

## ADULT EDUCATION

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Adult Education is growing with vigor and continues to thrive in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "The mission of Adult Education is to assist adults to acquire further control of their current circumstances and their future destinies. Control enables adults to participate more intelligently and responsibly in the political, working, social, cultural, family and religious environments of society, and to improve the quality of their lives."<sup>1</sup> The mission of Adult Education may be considered universal both conceptually and geographically. The practice of Adult Education is influenced by such diverse factors as nationalism, culture, environment and economics and thus becomes a complex phenomenon. Education for adults is developed and made acceptable by educators of adults to meet the learning needs of adults, by developing learning opportunities commonly called programs.

Over the centuries the practice of Adult Education has shifted due to socialized and technological changes including the invention of the printing press, the Industrial Revolution, the geometric increase of knowledge, technological development, globalization and further commitment to the recognition and acceptance of Adult Education as an integral part of life. While the practice of Adult Education may be changing rapidly, the mission, policy and principles have changed more slowly because there are only gradual shifts in the values and philosophy of adults.

Adult Education embraces all aspects of the education of adults including policy, practice and research. It may be used synonymously for such terms as continuing

education, training, androgogy, human resource development, popular education, inservice education, extension and outreach education. Educators of adults may, however, attribute some slightly different meaning to each of these apparent synonyms for Adult Education. The users of each term may be adhering to the same policies, but the resulting practice may be somewhat different due to such factors as the focus of the sponsoring agency, the nature and sources of the knowledge base, and the needs of the learners.

Education including the education of adults is as old as human existence. One way to view the evolution of education of which Adult Education is an integral part is to see it as passing through three stages—traditional, institutional and knowledge-based. We are currently in the transition between stages two and three.

“The first stage is called the traditional stage. In the traditional stage, which extended over many centuries, all the components of the society were educative—families, occupations, religious, social and cultural activities—the entire community. Adult Education was indigenous to the people and society. There were no or very few special institutions for the education of most people.

The second stage might be called the institutional stage. A special institution for educating young people was established—the school—and gradually most education functions were stripped from the other components of society and transferred to the school. Thus schooling became equated with education and education with schooling. In this stage many institutions other than schools including libraries, museums, religious organizations and businesses became involved in education, particularly for adults.

The third stage of education into which the work is now moving might be called the knowledge-based stage. This stage does not consider knowledge as a product but knowledge as the basis for learning. Knowledge is all encompassing to all aspects of learning and it behooves all adults to continue to learn in areas and at levels appropriate for them. As in the traditional stage, all the components of society are again considered to be educative.<sup>2</sup>

The continuing need for adult learning is also related to changes taking place in government, civil society, careers, vocations, political areas and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs). The knowledge base in all of these areas is increasing at an accelerating rate. Accordingly it becomes necessary to develop the ability to decide what knowledge is valid and should be learned and what knowledge becomes obsolete and should be forgotten.

Adult Education functions in the political, cultural, religious and economic context of any given time. Some of the dramatic events in the United States (after the Revolutionary War) that shaped Adult Education) were the Civil War, telegraph, telephone, railroads, air transportation, World War I, the depression of 1929-39, World War II, the birth of the United Nations, Civil Rights and developments in space.

Adult Education has not only been able to adapt in the context of such change but also to be proactive in providing opportunities for adults to learn to cope with changes and to use change to the advantage of citizens and society.

Learning is a lifelong process that encompasses learning at all ages and stages of human development. It is sometimes convenient to consider life in stages on a continuum such as infant, child, youth and adult. In terms of years, adulthood is the longest stage and may be divided into subclasses such as career, middle age, retired and old age. Because of the longer span of years, this stage has the greatest potential for learning. Learning by adults may also be classified in terms of sponsors such as military, business and a host of other groups.

Paralleling, the recognition of the need of education for adults is the increasing length of the life span. It gives adults extended time and thus provides more opportunities for learning. In many cases recently, it provides a longer work life.

When schools and other educational institutions were established in the United States, they were primarily focused on children and youth with the unwritten understanding that they would receive enough education to last for a lifetime.

It was gradually recognized that the education of adults was increasingly perceived as not only important but also necessary. The gap between the opportunities to learn by adults and by children is increasing in favor of adults.

For an adult to learn there must be learning opportunities commonly called programs available and accessible in which to react or participate. Programs are ordinarily developed by assessing needs, describing objectives, selecting the appropriate knowledge, selecting methods and developing other elements of a delivery system as well as assessing learning.

The above elements are of course subject to continuing change. Recently there have been major developments in electronics, most recently in computers and the Internet, which complement existing means and methods for learning which enable adults to have additional ways to access knowledge that may be more appropriate to their style of learning. These new methods expand the ways for learning and coupled with new knowledge, increase the permutations and combinations for learning opportunities. The learner must accept over a lifetime those that are most appropriate for his or her learning needs. They also facilitate distance education. Individuals may prefer a particular method for accessing knowledge and may welcome the new opportunities on site for online learning. It may also increase their motivation to learn. The use of new technology raises additional questions about such issues as copyright, privacy and finances as well as access and availability.

A delivery system for Adult Education requires institutions, organizations or groups to implement the purposes, objectives or policies set by government and other bodies. Almost every agency of government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provides learning opportunities not only for their employees, volunteers and constituents but also for adults who may be in other agencies. The broadening of concern for involvement in and the commitment to the education of adults is evident in the expansion in the number and types of agencies providing Adult Education so that almost all of them are involved in the education of adults. They "include business and industry, communications enterprises, galleries, museums, government agencies, international organizations, labor organizations, unions, military, postsecondary institutions, media outlets, religious bodies, schools, correctional facilities, special groups (elderly, handicapped, minorities, illiterates), sports and recreation organization, vocational and professional associations and voluntary or not for profit bodies. The concern for Adult Education is also worldwide and involves people from all segments of the socio-economic society."<sup>3</sup> A task of educators of adults is to continue to promote and encourage mainstreaming of adult learning into all agencies of society and into the lives of all adults.

The goal of Adult Education is learning. If there is no learning, Adult Education is of no avail. Learning is an individual activity. Learning takes place when an individual reacts to a potential learning situation. If the reaction is positive then learning takes place. If there is no reaction or if the reaction is negative, then there is no learning. Accordingly, learning is self-directed and self-controlled. Learning opportunities may be provided by educators of adults through agencies. Self-directed learners may select

State. Each State has developed a system that prescribes regulations on matters such as finances, curricula, certification of teachers and an array of other educational matters. These matters govern the state institutions but they also apply to some extent to private bodies and NGOs. In this way State governments regulate and thus coordinate selected areas of education within the States. Through cooperation and dissemination of information, the education systems in the States are, in many aspects, similar to each other. There is extensive cooperation and consultation but little coordination of Adult Education activities at any level of government or other areas of society.

The federal government in the United States does not have a designated role in the financing of Adult Education. However, it assumes a role, for example, by funding activities of various kinds such as Adult Basic Education that are optional for States to accept. In all such cases participating States must abide by the same regulations for the federal programs. Some grants in aid for Adult Education students are funded and paid directly to students after approval of applications initiated by individuals.

The financial support for Adult Education is very irregular because neither State governments nor the federal government are mandated to support it. Governments do provide some funds for designated projects available to adults under prescribed terms. In other cases, departments of government provide some Adult Education programs and other activities for their employees. Agencies such as corporations and the military provide considerable financial support for their clientele. The contributions of many NGOs to provide education for their clientele and other selected adults are substantial. In many cases, adults pay some fees for their education.

Considering that millions of adults are not learning sufficiently to function effectively as individuals or citizens, the support for Adult Education must at best be considered inadequate.

Rapidly changing developments in all areas of life require that adults must continue to learn in order to remain efficient and effective. Continuing and continuous learning throughout life is essential to further enhance the quality of life of adults, to facilitate an innovative economy and to develop further a democratic society in a global context. Education of adults must be accepted by government as a necessary function and, accordingly, should be financed by government, as is the education of children and youth, and not be a sporadic and uncoordinated effort of many agencies.

One of the hindrances to obtaining commitment to Adult Education is the lack of assessment of learning by adults. There is considerable evaluation of the conditions of adult learning but little assessment of actual learning by adults. The various aspects of the evaluation process itself need further examination. Part-time adult students enrolled in credit courses in colleges and universities are evaluated and given grades in conformance with the policies and practices for evaluation of full-time students. Adults in programs of many agencies are given certificates or other forms of recognition for attendance or some indication of performance. In other cases, certificates such as CEUs (Continuing Education Units) are awarded to adults if the program has specified characteristics. Some so-called diploma mills award degrees and other designations in return for little more than financial payments.

In general, evaluation of Adult Education in terms of performance outcomes or other standards requires further consideration by educators of adults. A cursory review of

topics at national and international conferences indicates little attention to evaluation. Further evaluation of Adult Education would give satisfaction and credibility to adults and it would also provide evidence to government sponsors and other funding bodies of the extent to which adults are learning by participation in Adult Education programs.

Education for all children and youth in kindergarten, elementary and high school has become the acceptable minimum mandatory standard known as K-8 (kindergarten through elementary school) and K-12 (kindergarten through grade 12). For some nations of the world, even the first stage of K-8 is not a reality. Recently more learning opportunities are being provided by community colleges, and on the Internet as well as by an array of other privately and publicly sponsored four-year colleges and other institutions as well as corporate bodies—some of which award degrees. In this way, the concept of K-12 is being extended to K-16 (kindergarten through 16 years of secondary/bachelor degree). K-Life may now be envisioned for all adults, while it may not be deemed as possible in the foreseeable future. It is, however, a goal that may be achievable in stages as suggested above. Even within stages, standards for schools, institutions and other agencies could be targets for accomplishment. To realize the goal of K-Life requires a commitment of government to K-Life. After the policy is established then funds and other resources must be committed to implement of the policy. It is not only necessary for lifelong learning to be mainstreamed further into society, it must be accepted as the responsibility of each individual to integrate learning into their life as a lifelong process.

The problem of motivation for continuing learning by adults remains a major concern. It is more of an issue than in K-16 where the recognized grades or levels of

learning are articulated and built into the system. The issue of motivation for continuing learning by adults becomes more evident when level 16 is not reached. Further consideration should be or is given to articulation and continuity between the learning and level where an individual leaves the institutionalized levels of K-8, K-12 or K-16 and enters the K-Life level. Attendance by adults in Adult Education is not likely to be made compulsory by law in the foreseeable future so additional initiatives must be made in the voluntary sector. Educators of adults must not only help facilitate the motivation of adults but also assist them to bridge the gap between somewhat structured K-8, K12-K12 level to a less structured K-Life stage. Adults must assume a more proactive role for their own learning.

Educators of adults are people who have accepted the role of enhancing the field of Adult Education. More specifically, by developing learning opportunities and arranging the many other aspects of education, they facilitate adult learning. Educators of adults may be paid employees or volunteers and they may even be unaware that, through their activities, they are engaged in the field of Adult Education. Thus, some do identify with the field and some do not and, moreover, others may not always recognize themselves as performing adult education roles. Educators of adults function in several roles including "administrators, supervisors, deans, directors, advisors, counselors, faculty and tutors, and librarians. They may also serve in a part-time role as community developers, community educators, research workers, consultants, policy makers, elected officials and board members of Adult Education agencies."<sup>4</sup> The expansion and diversity of Adult Education require a cadre of educators of adults who are capable of developing the field.

The practice of Adult Education is a complex enterprise with considerable ambiguity as it pursues its mission of "assisting adults to acquire further control of their current circumstances and their future destinies" within an increasingly diverse global society. The increasing commitment to and enthusiasm for Adult Education by both adults and society augurs well for the enhancement of adult learning, the field of Adult Education and the further improvement of the quality of life of all people worldwide.

#### END NOTES

This paper is a revision of the one presented at the Center for Leadership Development of Global Cooperation in Kiev, Ukraine, May 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> Charters, Alexander N. *A Primer of Adult Education. Surveys and Studies, Literacy, Adult Education and Rural Development Division, UNESCO, Paris, April 1987. ED-87/WS/10, 123 pgs.*

<sup>2</sup> Charters, Alexander N. *Some Perspectives on Lifelong Education.* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education, 1986) 15 pgs.

<sup>3</sup> Charters, Alexander N. *A Primer of Adult Education. Surveys and Studies, Literacy, Adult Education and Rural Development Division, UNESCO, Paris, April 1987. ED-87/WS/10, 123 pgs.*

<sup>4</sup> Charters, Alexander N. *A Primer of Adult Education. Surveys and Studies, Literacy, Adult Education and Rural Development Division, UNESCO, Paris, April 1987. ED-87/WS/10, 123 pgs.*