

Creating and Maintaining an Interest in Learning for Adults

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When will we achieve the goal "that opportunities for lifelong learning through continuing education be available to all citizens without regard to previous education or training"? To do so, all our institutions are faced with revisions in the structures we have practiced for so many years.

EDUCATION, in the minds of many persons, has come to be viewed as a tedium of schooling or training through a group process. Learning, on the other hand, is an individual process marked by a variety of styles and a multitude of settings. It implies a changing set of conditions which reinforces, modifies, or expands knowledge, understanding, and the development of skills.

Our educational goals are toward the acquisition of skills and the art of understanding and communicating ideas; a capacity for reasoning to compare, to find agreement and disagreement, and to recognize differences; acquiring knowledge that is enabling wisdom; a sense of excitement in discovery; and in it all, some charm and grace.

The older student group, today, includes those who did not complete high school as well as those with highly specialized degrees. These students participate in courses of instruction expecting to apply immediately what they learn. When the instruction does

not satisfy that desire the students do not register again or search for other programs which appear to be more to their expectation.

What can be done for the older (adult) student within the constraints of institutional education? The references cited here are limited but there is an essence in them which, with creative interpretation and implementation, provides a springboard for creating and maintaining a lifelong interest in learning.

It is unlikely that educators can *create* an interest in learning. Given a reasonable amount of intelligence and emotional stability that interest is present. What can be done more effectively is the modification or utilization of the environments in which learning does or can occur. In our institutional structures this requires modifications in organizational processes and procedures—adaptability and flexibility in time and space patterns (therein lie the Gordian knots).

If Congress should determine that "it is in the National interest that opportunities for lifelong learning through continuing education be available to all citizens without regard to previous education or training,"¹

¹ National Advisory Council on Extension and Continuing Education. *Equity of Access*. 9th Annual Report. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975.

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then all of our institutions are faced with revisions in the structures we have practiced for so many years.

Beyond the Evening College

As adult educators we are charged to promote and advance the educational growth of individuals through programs which reside both within and outside our formal institutions, such as non-credit and credit learning activities. Our functions are to discern educational needs of the society we serve and determine where and how the resources available can meet these needs. We have to avoid panaceas and realize that we do not have all the answers or the programmatic resources for all of society's needs or desires.

In his study concerned with the part-time student, Ernest McMahon ventured to describe "The Evening College of Tomorrow."² He suggests a separation (administratively) between evening colleges which

² Ernest E. McMahon. *The Emerging Evening College*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1960.

provide for studies culminating in a degree and those which provide adult education and community service, such as non-credit programming.

Unfortunately, one result of confusing the evening college with adult education has been a limitation in the scope of the university's adult education programs and in the amount of the university's experimentation with new methods of adult education. Thereby, the cause of adult education at the university level has suffered. The special role of the evening college and the total challenge of adult education must both be recognized by the university.³

The elapse of 15 years since McMahon's astute observation has seen the growth and the decline of the conventional college/university student population; the advent of avid approaches to "non-traditional" and "external degree" programs; as well as such concerns as the American Council on Education for financing the part-time student, "The New Majority in Post-Secondary Education"; the "Equity of Access, Continuing Education, and the Part-Time Student" of

³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.



Libby Joy

the National Advisory Council on Extension and Continuing Education; and the numerous reports of the Carnegie Commission.

Indeed, "the special role of the evening college and the total challenge of adult education" are being recognized by the university. As implied by McMahon, *why not in a college of the university with an abiding philosophy and purpose of lifelong learning and "in the interest of economy and efficiency" and effectiveness (I add effectiveness because there are too many examples in education of efficiency without effectiveness)?*

There is a terrible presumption and arrogance in the titling of an administrative unit as one which encompasses lifelong learning—but then presumption and arrogance are not new to universities and colleges. The basic premise which must be followed is that if these learning activities are to be sponsored by the university they must be such that the resources which the university can bring to bear are appropriate and available. To have significance in the university they must be considered as central and not peripheral to university purposes and functions. Universities, particularly the tax-assisted ones, are more than degree granting entities even though they continue to be funded by the number of full-time students and the number of degrees granted.

In its report, "The Lifelong University," the Task Force on Lifelong Education of Michigan State University observes that colleges and universities must rededicate "themselves to the goal of developing motivation and skills for self-learning. They must pursue this goal in relation to both old and new audiences. Some of the new audiences will be comprised of individuals, especially from groups heretofore inadequately served by higher education."⁴

"Every college and university is unique because of its geographical location, its historical mission, its educational philosophy, the competence of its faculty and administration, and the special frontiers of content, method, or program design it wishes to cross

⁴ Task Force on Lifelong Education. *The Lifelong University*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1973.

"It is unlikely that educators can create an interest in learning. Given a reasonable amount of intelligence and emotional stability that interest is present. What can be done more effectively is the modification or utilization of the environments in which learning does or can occur."⁵

at any given time."⁵ Added to this is the caution to weigh carefully the temptations to duplicate or replicate the successful program in one setting in another setting.

It is necessary to provide flexibility and adaptability in administrative organization and process to alleviate the institutional processes which overly structure the learning environment (the university is usually convinced that it *knows* what student needs are and how they should be met). Adaptations in time, space, and instructional methodology are crucial if interest in learning is to be sustained. Provision must be made to utilize the environments of the older student—the environments of home, community, public libraries, art institutes, places of employment, and employment-related opportunities. (As an illustration of employment related opportunities, we have a student who took advantage of a business trip to London to do research and investigation on an independent study of Samuel Johnson.)

Need for Flexible Methodology

These life situations and settings are convenient and offer an ambience for introducing the excitement of new learning experiences. But these too can become dull and commonplace unless there is provision for a variety of instructional methodologies and techniques.

⁵ "The External Degree." Special issue of *The Journal of Higher Education* 44 (6); June 1973.

Samuel B. Gould reminds us that even with adult students there are those who do not achieve well in self-directed studies:

More rather than less rigor is demanded of the external degree student; more rather than less initiative is expected. A high degree of motivation is a fundamental requisite. The most careful monitoring of innovative adaptations and departures from the norm is necessary, not to discourage flexible and diverse approaches but to make certain that each person has a truly educative experience.⁶

Barbara Mickey observes that: "Faculty who are flexible in teaching methods, who are sensitive to student needs in the classroom, who can adjust communication pathways as needed, who are willing to consider new kinds of content and to organize traditional content in new contexts, seem most successful in non-traditional programs."⁷ Traditional or non-traditional, for effective learning by adults these attributes of the teaching faculty are necessary. The uses of independent study, field studies, seminars, workshops, conferences, radio, television, and the newspaper are all vehicles for the time and space adaptations for learning.

Since education (learning) is a human endeavor it is more meaningful when shared with other humans. For this reason instruction which relies heavily upon television or radio or other techno-student processes should provide for students to gather in groups to share and exchange in the course of study. Not all of traditional or conventional instruction is or has been ineffective.

Nurturing the Desire To Learn

Institutions have traditionally concerned themselves with admission criteria and standards. This is understandable in all fairness to the time, energy, and expense by both the student and the institution. But the true purpose resides not at the entrance but

⁶ Samuel B. Gould. "Foreword." In: Cyril O. Houle. *The External Degree*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1973.

⁷ *The Journal of Higher Education*, op. cit.

the exit gate. What has the student learned that is both meaningful and useful to students and faculty? As with instructional methods, the instrumentalities of measurement and the processes of evaluation need to be varied and adaptable to the learning environments utilized.

Student services and instructional support conducive to the time and place dimensions must be provided. One such activity which seems to be a tedium for all students is the process of registration. With careful design registration by mail can be worked out so that the interests of the student and the institution are satisfied. Most registrars with the aid of computers and technical staff are amenable to this procedure.

Advising and counseling can stimulate or deter a desire to continue to learn. The judicious selection of personnel to perform these tasks is important in most programs for the older student. The Regional Learning Service of Central New York, the "learning consultant" role, and the "peer counselor" described by Vickers⁸ offer possibilities for combining services and personnel which can be brought into action. It is axiomatic that unless these personnel can identify with the student and relate to the student's situation they can hardly translate the interests of the student into the program and vice versa.

It should be evident that to maintain an interest in learning, particularly for the older student, the student rather than the program per se is of central concern. Emphasis should be on the learning process through which content is conveyed; the content takes its cues from the learning needs and interests of both faculty and student.

The reader expecting "how-to-do-it" or "how-does-it-work" answers is disappointed. It should be apparent that there are unlimited ways of programming. Principles have to be applied before their worth and relevance can be assessed. As guides for action systematically applied and fervently pursued, principles will translate into programs which are creative and which sustain an interest in learning. □

⁸ *Ibid.*

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