

How the Changes in Society Impacts the Educational Choices of Adult Learners

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize why education should be viewed as a means of opening up lucrative employment opportunities for a diverse population of adults that are seeking to transform themselves by obtaining an education and incorporating their past knowledge and experiences into new skill sets that would enable them to become productive employees in a changing society. “Two of the three purposes of adult education practice in the United States identified by Heaney (1996) are allied with maintaining this social structure: (1) bringing learners into conformity with mainstream roles and expectations and (2) developing the best and brightest and validating the privileges of this educated elite” (Heaney, 1996,

Many adults are facing the decision of continuing their education and facing the challenges that come with returning to the classroom. There are numerous programs offered by various colleges, universities and vocational or technology schools that are waiting to have the opportunity to enroll these students into their programs. The potential student has to determine what their area of study will be, then decide where they would like to go to obtain their education. Some adults prefer the route of vocational training to the route of a degree program, because vocational training is specific to their needs compared to a degree program that may not guarantee entry into the field of their interest.

When deciding which school to attend and what program to enter the question to ask would be; is the primary concern of this institutions educational programs centered around helping the individual learner become productive in society or is its primary concern about the profit margin?

“ A number of teachers noted that literacy education is increasingly becoming a commercial enterprise and that educational institutions are driven more by a technical view of adult literacy where learning outcomes are quantifiable and measurable. One literacy educator explained:

“We have to fight to keep the word education in our programs. So many programs are becoming ‘training’ nowadays. The administration keeps asking for key productivity indicators and this is particularly frustrating when you work in basic literacy”(Magro , 2002, p.6).

Have we truly gotten to the point where basic literacy, and individual thinking are not being nurtured? Has the capitalist approach of letting corporations define the skills that equip individuals to remain robots in order to maintain the status quo in mainstream America? Has educational institutions let corporate profits take the forefront over developing an education for individuals that provide skills to take on challenging roles, question issues and break down obstacles that were created by societies economic influences?

“Adult education at the end of this century is represented by both streams: market-driven, professionalized institutions that help individuals acquire the knowledge and skills needed to maintain the status quo, and those who envision a different order and consider the purpose of their educative work is to bring it about” ( Kerka, 1996).

The focus of education should be directed toward educating the individual learner on how to approach and alter the direction of society by actively getting involved in finding ways to bring about social, political, economical and cultural change.

“The dominant paradigm of adult education--adult development--is being challenged profoundly in the context of postmodernism, social fragmentation, and cultural erosion. Adult education's new role should emphasize the collective, collaborative, and social dimensions of adult learning in order to make a significant contribution to society” (Finger, 1995).

Finger emphasizes that adult education is surrounded by style developed in reaction to modernism, a broken society and the wearing away of cultural identity. Modernism did not allow individual thought or objectivity that went against the status quo, and stagnated the individual development and growth that derived from education.

“Any viable conception of adult education must not only make postmodern individuals better competitors in the global marketplace, but must also help them and the organizations they comprise to define themselves within a larger antipoetic web of relations”(Ostrom et.al, 2008).

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will discuss why education should primarily be concerned with helping individuals become productive citizens in society. I will attempt to provide the reader with reasons for the need of education, the role of the adult educator, how students participation in education can raise awareness of the ways social change has impacted the current and future work opportunity's that will affect career choices and the employability of adults in society.

#### **Primary Concern for the Need of Education**

Education is the attainment of knowledge and understanding, creating wisdom that can be applied to jobs, community and life issues.

Cafferalla (2002), states. “ Adult education is conducted for five primary purposes:

1. Encourage continuous growth and development of individuals
2. Assist people in responding to practical problems and issues of adult life .
3. Prepare people for current and future work opportunities.
4. Assist organizations in achieving desired results and to provide opportunities.
5. Examine community and societal issues and implement change for the common good. “

The primary need for attaining an education is due to the changes in society that affect the need to increase personal growth, retain jobs, competition and the need to communicate and develop relationships within a diverse workforce. Workers that have been in the workforce for years are seeing the affects of not having an education that will meet the needs of society. These employees are not waiting until layoffs or downsizing comes their way. Many individuals are taking control of their lives by acknowledging their weaknesses and taking steps to develop themselves.

“In this learning culture for all, individuals themselves will take responsibility for their own learning and its management throughout their lives, to support both individual and collective well-being and achievement. It will foster people's creativity, strengthen citizenship and contribute to economic success for the whole country as a whole, for business, for communities and for individuals and families. What is more, the developments of this learning culture will also help to challenge prejudice in all its forms, enhance tolerance and underpin the values of a civilized, pluralistic and inclusive society. In short,

it will reduce social exclusion and poverty, promote greater social cohesion, reduce social divisions and foster greater international understanding” (Armstrong, 2006, p.16).

Without an education or the development of skills individuals will place limits on furthering their personal and professional growth, the ability to understand and solve social problems, communicate with others and the capacity to compete in a highly skilled and diverse economic market.

### **Educators Role in Student Transformation**

The educator plays an important role in a learner’s education. Although the learner’s education is self-directed and is in a self-learning environment, the adult educators ability to engage with the student has a tremendous impact on the transformation of the student and his/her education.

Transformative learning should be the business of all adult educators the role of the facilitator who acts to guide rather than direct the learning process.

One teacher explained: “I’m there to guide people to help them look at themselves and their own discoveries. I consider myself a reformer only in the sense that I can help people find out where or what they want to reform. I can help learners articulate their experiences.” (Magro, 2002, p. 3).

The educator has the opportunity to nurture and strengthen the learning of a student by providing them with the fundamentals that would allow he/she to rediscover new ways in challenging societies hegemonic ways that would generate a society that has equal participation by all.

### **Adult Learners Class Participation**

Student participation in class discussions has the ability to influence others with ideas and opinions that may identify a different approach of resolving an issue or improving reasoning skills that become effective tools in the workplace environment.

The educator stimulates the learner’s intellect by assessing areas that are important to him/her. Needs assessment provides the educator with knowledge of the learner’s experiences and interest, therefore equipping him/her with the tools to guide the learning process.

The needs assessment also reaffirms to the student that the primary concern of the educator is to equip the individual learner with necessary skill sets that will challenge them as individual thinkers, and problem solvers. The emphasis of concern placed on the student’s education by the educator helps to increase class participation, his/her self-esteem and the ability to competitively challenge bureaucratic tendencies in the marketplace.

“The encroaching influence of the marketplace on education, there is a tendency to move towards providing learners with an environment that is tailored to suit their particular expressed needs, wants, and desires. After all, “happy” educational consumers need to be satisfied with their product”(Gouthro, 2006, p. 132)!

Class participation is heightened when the learner recognizes the interest that the adult educator has in promoting a cooperative and democratic self-directed group environment. “Dewey and other progressive educators, including adult educators Lindeman and Bergevin, gave their support to group activities as a means of promoting learning and preserving democratic ideals” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 131).

### **Societal Changes in Technology**

Society is changing rapidly and education has become a necessity to compete and function in this global age of technology. Corporations are requiring employees to develop and broaden their skills in areas of information-based technology that will allow companies to compete globally. The lack of educated citizens in the area of technology will weaken the chances of a company's ability to compete in the global financial market. Institutions of higher learning are creating curriculums that are focused on the needs of corporations to retrain their employees to stay abreast of global technological advances.

“ Strong versions of globalization argue that we have witnessed a qualitative transformation of capitalism beginning in the post-World War II era and accelerating in the last three decades. This transformation is the result of an explosion in information-based technology and automation that have pushed manufacturing and productive capital to the margins of capitalist relations. Today's economy is technology- and information- based, characterized most typically by the billions of dollars of financial capital that effortlessly and continuously circulate across the planet conflating space and time, creating a truly globalized economy”(Holst, 2006, p.174).

### **Conclusion**

The need for education is evident. The need for enough individuals with the skill sets that are necessary to be productive in society is also clearly evident. There are numerous for profit universities, colleges, and vocational training schools popping up all over the place. There are online classes that are available through public and private universities that have been around for decades getting into the virtual education arena.

Competition and the need for profit has had a direct impact on the increasing number of people that are out of work. The increased changes in technology have had a direct impact on the need for the adult population to make new career choices. Griffin points out, “while we may have an individual-focused ideology, in today's world the state and business and industry play the major role in determining the ultimate shape of much adult learning”(Griffin, 1987, p. 273).

In my paper I identified various changes in society that attributes to the increased need of learning and teaching of adults. It was also identified how society and technology has changed to the point that the need for education seems to be geared toward profit and competition that impacts the values and career choices of adult learners.

In my opinion if this trend of corporations deciding the type of learning and teaching is necessary for employment continues the ability to make career choices will become an issue for a diverse adult population. If the livelihood of the adult population were the priority concern in education, there would be a transformation in society that would create entrepreneurs, and individuals that are capable of addressing social concerns and challenging the capitalist status quo.

From an economic position, writes Beatty, “ education is a commodity possessed by individuals; from a political perspective, educated individuals will ultimately form an educated citizenry for an improved society” (Beatty, 1992, p.22).

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