

Malcolm Knowles Awardee 2023, the Community Learning and Service Partnership (CLASP): Artificial Intelligence and Human Perspectives on Our Story

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Abstract: The Community Learning and Service Partnership (CLASP) being named the recipient of the Malcolm Knowles Award prompts retrospection and raises the question of what to present at the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) conference. What is the overarching narrative of CLASP? Given the international and intergenerational nature of the program, anecdotes abound—stories of transformation, rich relationships, and shared achievements; but what is the “metastory”? An unfinished, in-house film made years ago wherein program participants and observers spoke freely on camera may serve. From a detached perspective, we turn to artificial intelligence in the form of a qualitative data analytics program. This paper reports the results of that media analysis and conference attendees’ reactions to the film.

Keywords: learning partnerships, undergraduate andragogues, media analysis, qualitative data analytics, artificial intelligence

Author’s Note

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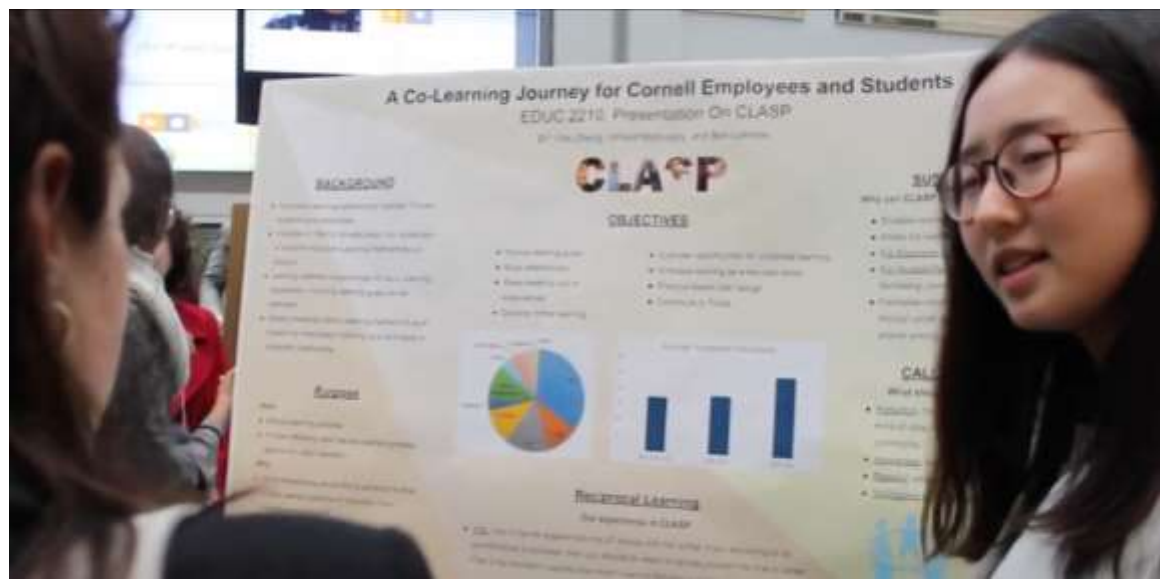
Background

The undergraduate minor in education is quite popular at Cornell, a university now without an education department. Admissions staff tell us they receive many inquiries about the education minor from potential students considering Cornell University. I (Raymer) lead the minor’s andragogy curriculum and direct the Community Learning and Service Partnership (CLASP) adult learning program.

The CLASP team matches campus staff members, primarily UAW Local 2300 service employees, with students enrolled in our adult learning courses. This unique partnership pairs one student with one employee, focusing on the employee’s learning goal. Students utilize their knowledge of andragogical practices to mentor adult learners, while employees gain a supportive colleague to help them pursue their educational goals, usually of their choosing. Through these partnerships, students learn from the wisdom and experience of adults, and employees gain a dedicated mentor and ally. Both partners grow individually and together, gaining new perspectives on the campus community and the world at large. Participating in CLASP significantly changes knowledge, confidence, life circumstances, and career paths for both employees and students. As many Cornell students go on to influential positions after graduation, it is vital that their current and future decision-making is informed by an understanding and appreciation of the lives and experiences of those who are often underrepresented. Since our university does not have an education major, students from all disciplines and fields are drawn to

our andragogy courses, and our diverse class composition affords excellent opportunities to apply adult learning principles and practices in varied contexts and settings. This provides many avenues for students to discover the relevance and elegant utility of andragogy for relational learning and humane education. In this paper, we invite others' perspectives, both AI and human, on one homegrown media project to discover what it conveys about the program and learn what it does not impart.

Figure 1
 CLASP Student Learning Partner Presenting Poster at Engaged Learning Festival (screenshot)



Reciprocal relationships are the heart of CLASP. Many participating adults are first- or second-generation immigrants, and many Cornell students in education courses are international students. While most of our andragogy courses are offered at the undergraduate level, we also welcome graduate students and staff members on a space-available basis. For adults, our primary commitment is to service employees, yet we also accept applications from professionals and faculty adult learners, as well as adults from the local community. In addition to English language acquisition, the most commonly requested areas of study among CLASP participants include computer skills, career development, preparation for vocational certifications, and non-English language study, such as American Sign Language. We have a diverse range of adult and international learners engaged in the student-employee partnerships. Therefore, our academic courses incorporate soft skills, intercultural communication, and relational learning. For CLASP employees/adults, we offer optional orientations to adult learning to provide them with some of the same material the students study. This is a first step to setting the tone for a learning environment of mutual respect and co-learning between students and adults.

In addition to myself (Raymer), the CLASP team includes two part-time colleagues: SE, the program liaison, and BK, the program manager. One of SE's primary responsibilities is to pair employees and students. SE also teaches a course for students interested in partnering with adults wanting to gain English language proficiency, *Adult language learners and marginalization: Applied teaching methods for empowerment*. I (Raymer) teach three courses: a) *Introduction to adult learning*; b) *Design and facilitation of learning for development*; and one graduate course, c) *Lifelong learning, just sustainability and learning cities/localities*.

Additionally, both instructors periodically offer special topic courses. For each student enrolled in our andragogical courses, the fieldwork consists of serving as an educational mentor to an adult learner.

Approach

What to present at AAACE in a short session to communicate a sense of the human side of relational learning? CLASP has a video, an in-house production created by former CLASP-ian Dave Nelson, with students, adult learners, union leaders, and employee managers. I contacted Nelson, now a Resiliency Coordinator at Biddeford High School in Maine, to see what he remembered about making the film. Nelson replied:

One of the things that has stuck with me, and that I tried to convey in the video, is the element of mutual learning that Professor Raymer stresses in her classes. The program is not about college students teaching service workers—it's about students and employees coming together to learn from each other. I found everyone I filmed had either absorbed this idea from Professor Raymer or realized it on their own through their learning partnerships. What surprised me most in interviewing both students and employees, however, was the *emotional impact* of CLASP. I remember one employee saying that his learning partner was like a son to him, and others met beyond their scheduled hours and continued meetings after the course ended. For many, the learning partnerships gave them a sense of empowerment, both from the learning and the personal connections. For everyone I spoke with, including supervisors of the employees, the experience was overwhelmingly positive. (Nelson, D., personal communication, Oct. 23. 2023)

Before showing the film to colleagues at AAACE, we wanted to gain a third party's perspective on the film, as we felt too close to the program portrayed to perceive the picture clearly. We considered the possibility of using artificial intelligence (AI) tools. After researching several AI utilities, we identified one for which we could find no reports of the problems commonly associated with AI, such as bias and 'hallucinations'—i.e., inventing content (Hatem et al., 2023; Jordan, 2019; Ntoutsis et al., 2020; Tsamados et al., 2022). In fact, very little has been written about the qualitative data analytics program Ailyze (<https://www.ailyze.com>); we learned of it through colleagues in evaluation who lauded the tool. The free version, Ailyze Lite, offers different options for summation, content analysis, question application, synopsis, and thematic analysis, while the professional version additionally offers outcome harvesting and comparative qualitative analysis. We opted for the free version and ran two types of analysis.

A short introductory video about the program is available on the CLASP website: <https://cals.cornell.edu/global-development/our-work/our-initiatives/community-learning-and-service-partnership>. This film, also made by Nelson, is in a finished form and runs just under five minutes. Another extended version is not quite as polished, and no changes have been made since Nelson left for Maine five years ago. As we would like to use this media as the basis for a more comprehensive introduction to the program, it is this version that we selected for analysis.

Results

The unfinished film was screened at the AAACE annual conference held in Lexington, KY, in 2023.

Those speaking in the film included program participants and observers in four roles:

1. **Administrators/Managers**—people in positions to encourage employees to take part in CLASP.
2. **Employees/Adult Learners**—Primarily unionized members in the services fields of building care, dining, and hospitality.
3. **Union Leaders**—Staff members of UAW Local 2300, the union of Cornell service workers, along with other members in local libraries, transportation, and water plants.
4. **Students** (and others taking andragogical courses at Cornell)—While we refer to everyone in CLASP-affiliated courses as “students,” some of the people who populate our academic courses are graduate students, staff members, and faculty colleagues.

Figure 2

Adult Learning Partner, Human Resources Leader, UAW Leader, Student Learning Partner (screenshot)



The transcript of the film was uploaded into Allyze. The first analysis prompt given to Allyze was to “summarize the perspectives of each group of participants.” Quoting the Allyze output, here are the results:

Group 1, consisting of administrators Steve, Murray, and Tony, expressed their positive views on the CLASP program. They highlight the benefits of the program for both staff and students. Supervisor Murray emphasizes the passion and impact that the program has

on both staff and students. Supervisor Tony believes that the program helps people feel better about themselves and allows them to apply their potential. Cornell Human Resources Steve appreciates the dedication and enthusiasm that participants bring to the program.

Group 2, represented by UAW leaders Jason and Chris, also expressed their support for the CLASP program. They emphasize the importance of the program for individuals and the broader Cornell community. UAW Local 2300 Leader Jason believes that the program benefits everyone involved, including Cornell and the students. Chris highlights the program's role in breaking systemic oppression and enabling students to become allies.

Group 3, comprising employees Don, Daniel, Alita, Donna, Leila, and Travis, share their personal experiences and the positive impact of the CLASP program on their learning and personal growth. Employee Don reflects on the humbling experience of being taught by a younger student and the value of continuous learning. Employee Alita initially felt hesitant but found the program encouraging and has since inspired her coworkers to participate. Employee Donna expresses her enthusiasm for learning and how the program has helped her acquire new skills. Employee Leila discusses her struggles with traditional learning methods and how the CLASP program provided a more effective approach.

Group 4, represented by students Sidney, Asher, Ellery, Jules, Kiana, Alicia, Michèle, Saaj, Chase, and Sebastian, highlight the transformative experiences they had through the CLASP program. They emphasize the personal connections and friendships formed with their learning partners. The students appreciate the opportunity to learn from each other and gain insights into different walks of life. They also mention the importance of tailoring lessons to their learning partners' interests and needs. The students express gratitude for the program's impact on their personal and academic growth. (Allyze, personal communication, October 21, 2023)

Next, the transcript was uploaded again into Allyze and with the instruction to conduct a thematic analysis. This time Allyze identified eight prominent themes: 1) motivation; 2) engagement; 3) language learning and cultural exchange; 4) personal growth and confidence building; 5) teaching and learning strategies; 6) mutual learning and personal connection; 7) impact and benefits; and 8) lifelong learning. In short, a machine data analytics tool, one so far without reports of the problems often associated with artificial intelligence tools, rendered what a human might consider to be confirmation of the program's aims. How would the expert educators attending the AAACE conference respond to the film?

Discussion

The goal of showing the longer film was not only to inform colleagues about the program but also, with the thought of possibly refining and polishing the video to elicit their constructive feedback. In particular, we wanted to know: 1) their impressions of the program; 2) whether they saw any instance of portraying the adult learners in a patronizing manner, and 3) did they find any elements of the film confusing, unclear, or missing?

The AAACE members who viewed the film at the 2023 annual conference in Lexington were forthcoming and animated. Regarding reactions to the program, one aspect that seemed to make quite an impression was that the student learning partners were primarily undergraduates and, given that there is no such degree here, none were education majors. One person stated that she could imagine graduate students serving as educational mentors of adults, but she was quite surprised to hear undergraduates speaking so articulately about adult learning. A number of people remarked on the high regard students and employee learning partners had for one another, as well as the enthusiastic support of CLASP of both union leaders and employee managers. One person noted that it was great to see the university really promoting a culture of learning for everyone on campus. Regarding whether or not any of the adult learners were portrayed in a disrespectful manner, no one at the screening saw any suggestion of condescension.

With respect to what was missing, unclear, or confusing, the participants offered great, specific, and constructive feedback. A few people said the film needed to introduce and describe the learning partnerships earlier; one added that she did not figure out what we meant by the term until halfway through the movie. Another said that we needed to add brief descriptions of the courses affiliated with CLASP. Someone suggested adding a little of the history of the program, its evolution, and its somewhat unusual harmonic stakeholder composition of union, human resources, and academics. Another person remarked on the variety of majors of the undergraduate students involved in CLASP, and all affirmed that the program was an apt recipient of the Malcolm Knowles Award for andragogical process.

With adult education's emphasis on values such as social justice, community, and respect for individuals, some may be a bit wary of artificial intelligence (Tyson & Kikuchi, 2023). Yet, as we see our students employing AI in undeniably creative ways with their adult learners, perhaps the time has come for educators to give it a try (Yang et al., 2021). At least as employed in this case, it seems artificial and human intelligence would agree on the determination Allyze reached in concluding its' media analysis of the film:

In summary, the administrators, UAW leaders, employees, and students all express positive perspectives on the CLASP program. They highlight the program's benefits in terms of personal growth, learning, and building connections within the Cornell community. The program is seen as a valuable opportunity for both staff and students to learn from each other and develop new skills (Allyze, personal communication, October 21, 2023).

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