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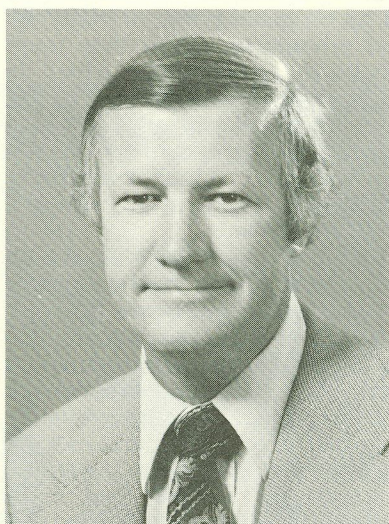
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Adult education requires support from traditional education and administrators.

Adult education revisited

by Charles Oaklief



Charles Oaklief earned his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. from the Ohio State University. Dr. Oaklief has extensive experience in university teaching, community administration and program development. He is currently as Associate Professor in Adult Education at Kansas State University. His research interests include appraisal of adult and continuing education in community colleges.

Adult education, both as a field of practice, and as an area of professional study in graduate education has emerged, somewhat apprehensively, into the limelight of higher education. In this respect, adult education is much more than just a delivery system for traditional "youth oriented" approaches to education and the teaching of adult learners. Considering the stand point of the institution, graduate studies in adult education can play a major role in providing the type of learning environment in our colleges of education which can better meet the needs of "new audiences" such as those individuals seeking competencies for returning to the world of work,—women, older Americans and various special interest groups from a variety of cultural, economic, and organizational settings.

In this respect, the professional field of adult education has much to offer toward the organization and development of colleges and departments of life-long learning where emphasis can be placed on development of learning activities and experiences from birth to death. The transition to life-long learning concepts in our educational delivery systems, by the very nature of the concept itself, will require inclusion and building upon current and traditional organizational entities such as elementary, secondary, post-secondary, adult education, community school and vocational-technical education. Such a transition must not preclude those programs and institutions which now provide necessary services and linkages between educational organizations and society in general.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of adult education to the life-long learning movement will be in the following areas:

1. The philosophy and emphasis of adult education which prepares the "learner" to more successfully cope with the larger problems of life.
2. The emphasis on developmental tasks of adult life.
3. The consideration of life experiences in the learning environment of adult students.
4. The projection of the role for teachers of adults as that of a resource person, consultant and advisor rather than the traditional role of information provider. This is not to promote the idea that adult educators are informational "cop-outs", but to develop the premise that effective adult education is at best the product of the students' personal involvement—shared experiences, enlightened self-leadership, and full participation in designing, conducting and evaluating learning experiences.

Even with the current emphasis of educational institutions, industry and government on adult and continuing education, little progress has been made toward resolving the problems associated with or leading to a standardized definition of adult education. Although this represents an academic dilemma for many graduate students, it should not be considered a burden at this point for the practitioner or in the development of professional areas of adult education. Professionals and practitioners in an academic discipline and movement so well established and significant to the over-all development of society as is adult education, should not be "saddled" with narrow perspectives of definition but should consider as a benefit, the synergistic effects of a changing and developing program of graduate studies, a strong academic and service relationship with supporting discipline such as sociology, psychology, anthropology and of course at the same level, a vital and efficient delivery system based on sound principles of productivity and business management. Such a program usually defies simplistic definition.

According to recent surveys, most lay persons associate the term adult education with the remedial function; that of providing high school equivalency through Adult Basic Education (ABE) which is credentialed through General Education Development (GED) testing programs. This segment of the adult education program has also been referred to as fundamental and literacy education for mature and foreign-born adults. This program effort currently boast more than 1.3 million adult students in the United States and represents the larger part of most State Department of Education efforts in the area of adult education. Current national funding for the ABE program is reported to be \$67.5 million.

The larger segment of adult education, however, consists of various learning efforts sponsored by a myriad of organizations and is offered through a variety of programs including liberal adult education, community development, education for aging, adult-occupational education, continuing education and adult recreational education, to name a few. Institutional programs offering a large segment of the organized learning experiences for adults are through the Cooperative Extension Service, military organizations, libraries, museums, art institutes, proprietary schools, religious institutions, labor unions, business organizations, health agencies and government. Perhaps the largest single group of adult learners would be the individual adult as a self-direct learner. Research identifies each U.S. adult citizen as initiating eight different and distinct learning experiences per year.

The considerable lack of homogeneity among the adult student population also contributes to the difficulty of singularly defining adult education. Adult learners differ

considerably in their cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds, chronological age, life experiences, motivation and orientation to learning and time perspective. They also usually have an inclination for immediacy of application of learning incurred through adult learning experiences.

The subject matter and curriculum varies greatly across the many programs of adult education and as offered by various types of organizations to meet a broad variety of individual, small group, or large group needs. Considering the diffusion of subject areas, great diversity of adult education audiences and numerous types and sizes of agencies providing adult education, it is imperative for those in higher adult education to continually identify and synthesize appropriate ways for adult educators to interface with the learning and service needs of adult learner audiences. In this respect, the major concern and emphasis must be on making the interface appropriate, meaningful and productive, rather than upon building traditional educational relationships which in terms of the educational environment tend to be formal and judgmental rather than informal and supportive; in terms of educational program plans tend to be teacher initiated and are content oriented rather than being established through mutual participation and conducted as a readiness oriented learning project.

In brief, the lay or occasional practitioner as well as professional adult leaders, and graduate level educators have a "critical path" to follow which leads over the "cutting edge" of both traditional and innovative educational programing. This path is the process of adult education which can bring new and revitalized learning experiences to millions of adult learners in our nations educational institutions, industries, and public or private organizations.

Adult education programs can be the step toward institutional education or individual learning that really "makes a difference". Regardless of its definition or the fact that it may be supportive of other functions or purposes, adult education must be of the highest quality in both process and product.

The implications for our graduate studies in professional adult education are dynamic and far-reaching. Growing into the life-long learning aura, however, will require a considerable measure of risk on the part of both practitioner and graduate adult-educators. Generally, adult educators have proven their commitment to taking the necessary risks required in building appropriate adult and life-long learning environments. Existing traditional educational structures and especially the administrative and educational delivery systems must provide an equal measure of support and trust to those functioning as leaders, teachers, and administrators of adults.