

Features

Adult Education: 21st Century

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The judgements made in this paper about the nature of adult education in the 21st century are based on the following assumptions:

1. The world order will continue to change at a rapid rate on many fronts.
2. Adults will continue to have a visible longing for empowerment.
3. Adult education will continue to assist adults to cope with change.

To speculate about adult education in the 21st century, it is necessary also to speculate about the anticipated changes in society at that time. One set of projections contained in *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* includes:

A booming global economy in the 1990s: a renaissance in the arts; the emergence of free market socialism; global lifestyles and cultural nationalism; the privatization of the welfare state; the rise of the Pacific Rim; the decade of women in leadership; the age of biology; the religious revival of the third millennium; and the triumph of the individual. (Naisbitt & Aburdene, p. 13)

Against this background I project that adult education will progress by: 1) acquiring a stronger central focus, 2) strengthening collaboration among providers, 3) moving to the mainstream, 4) creating innovative funding patterns for developing educators of adults, and 5) emphasizing assessment and accountability.

Acquiring a Central Focus for the Field

For the long term, the future will be in the hands of children as yet unborn. The short term future, however, is in the hands of adults now living, voting, and controlling society. "They are the ones who make the decisions that shape or misshape human beings and human affairs" (Blakely & Lappin, p. 7). Adults, therefore, must continue to learn in order to make intelligent decisions, and to contribute to their

empowerment in a rapidly changing society. Adult education is a principle instrument in assisting adults to learn.

The most recent national document urging the need for changes in elementary, secondary, and higher education, *America 2000: An Education Strategy* (1991), initiated by President Bush, in addition gives priority to change in adult education. This is a first. Bush calls "for the rest of us," yesterday's students and today's workers, to become a nation of students (p. 29). In fact, in light of the extensive societal changes predicted in works like *Megatrends 2000*, we must perceive adult education broadly and generically, rather than narrowly, as is often the case. Adult education includes extension, continuing education, training, human resource development, literacy, and basic education. Whatever term is used, adult education encompasses all of the educational activities in which adults can participate.

Adults, however, deserve to know the name of the endeavor in which they are engaged. Adult education needs a distinguishing theme or focus, such as: "To assist adults to further control of their current circumstances and their future destinies" (Charters, 1987, p. 1). Such control enables adults to participate more intelligently and responsibly in all aspects of their lives. It implies a sense of dignity in human beings and a longing for liberation of the spirit. The fulfillment of such a mission for adult education will empower people and will strengthen the central focus of the field.

This central focus for adult education requires an infusion of positive attitude, in addition to a broad definition and visionary mission. Many adults enroll in adult education programs almost in a sense of desperation to achieve literacy or job skills. Such anxiety will be countered when adults and educators of adults infuse the entire adult education enterprise with the conviction that learning is positive, even exhilarating. The educator of adults must present adult education as a positive opportunity for enlightenment rather than a correction for ignorance. It is as exciting to learn to read at age 50 as it is at age 6.

A central focus, however, does not mean a static focus. Its implementation requires changing programs that must provide coping skills for adults in a rapidly changing societal environment. Educators of adults need to monitor program change to be sure that changes meet clearly specified goals and create progress in a desired direction, not just "change for the sake of change."

In order for a central focus to emerge, educators of adults must acknowledge a greater recognition of the essentiality of individual learning. Learning is an individual activity that takes place only when

a motivated individual interacts with a learning opportunity. Self-motivation is the ideal, building on the basis of what Houle calls the inquiring mind (Houle, 1961). However, in the coming years societal forces will provide increasing numbers of external pressures to motivate individual learning. These forces include the need to deal with major demographic shifts and their concomitant diversity, the emergence of new political and economic systems, and the dismantling of the military-industrial complex. All these forces will suggest to adults the need for additional education. If, in addition, educators of adults were to become more impatient and push more vigorously in the directions discussed above for increased rapid and extensive change in adult education, it is not overly optimistic to suggest that a central focus will develop.

The challenge to "become a nation of students" put forward by President Bush has the potential to have substantial, even dramatic, effect if programs for adults can be developed at a rapid rate and on a massive scale. However, the extent to which adults learn from new programs will vary. Often, the application of learning to change behavior and practice may take a very long time. Even so, the cumulative effect on society of such a presidential call as is contained in *America 2000* may be substantial. The response will depend on the spirit and commitment to learning instilled in adults everywhere.

Strengthening Collaboration among Providers

Individual educators of adults form an expanding cadre of people who provide educational programs to adult learners. Some identify themselves as educators of adults. Others, although involved in the education of adults, are not recognized by the field or even by themselves as performing an adult education role. These others may be paid or unpaid. They may be

administrators, supervisors, deans, directors, advisors, counselors, members of the clergy, librarians, media specialists and other support personnel, tutors, facilitators, faculty and students in the field of education, community developers and educators, research workers, consultants, policy makers, elected officials, and board members of adult education agencies. (Charters, 1987, p. 2)

To cope with the demands of adult education in the 21st century, all of the personnel described need to be recognized as educators of adults

in the 21st century, and all of the personnel described need to be mustered to enhance the total field. As the demand for adult education grows, these individuals have new opportunities to recognize and collaborate with one another.

Similarly, collaboration will increase among the agencies providing adult education. The time has long passed when schools, colleges, universities, and libraries were the main providers of adult education programs. The types and numbers of provider agencies have increased exponentially, although most agencies also play roles other than adult education.

They include business and industry, communication enterprises, galleries and museums, government agencies, international organizations, labor organizations and unions, military, postsecondary institutions, religious bodies, schools, correctional facilities, special groups (elderly, handicapped, minorities, illiterates), sports and recreation organizations, vocational and professional associations, and voluntary (not-for-profit) bodies. (Charters, 1987, p. 55)

It will be mutually profitable for all agencies working with adults to identify with the adult education field and to work in concert, thereby enhancing the total field of adult education. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, massive and conscious effort must expand the number and roles of agencies working with adults. Collaboration, rather than competition, will avoid duplication and free resources to identify and fulfill unmet needs.

Moving to the Mainstream of Society

Adult education continues to move gradually into the mainstream of education and society; part of the significance of George Bush's educational strategy is that adult education unequivocally is included. However, before adult education will move in fact to the mainstream, the concept of lifelong learning must itself be embraced by society. The positive attitudes toward adult education discussed above will cause adults of the 21st century to consider educational factors as a priority in their lives, along with career, cultural, religious, political, and other concerns. As educators of adults are more aggressive in pushing for a place in the mainstream, thus continuing the present trend, adult education will move out of the periphery and become an integral part of the lives of individuals. The challenges to adult education are to provide leadership, to provide the skills adults will need to anticipate

projected societal changes, and to assist adults to prepare for, facilitate, or block these changes so as to reduce their sense of powerlessness and provide instead a sense of empowerment. If educators of adults are able to do this, then the move to the mainstream of society will be accomplished.

Creating Innovative Funding Patterns for Developing Educators of Adults

Before World War II the leaders of adult education did not "enter" the field, they developed it. The early leaders of such extensive adult education programs as the Cooperative Extension and the General Extension Divisions of the Land Grant and State Universities tended to have strong academic backgrounds and experience in teaching and research. Over the years, many other agencies, including public schools, libraries, private business, and industry, have given the field leaders whose educational background has been developed in many disciplines. As the vast array of adult education agencies continues to expand in type and number in the 21st century, it will be necessary to attract from a variety of sources qualified personnel with the expertise to staff these facilities. The development of new educators of adults and the continuing education of those already in the field is essential.

The continuing education of educators of adults may become big business for public, private, and proprietary organizations in the 21st century. All educators of adults will require information and skills in three areas: general education to understand the societal context in which they are functioning; professional or specialized education to effectively develop programs in a particular agency; and adult education so that they can effectively develop, administrate, and teach programs for adults. Patterns of self-directed learning will be unique to each educator, but making and keeping these educators of adults qualified will necessitate also a variety of continuing education programs. In the future, graduate programs in adult education, traditionally in Schools of Education, should be developed in other professional schools. Those graduate programs already in schools of education could be expanded to collaborate or cooperate with those in other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and technology, in order to meet the needs for educators of adults in the 21st century.

In addition, increases in financial resources, as well as in the variety of patterns of funding, will be required in the next century to fulfill the needs of adult education. Currently, most adult education funding comes from single sources. For instance, many corporations finance their own in-service programs. Funding of single projects from

multiple sources must become an acceptable pattern in the future. Other aspects of financial expansion may include adult education programs as components in "cafeteria" fringe benefit packages and in union and other contracts. The concept of continuing education as "entitlement" and the use of educational coupons as reward for services also may become more common.

Emphasizing Assessment and Accountability

Total Quality Management (TQM) is an innovation currently permeating business environments. The TQM model focuses on the system, the process. Customer satisfaction is the goal. Both positive and negative assessments of the final inspector, the customer, are fed back into the system in a closed loop for corrective action. Adult education must encounter the impact of TQM, if only minimally, through an increased focus on assessment and accountability to its students. The increasing difficulty in matching scarce resources with expanding needs also accentuates attention to accountability by providers and consumers alike.

Initially, adult education program providers must determine the needs of their adult student customers. Part of the difficulty in increasing efficiency is that neither adults nor providers have made any major program assessments in terms of their learning outcomes. The challenge is to see that data gathered in surveys and analyses for identifying needs truly reflects the needs perceived by individual adults. If this challenge is not met, programs will be inappropriate or inefficient in terms of learners' needs. This is wasteful. However, once society reaches consensus as to the importance of a particular continuing education program, such as professional licensing programs, that program often becomes mandatory. In some cases, up-dating for continued competence in a rapidly changing environment is compulsory, but some educators of adults see these trends, characteristic of our credential-focused society, as infringements on the rights of adults to learn or not to learn. These educators feel adults are being compelled to learn and their privacy invaded in this context. Educators of adults need to be alert to this ethical dilemma and ensure that mandatory programs truly benefit the learner as well as reflect societal consensus. The costs and benefits of such programs should be made clear, and the choice to opt out included.

Many of the issues discussed above may be evident in other countries. Educators of adults worldwide are concerned with great and challenging changes. The mission of adult education around the world

will continue to be the empowerment of adults so that "they have more control over their present circumstances and future destinies" (Charters, 1987, p. 1), and all can learn from each other.

A prevailing sense of optimism is evident in this account of Adult Education: 21st Century. The alternative cannot even be contemplated.

References

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