Chapter 109
Improving Workforce Education and Adult Learning:
New Concepts

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ABSTRACT

Workforce education and adult learning cannot and should not be separate. These two closely inter-related fields continue to produce a sustainable competitive advantage in a competitive and global 21st century workforce. This chapter highlights some of the major concepts used to improve workforce education and adult learning in the hope that future researchers can replicate and continue to generate new knowledge when change reshapes the nature of the adult learner's work. The authors have addressed existing and emerging concepts in these two fields, from a very different perspective than most articles of this nature, to assist in redefining workforce education and adult learning in the 21st century. It is hoped that everyone, including those in key leadership positions, will take a renewed interest in these vitally important fields and seek to leverage the respective theories, models, and frameworks to produce a more productive citizen of the world.

INTRODUCTION

The term *vocational education* immediately reminds one of adult learning simply due to the fact that practitioners of vocational education are adult learners engaged in lifelong learning and the

world of work. Adult education has been defined as "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults" (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 8). It is difficult and impractical, in most cases, for scholars and scholar-practitioners to disregard the fact that our adult lives, and learning, are intimately tied

to our work lives. Our career and our ability to "thrive and survive" are woven in a manner that allows very little room for separation. Relationships to family, colleagues, and friends, life values, interaction with others, socio-economic status, gender roles, work-life balance, beneficial solutions, intellectual renewal, general efficacy, and even spirituality are all closely tied to our view of both work and everyday life of the adult learner.

The prominent educator and philosopher John Dewey (1966) advocated that occupations be the vehicle of instruction at elementary and secondary levels; nevertheless, elementary and secondary school children have not yet entered the workforce to formally earn a living. Theories of project, performance, and service learning integrate many similar principles are widely accepted. However, these principles are not often directly tied directly from adult education to the practice of workplace learning in the classroom. Adult learners gain meaning through their involvement, employment, and interactions with workforce education. It is futile for scholars to separate vocational (workforce) education from adult education or vice versa (Parker, 2010).

Therefore, a simple conceptual argument would be that adults and their chosen occupations would be integrally connected – and should be connected at the elementary, secondary, postsecondary and lifelong levels. However, it is an often an ignored aspect of both formal and informal education. The fields of workforce education and adult learning are like conjoined twins; trying to separate one from the other would likely cause both to die. It is not surprising that most land-grant universities offer vocational education and adult learning programs in one department (Wang & King, 2007). Although some universities separate the two programs, they, more than likely, remain in one college where courses from one program serve the other program as well. The fact is that university courses in vocational education and adult learning share similar historical and philosophical foundations. We must build on this rich relationship and better study the overlapping theories, models and frameworks to implement richer learning and teaching methods for lifelong learners.

BACKGROUND

The disciples of Aristotle, Plato, and Confucius were adult learners, meaning that adult learning as a concept and practice preceded pedagogy, or the "the art and science of teaching children." According to its current definition, as long as a child has reached the age of 18, she is considered an adult and therefore an adult learner. However, it is not as simple as biologically defining an age of adulthood. The long accepted theoretical ideas of pedagogy, andragogy, and geragogy (older adult learning, coined in 1950s) provide a basic start but can be better described as a continuum of theory rather than standalone theoretical constructs to be studied separately. It is important that we recognize that adults are not a homogeneous group. People tend to become increasingly different as they age (Allen & Hart, 1998). Differences in education, experience, health, and experiences are so diverse that few generalizations are accurate (Caswell, 1994).

By certain standards in many societies, advances in workforce education technologies and adult learning can be used to determine how advanced or not. Western industrialized countries entered the Information Age after experiencing industrialization, which helped those countries move from an agricultural society. Today, in the United States, the number of farmers is less than 1% (Wang & King, 2007) of the general population. Had it not been for the technological advances in vocational/workforce education, more Americans would have remained farmers. When adult learners relied on simple tools made out of stone, wood, or metal, agricultural societies lasted from several hundred to several thousand years. As workforce technologies developed, adult learners enjoyed the benefits of the locomotive, sewing machine, telegraph,

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