

## **Feature Articles**

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# ***Cultural Diversity: Fracture Lines In Adult Education Practice***

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The field of practice in adult and continuing education is poised to undergo a tremendous metamorphosis which will be defined largely by the increase in culturally diverse populations in the United States. Given the demographic changes that have already occurred in society, the pools from which we hire teachers, program planners, counselors, and administrators will increasingly represent significant numbers of people of color. Also, the client populations that are served by our adult education agencies and organizations will be derived from populations that differ significantly from the mainstream in language usage and in culturally-derived beliefs and values. As the populations of people of color continue to increase, issues of race and ethnicity and the politics of inclusion/exclusion will become even more important to adult education than to the country as a whole. While these populations are not necessarily new to adult and continuing education, their increasing numbers will likely mandate a rethinking of how our organizations relate to them.

Historically, adult education organizations have taken either a "Golden Rule" perspective or an assimilationist stance toward the learning needs of people of color. Those who profess the Golden Rule approach argue that, practitioners should treat individuals with civility; it recognizes that the only important differences are individual differences and concludes that since everyone is special and different, everyone should be treated the same, regardless of their ethnicity or socioeconomic standing (Morrison, 1992). Those who profess the assimilationist approach call for shaping people to the dominant mainstream culture; people with divergent cultures must abandon their preferred styles, companions, dress, or values in order to gain access to either adult education programs or job positions (Morrison, 1992). People in both groups assume that people of color do not differ from the norm in regards to their learning goals, subject matter content needs, learning style preferences, barriers to learning, motivations for participation, financial status, and other concerns. Looking at these concerns from the Golden Rule perspective creates an illusion of "color

blindness” in the educator, prompting him or her to ignore prejudice and systematic oppression as barriers to participation; the assumption is that individual responsibility and morality are essential ingredients to diversity. Approaching diversity from an assimilationist perspective is equally problematic for the educator because from this perspective people of color are forced to reject the culture of their ethnic heritage and to accept a dominant culture that might be perceived to be a threat to their cultural identity. The policies and practices of adult education organizations that have evolved from these two perspectives may account in part for the dismal level of participation in adult and continuing education programs by people of color.

In 1986 people of color made up only 26.3% of school noncompleters, yet in 1988-89 they accounted for 60.8% (Martin, 1990). In the area of workplace training, people of color tend to be tremendously under-represented. In 1987 African-American adults constituted 9.5% of the workforce, but received only 5.1% of formal workplace training. Hispanics constituted 5.5% of the workforce, but received only 2.7% of the training (Carnevale, 1989). Findings from other studies (Hill, 1987) document the under-representation of people of color in other areas of adult education practice: extension, continuing higher education, enrichment education, continuing professional education, and others. Adult literacy is the only area within the field of adult education practice in which people of color are over-represented.

There are numerous hypotheses and theories which could explain both the conspicuous participation of people of color in adult literacy education and their paucity of participation in other areas of adult education practice. To explain some of the factors that I believe account for the lack of participation and how these may be changing, I will present six “fracture lines” that I believe are unfreezing some of the dominant socio-economic conditions and underlying assumptions of practitioners that have in the past inhibited the participation of people of color in adult education programs.

### **1. Promotion of Schooling in the Workplace**

Market-oriented programming demands an acute focus on delivering services to those populations with access to both the information and monetary resources to identify and acquire adult education services. This focus has resulted from a major socioeconomic trend in which parent

agencies have reduced their financial support to continuing education programs (Matkin, 1985). The net effect is a type of elitism in continuing education; people of color, who tend to be among the information and resource poor, are systematically excluded from participation. President Clinton proposes that every company with more than 50 employees would have to spend 1.5% of its payroll on training a skilled workforce (Dentzer, 1992). Increasing the funds available for workers suggests a countervailing trend to market-oriented adult education programming which could result in increased funding for the education of resource-poor working adults.

## **2. Stigma Transference vs. Career Enhancement**

As an Assistant Professor at a predominantly white university, I was personally advised by well-meaning African-American professors that in order to obtain tenure at my university I should avoid conducting research on African-Americans or publishing in journals that focus on their educational needs and interests. Both non-minorities and many people of color who are adult education professionals fear that the devaluation associated with the "stigma" of poor people of color will limit their career options. Although Ervin Goffman's (1963) seminal text, *Stigma*, suggests that stigma transference is a common occurrence among non-stigmatized others who become associated with stigmatized groups in our society, there is evidence that such a stigma may serve as a mark of distinction and advance careers rather than limit them. For example, Myles Horton's reputation as a compassionate advocate for the impoverished was enhanced by his significant involvement with the oppressed from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

## **3. Challenges to Ethnic Type-casting**

Both Darkenwald (1975) and Podeschi (1990) argue that people of color should teach their own. They suggest that potential conflicts in teaching and learning caused by contrasting cultural patterns will be diminished if the instructors are from the same cultural backgrounds as the students. Podeschi makes a compelling case for this argument in his discussion of educational programs for Hmong adults. Both authors capture the substance of the assumption that non-minorities cannot (and perhaps should not) design and teach in programs in which significant numbers of people of color are expected to enroll. However, in a field in which people of color

are tremendously under-represented among practitioners, this argument is tantamount to professional neglect. I believe that if programmers and instructors are careful to recognize and respect the cultural values and perspectives of the people of color served in their programs, then instructor race (or ethnicity) should be of no consequence. From an ethical perspective, to charge all professional people of color with the role of "minority educator" is equivalent to "type casting," which is an unethical limitation of their professional options.

#### **4. Cultural Assimilation vs. Cultural Diversity**

The "melting-pot" theory, that there is really only one mainstream culture and people of color must adjust to that culture to be socioeconomically successful, is largely a false hypothesis held by assimilationists who do not yet recognize or appreciate the magnitude of the changes gripping this country. As people of color become more numerous, they can be expected to resist giving up their defining values and, in fact, to insist that their values be accepted as equal to those of others in society. As a result, various social institutions like elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, businesses, and others are attempting to prepare both their existing staffs and clients for major changes in the structures and cultures of their organizations. For example, many schools are seeking to implement multicultural curricula for students and workshops for teachers and administrators. By providing leadership in such efforts, adult education practitioners help both themselves and others to identify and value the defining attributes of people of color.

#### **5. Renunciation of Hopeless Attitudes toward Inner-City Problems**

The 1992 Los Angeles Riots provided a gauge for measuring the intensity and depth of the socioeconomic problems like poverty, single parenthood, unemployment, drug abuse, and high dropout rates experienced by inner-city people of color. These brutal social problems are no longer being viewed as impervious to effective adult education programming. As the new Clinton presidency takes shape, hopes run high for an administration that will provide the funding to rebuild the inner cities. Through the development of interdisciplinary programs that promote job training and education, and by fostering collaborative efforts among diverse agencies

to implement programs, adult education practitioners can play a vital role in this resurgence.

### **6. Diminishing Belief in “Instrumental Individualism”**

Those who believe in the theory of instrumental individualism argue that the individual who is intelligent and works hard will always obtain high levels of formal education, obtain equitable employment, and successfully find his or her way to needed adult and continuing education programs. Those who espouse this philosophy ignore other factors, such as stigmatization, economic conditions, and opportunity structures, that contribute to the economic and educational success (or failure) of individuals.

Interdisciplinary groups of professionals and other citizens who are concerned about the negative effects of instrumental individualism have begun to organize into a national “communitarian” movement. At the forefront of this movement is the not-for-profit Center for Policy Research, Inc. On January 10, 1991, the center launched a new journal, *The Responsive Community*, as a means to promote communication and contact between those interested in restoring commitment to a sense of community as a defining social value. Those in the movement seek to restore commitments to shared values and to encourage people to act ethically and civilly without relying on coercion. Progress is defined via the changes that occur in both the habits of the heart and mindsets of the public, and the public policies of our national government.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural diversity in adult education is a conspicuous phenomenon that no one wants to acknowledge publically. Adult education practitioners can no longer remain silent on this issue. As the fracture lines above suggest, however, the practice paradigm in adult education is evolving and adult education practitioners will play a substantial role in directing its evolution.

Making a commitment to meaningful diversity involves sharing control with people who are “different.” It also involves considerable risks, including emotional pain, political vulnerability, and personal alienation. However, a more equitable, compassionate, and hopeful society is worth those risks. We should support diversity not only because of a potential gain of market share but because, by helping people to value diversity, we advance the mission of human civilization.

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