Chapter 4
Web 2.0 and the Actualization of the Ideals of Adult Education

Marc G. Weinstein
Florida International University, USA

Tonette S. Rocco
Florida International University, USA

Maria S. Plakhotnik
Florida International University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how the emergent information ecosystem relates to assumptions about adult learners articulated in andragogy (Knowles, 1970, 1984) and adult education concepts. The chapter discusses the evolution of the information ecosystem and how its defining attributes relate to access, voluntary participation, self-direction, and learning webs. The new opportunities offered by this information ecosystem emerged in the same social and intellectual milieu as the foundational principles of adult education. Current developments in adult education indicate that new innovations in the use of interactive and communication technologies are emerging in a transformed information ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone with access to the World Wide Web now has a portal to a vast amount of information. This is a recent development as are the high rates of Internet usage, easy access to user-created content, and social computing. The explosion of new content on the World Wide Web, the ability of individuals to access and contribute to this content, and new interactive and communication technologies all constitute elements of a new in-

formation ecosystem. The term ecosystem is used to emphasize the importance of the multitude of interactions between individuals and communities in the information environment. In this chapter we discuss how the emergent information ecosystem relates to assumptions about adult learners articulated in andragogy (Knowles, 1970, 1984) and other adult education concepts. This chapter begins with an overview of adult education and core concepts as they relate to changes in the information ecosystem. In part two, the early era and subsequent evolution of the information ecosystem are discussed as are their defining

attributes: access, voluntary participation, self-direction, and learning webs. We note that the new opportunities offered by this information ecosystem are not accidental, but rather emerged in the same social and intellectual milieu as the foundational principles of adult education. In the final part of the chapter, the current use of new interactive communication technologies to promote adult education are examined.

BACKGROUND

Technology has assisted adults to escape conformity while providing tools to assist with learning and knowledge creation. Technological tools have included instruments to record information and ideas such as pen and paper, printing presses, computers, and Web 2.0. Knowles (1977) traces the use of adult education to apprenticeship programs, agricultural societies, and Benjamin Franklin's Junto. Apprenticeships were arrangements between a skilled craftsman and a novice where the novice learned by doing. The master and apprentice might be engaged with the latest technology in the carpentry or silversmith trades. Agricultural societies met to discuss innovations and technological advances in agriculture, while the Junto members read printed material that they discussed at meetings. Advances in technology around the printing press improved access to materials such as newspapers, pamphlets, and books. This technological advance increased communication and the dissemination of knowledge, which aided colonists when they declared and won independence and nurtured a nascent economy (Knowles, 1977; Isaacson, 2004). Technological advances foster communication between people, dissemination of ideas, and economic development.

Technology also assists adults seeking formal (within educational institutions) or nonformal education (external to the established institutions) and informal learning (opportunistic, experiential, incidental; Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Informal learning occurs without sponsorship or institutional control. Informal learning occurs in every day contexts for problem solving (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). "Most adult educators suspect that the majority of adult learning is informal" (Merriam et al., 2006, p. 60); adults have difficulty in identifying and placing measurable parameters around these learning episodes making it a difficult area to study and to influence. Learning episodes are more commonly known as self-directed learning projects.

Houle's (1961) study of adult participation produced a division of "purposes and values of continuing education" (p. 15) that distinguishes among goal, activity, and learning orientations. In the 1970s Houle's doctoral student, Tough, investigated the learning orientation goal of adults describing them as learning projects (Heimstra, 1994), initiated by learners who are motivated to gain knowledge, skills, or produce change. The assumption that adults are self-directed in their learning was popularized by Knowles (1970) and was based on learning orientation. Knowles (1970, 1975) further developed his basic assumptions about the adult learner by setting a baseline for self-directed learning. For Knowles self-directed learning meant that adults have a universal need and are intrinsically motivated to be self-directed in their learning. The problems stem from experience and experience is used to solve the problems.

Knowles (1984) popularized other assumptions about the adult learner. He made the case to distinguish between adults and children as learners and developed the concept of andragogy, a system of assumptions about the adult learner (Merriam et al., 2006). Andragogy is "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1970, p. 38) and is counterpoised to pedagogy's focus on children. Adult educators accepted andragogy because differentiating between the education of children and adults was important to professionalizing the field. With these assumptions "Knowles proposed a program planning model

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