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Places of Community for Adults

Metropolitan universities have a unique opportunity to contribute to the growth and development of adult learners if universities adapt their purpose, policies, and processes so as to be responsive to the needs of these students. The article summarizes a portion of the substantial body of research and theory that can help universities to adapt, and indicates some of the conclusions that can be drawn with regard to institutional characteristics.

Adults who enroll in a metropolitan university are simultaneously engaged in many ways with their city. Hence an institution fully committed to working with adult learners will not only provide a better education for these students but will also have an immediate impact on the community in which they live. However, the settings and methods conducive to adult learning differ from those appropriate to traditional younger students. A metropolitan university must adapt in several ways if it is to serve the educational needs of adults.

Most higher education institutions had their first encounter with adult students with the return of veterans in the 1940s. Few, however, made any special concessions or arrangements beyond setting up veterans' affairs offices and, in some instances, providing housing for married students. More recently, as enrollment of students in the traditional age bracket declined, colleges and universities took steps to attract adults as a stop-gap to fill emptying classrooms. However, most efforts were either aimed at helping older individuals to adapt to the ways of the institution, rather than changing the institution's ways of dealing with them, or consisted of adding on separate adult degree programs outside the institutional mainstream. Neither of these approaches is sufficient to serve the needs of adult learners.

Adult students enter the university with their own life histories and with interests and attitudes shaped by their experiences. The extent to which the academic program can tap this rich lode of experience and enable adults to make meaning of it through new learning determines the success of metropolitan universities in serving these students, and, thereby, their community.

A substantial body of research and theory exists which can assist in that task. Life cycle theories indicate successive phases in the ways in which individuals think of themselves and are motivated to pursue further education. Developmental stage theories describe intellectual growth and changes in the manner of learning. Experiential learning theories explore the learning process itself. These theories not only give faculty and administrators a framework for the design of a learning environment responsive to the nature of adult learners, but also help to define the very purpose and desired outcomes of the educational experience. New information about teaching and learning enables faculty members to present material in ways that dramatically affect learning outcomes. While each of these perspectives is valuable in and of itself, it is when they are used in concert that the most potent learning experiences can be provided for adult students and the impact of their university experience can be maximized.

Life Cycle Theory

Life cycle theory uses chronological age as a basis for describing and explaining predictable individual changes and responses to events and external relationships. Patricia Cross, in her seminal book, *Adults as Learners,* has utilized the work of a number of theorists to provide a synthesis of age-related marker events, psychic tasks, and attitudes that are helpful in observing periods of stability and transitions in the life cycle.

- From 18 to 22 years of age, individuals begin to separate from their families and become self-governing.
- From 23 to 28, they fashion an initial life structure, begin to think of themselves as grown up, and construct a dream or vision.
- From 29 to 34, they reevaluate their life structure, struggle to succeed, and project long-range goals.
- From 37 to 42, they face mortality, reappraise marriage and life work and discard dependent connections to spouse and mentor.
- From 45 to 55, they have increased feelings of adequacy and self-awareness, reestablish family ties, and enjoy their choices and life style.
- From 57 to 64, they accept and adjust to the aging process and become clearer about the dreams they still wish to attain.
- From 65 on, they experience increased acceptance of self, and disengage from many external relationships and ties.

Clearly, these descriptions are global and do not account for all of the variations in lifestyles and attitudes. However, an understanding of the modal developmental characteristics associated with age can be valuable in determining not only adult students' motivation for pursuing higher education, but also how the institution can best assist the adult student.

Developmental Stage Theory

Stage theories attempt to plot the progressions or changes in how people think as they experience and try to cope with the challenges of their lives. Each stage has particular intellectual tasks and ways of thinking to be mastered before a person can move to the next stage; however, and in life cycle theory, issues are not resolved "once and for all" and must be revisited as crises occur.

William Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development offers one description of the stages through which people move as their ways of thinking become more inner-directed and complete, and how the decision-making process is affected. It represents the way individuals process information and interpret the world outside of themselves. Each stage represents a qualitatively different way of thinking and a restructuring in the direction of increasing complexity.

As persons mature, they find their way of thinking increasingly inappropriate and at odds with their experience and the learning derived from it. The resulting disequilibrium and dissonance require a transition to the next stage. These transitions are important to the understanding of the developmental process. Writing in *The Modern American College,* Perry suggests that stages may be only resting points along the way and that development is all transition. The stages Perry proposes are: dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment.

In the first stage, *dualism,* truth and authority are so integrally linked that people assume that what is said is true simply because the source is authoritative. In their systematic search for authority, dualistic thinkers place little value on the opinions of their peers and, when presented with two opposing views, will ask, "Which one is correct?" They often have trouble accepting the professor's response that there is no fully agreed upon answer to that question. Movement from early dualism begins when students see that different authorities give different answers to the same questions.

In the early part of the next stage, *multiplicity,* people believe that the world of knowledge is divided into that which is known and that which is not known. As they come to experience more and more unanswered questions, they recognize diversity of opinions as legitimate. Because they lack the ability to discriminate between opinions as a function of context and particular circumstance, they are unable to make sound judgements as to which is better. Since there are so many legitimate ways to look at an issue, there is little concern for substantiating the one held. Students at this level frequently equate quality with the quantity of work done or the effort expended. Thus a ten-page paper should not receive an "A" while a fifteen-page paper earns a "C".

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In the latter part of multiplicity, learners become more independent, self-directed, and self-reflective; peers become credible sources of information; and the teacher is seen less as the final authority and more as a resource. Learners are able to examine events in their lives and to engage in "self-processing."

The move to *relativism* occurs as the locus of control shifts from external to internal, and the self assumes legitimacy in the learning process and in defining reality. While not egocentric, learners experience the self as at the center, dealing with a variety of issues, challenges, and problems. They recognize that while everything is relative it is not equally valid. Persons at this stage are able to consider the thinking of others, experience empathy, and thus understand them more fully.

The last stage is *commitment.* Individuals at this stage are characterized by an ability to deal with paradox, to make decisions in the absence of clear or complete information, and to tolerate ambiguity. They know that commitments do not actually settle things or make them easier, and may generate additional options and present new and difficult questions. Commitments often mean leaving behind parts of the self that are familiar and comfortable.

In the latter part of this stage, persons carry out multiple roles, accept meaningful decision-making opportunities, and engage in reflection about their activities and their lives and the meaning contained therein. They are willing to take on risks to their self-esteem in an effort to reach their full potential. Their ability to think contextually gradually expands to more areas, and they experience themselves as "in process."

While Perry's original work was done with traditional-age students, few of us have difficulty recognizing ourselves and our adult students in each of the categories. Even those who typically function at higher levels may revert to earlier ways of thinking as they enter an unfamiliar environment, and others may return to stages that worked for them in prior experiences with school. Perry suggests that intellectual growth in the adult years is possible if the proper stimulation is present in an appropriate environment.

The challenge comes in designing learning activities and environments that capitalize on learners' present stage and assist them in moving to greater levels of complexity. Students move from one position to the next as a result of confrontation with social and intellectual challenges they encounter or in a planned instructional program. However, faculty members may not be ready or able to teach with the epistemic flexibility characteristic of contextual relativism. How faculty members' level of development affects the design of courses and teaching strategies is important and suggests that professional development programs that address this topic should be included in a metropolitan university's response to adult students.

Both life cycle theory and developmental stage theory seem to stress a major point for metropolitan universities interested in serving adult learners:

that individuals recycle through earlier stages and ways of thinking when they encounter new, unfamiliar, or stressful situations. Growth and development do not occur in a linear, hierarchical pattern but rather in an upward spiral fashion, with retracing and relearning taking place as persons find themselves at odds with where they want to be.

Experiential Learning Theory

The work of David Kolb provides an understandable, useable framework for looking at and teaching and learning with adult students and designing activities that enable them to move to greater complexity in their thinking and behavior. He describes learning as a four-step process in which learners have immediate *concrete experience,* involving themselves fully in it, and then reflecting on the experience from different perspectives. From these *reflective observations,* learners engage in *abstract conceptualization* where they develop generalizations that help them integrate their observations into sound theories or principles. Finally, learners use these generalizations as guides to further action, or *active experimentation,* and try out what they have learned in new more complex situations. They then have further concrete experiences, and the cycle begins again, but this time the learner operates at a more complex level.

These four learning modes serve as a guide in the design of learning activities, providing an excellent way to utilize the experiences adults bring to the classroom.

- Prior experiences may be recalled, or activities may be designed that involve the learner in new experiences either physically or emotionally.
- Structured small group discussions, reflective papers, or journals provide opportunities to encourage students to reflect on their experiences by making connections with others' perspectives.
- New information presented through print or lectures engages learners in abstract conceptualization and provides the bases from which to develop hypotheses and principles.
- Trying out or applying these principles or theories in problem-solving situations completes the cycle with active experimentation.

While experiential learning theory holds great promise for professors working with adult students, it is also beneficial for students themselves. Most adult students have never had the opportunity to discuss or think about how they learn. Learning about their learning can be empowering for them as they come to understand not only their roles as learners in a metropolitan university setting but in their daily lives as well. They are thus encouraged to become life-long learners, to trust their own experience, to link knowing and doing, and to recognize that learning is the process by which growth and development occur.

The Response of Metropolitan Universities to Adult Students

How can the theoretical perspectives on life cycle, developmental theory, and experiential learning inform the metropolitan university's response to adult students? How can this knowledge be brought to bear on individual development as well as contribute to the collective well-being? Their purpose, their policies, and their practices must change if metropolitan universities are to engage and educate adults for civic and economic leadership in the twenty-first century. There must be a commitment to changing the institution and adapting it to adult learners rather than trying to change adults and force them into institutional structures designed for traditional-age students.

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Development programs that focus on life cycle, adult development theory, and experiential learning theory can help faculty and administrators to see themselves as adult learners and thus be more empathic in their understanding of their students as adult learners. Faculty members who are self-aware and deliberate about their own growth and development are more apt to be concerned about the growth and development of their students.

Parker Palmer in his book, *To Know as We Are Known,* suggests three characteristics of the institution that seem to respond to the theoretical perspectives presented and are especially critical if adult students are to learn and derive maximum value from metropolitan universities. The characteristics are: openness, boundaries, and hospitality.

The first, *openness,* speaks to the accessibility of the institution not only in admissions requirements and processes but in flexibility in scheduling. Provisions made for students in remedial and developmental studies, in recognition for prior learning and awarding credit where appropriate and in honoring work and life experiences in class, help to convey an atmosphere of openness. Accessibility of materials, not only in terms of physical availability, but also in terms of psychological accessibility in the sense that they are meaningful against the backdrop of experience the learners bring, is also essential to an open environment. It also speaks to acceptance of the students and a willingness to assist them in overcoming barriers such as fears that may be the result of previously unsuccessful or unpleasant encounters with formal education or fear of the unknown. A classroom that frees learners from excessive anxiety is necessary if learners are to experience achievement they find personally significant.

Openness also allows learners to be honest about their motivation for attending the university. Many may enter school for instrumental reasons. They seek technical skills and the credentialing that college matriculation brings. On a deeper level, however, they bring with them both the capacity

and a need to obtain some perspective on compelling questions of life, a more developmental motivation. Openness allows for the recognition of these questions as legitimate in the context of the life cycle and creates sufficient space for them to be addressed as well. An environment in which these instrumental and developmental motivations are complementary rather than dichotomous gives learners the space and support to maximize engagement with that environment.

While openness is essential for adult learning, Palmer suggests learning space needs *boundaries* that give it structure, shape, and a delineation of expectations. Adult learners, often fitting school work into already crowded lives, cannot afford to be surprised by last-minute changes in schedules and requirements. They need to know the rules because their time and resources are valuable. The institution has an obligation to insure timely and effective communication regarding registration and deadlines. Professors should be clear in conveying such information as changes in class location, times of meetings, and work expectations. The curriculum, the course syllabus, and the teacher all play a role in determining the form of the educational experience, along with counselors and advisers who help adult students set boundaries as they make realistic career and educational plans. Adult students, however, ought to have a role in managing their own learning, thereby encountering choice and experiencing autonomy. In becoming partners in their educational programs, they gain a better understanding of the higher education enterprise and a greater stake in its success.

Adult learners cannot afford to be surprised.

A third characteristic, *hospitality,* relates to the climate set by the institution, the creation of an arena in which students have a sense of being welcome and at ease. Hospitality implies a sense of caring for learners as opposed to impatience at what may appear to be ineptitude. In the recognition of experiences the learners bring, there is respect for their developmental stage and concern for the central tasks of their lives. It insures a response to a need on the part of adult learners to matter, to believe they are the object of someone's attention and that they are appreciated and cared about. Giving careful attention to all interactions with adult students helps them to see themselves as important and integral to the institution's purpose and function and may help keep them engaged in learning. Such an approach insures a safe environment in which there is time for reflection, which is essential if the often painful process of learning is to occur. Orientation courses that not only introduce the institution to the learner but address human development as an explicit part of the content help adult students to see themselves as having a legitimate place in the academy.

These three characteristics provide a framework with which to evaluate

an institution's effectiveness. How well do our universities measure up in providing an environment that makes our adult learners feel welcome? How successful are we at recognizing and utilizing the experiences they bring? Are we willing to change our role from that of authoritarian to partner with the learner in jointly defining the content and nature of learning? Are faculty and staff development programs in place that promote the centrality of the adult learner? These questions, while not exhaustive, should be addressed if we are serious about serving adults.

Suggested Readings

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