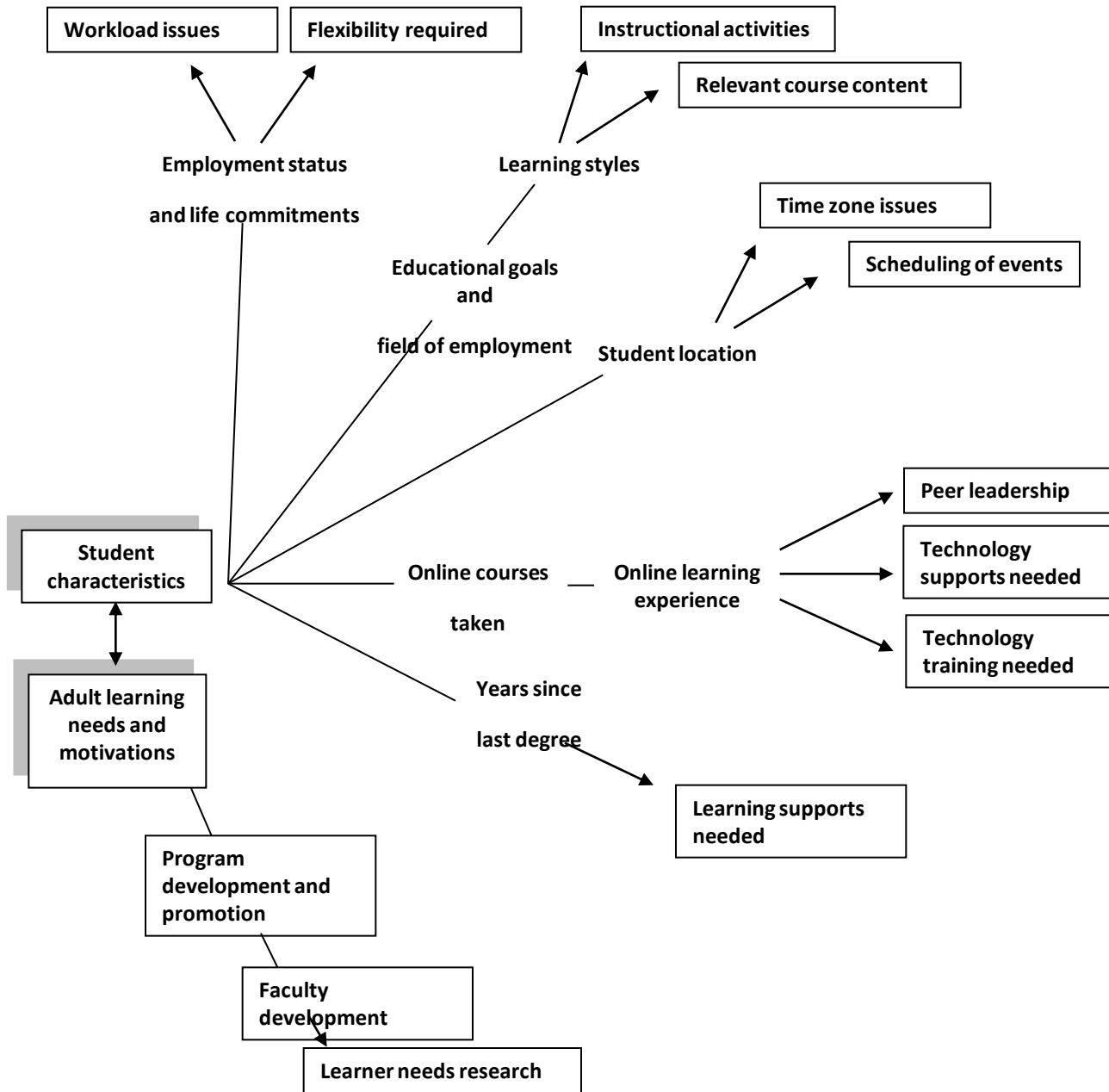- Hone best online practices

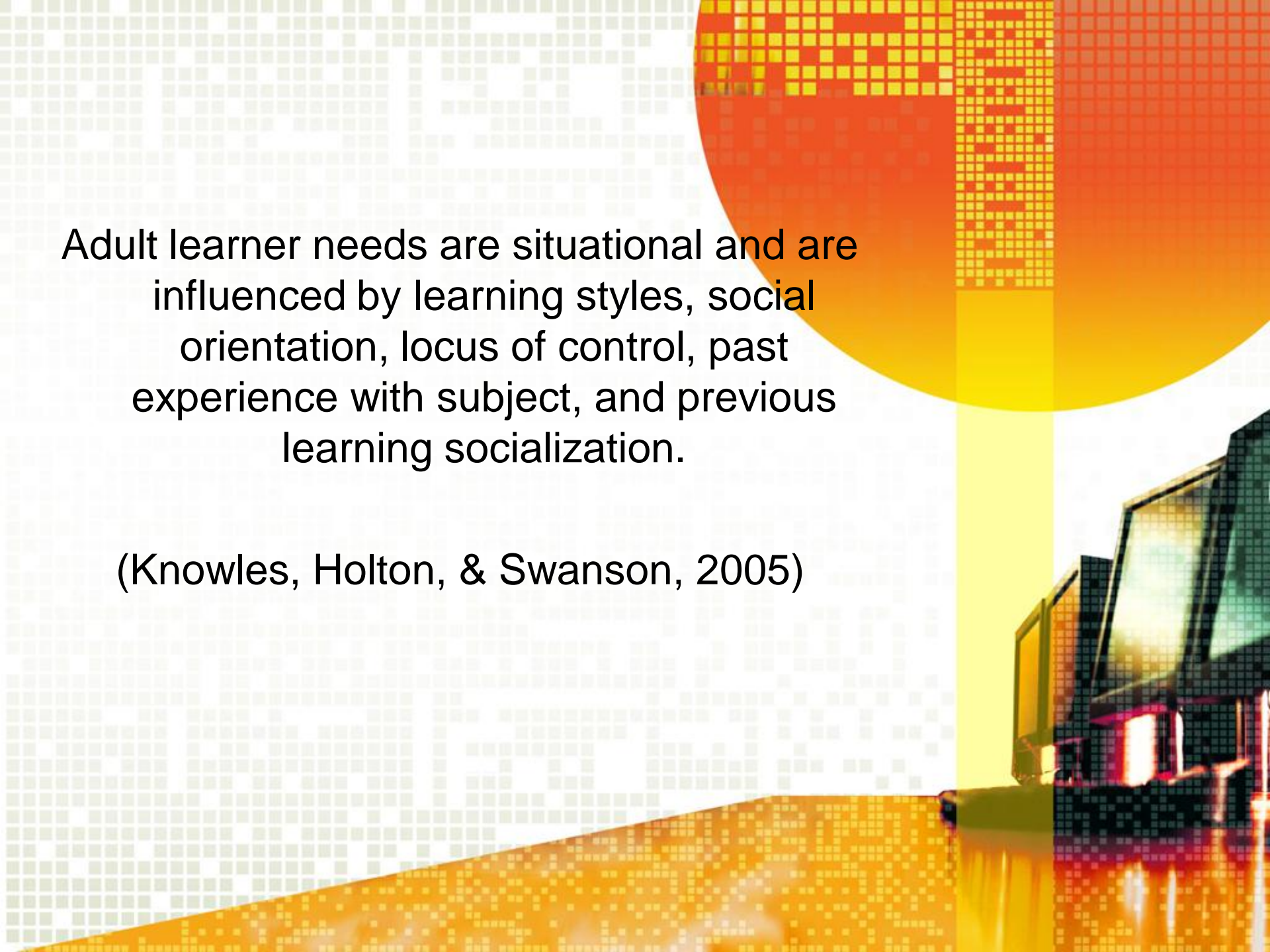# STEP #1: ADDRESSING LEARNER NEEDS & ISSUES

Engage in:

- student polling
- research projects
- program evaluation
- literature review

Student needs informing program, course, and instructional design

Workload issues

Flexibility required

Instructional activities

Relevant course content

Employment status and life commitments

Learning styles

Time zone issues

Scheduling of events

Educational goals and field of employment

Student location

Peer leadership

Technology supports needed

Student characteristics

Online courses taken

Online learning experience

Technology training needed

Adult learning needs and motivations

Years since last degree

Learning supports needed

Program development and promotion

Faculty development

Learner needs research

Adult learner needs are situational and are influenced by learning styles, social orientation, locus of control, past experience with subject, and previous learning socialization.

(Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005)

- Long (2003) suggests instructors gain a **complete view of adult learners**
  - Physical, cognitive, personality, experiential, and role characteristics.
- Students could achieve higher scores if provided
  - responsive instructional environment
  - that considered learner differences
  - with appropriate resources and teaching approaches
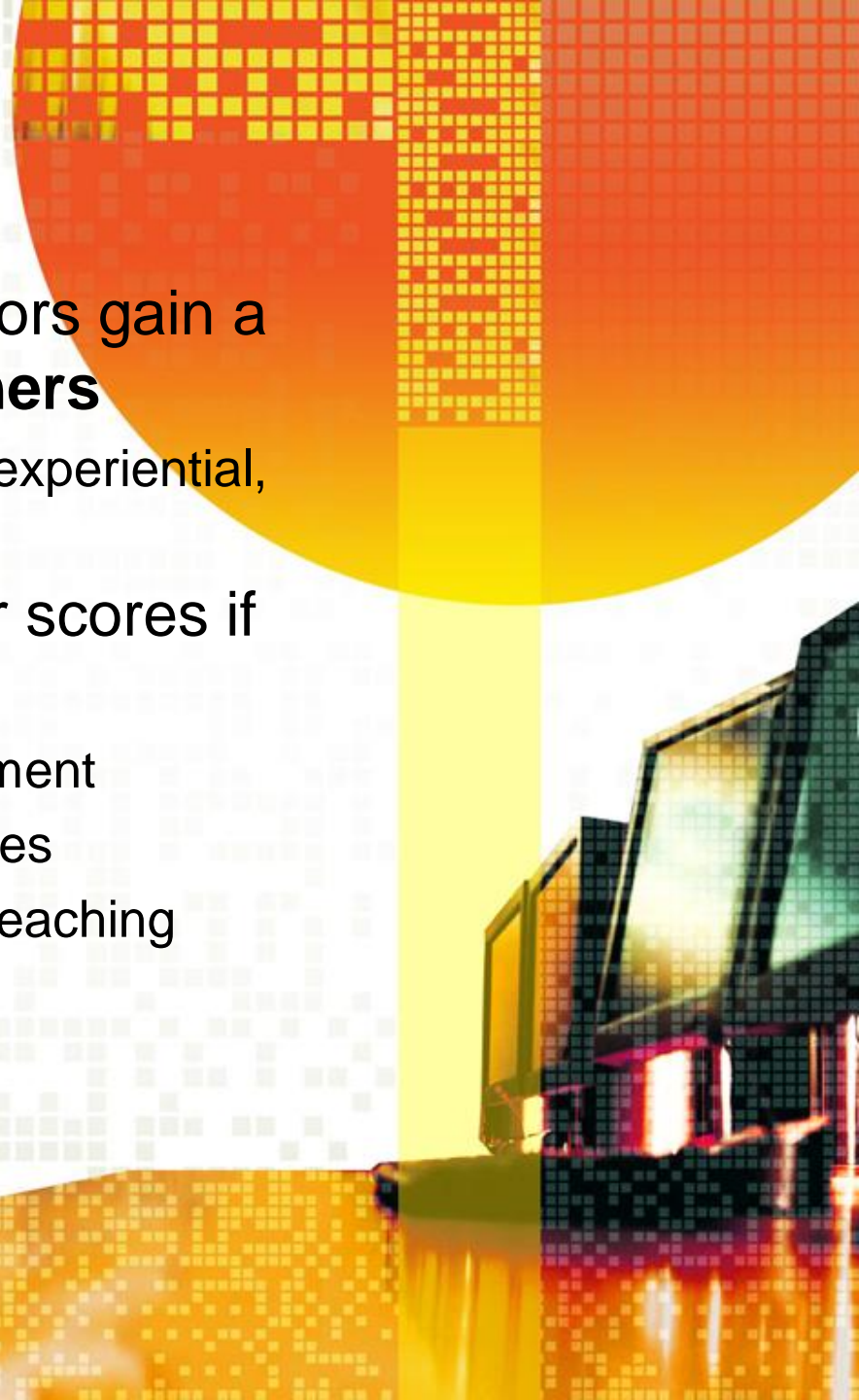
Participant Profile

- Participants were
  - self reliant
  - productive
  - well organized
  - result-oriented
  - decision makers
- They wanted choice and control over their learning.
- This group of learners understood quality, and had high expectations of their learning experience.

Final Thoughts

- ## Learner needs

  http://tinyurl.com/2g25afs

- ## Learning and social sciences

  http://tinyurl.com/25yscwu

- ## Uniqueness of online learning

  - HCI
  - Brain-based and cognitive learning
  - Technology affordances
  - Impact of tools
  - System and social dynamics, MIT

    http://tinyurl.com/2b88utu

- ## Ongoing critical inquiry

  – EDUCAUSE: Seeking Evidence of impact

    http://tinyurl.com/2c8aua2

THANK YOU