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Grit and the Adult Learner: Should We Be Thinking about Work Ethic?

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Abstract: Research related to work ethic appears most frequently in psychology and business-related venues, with few publications in education. This roundtable encourages participants to explore whether thinking in terms of a learners' work ethic is an appropriate or potentially beneficial concept for adult educators.

Recent conversations and research streams have connected the concepts of grit, tenacity, and perseverance (Duckworth, 2013; Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013) to the persistence and academic success of younger learners. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) defined grit "perseverance and passion for long-term goals … working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (p. 1087), and research demonstrates that those who demonstrate higher levels of grit also persevere longer when working on challenging tasks (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007). While the idea of grit is emerging as a "red-hot word" (Hoover, 2012) for those interested in the persistence and retention of traditional-aged college students, it is not a term currently connected with the literature in adult education. Therefore, the first question on the table is whether adult educators who are seeking ways to better encourage students might benefit from considering the "gritty-ness" of their learners.

In talking with recent college graduates about their workplace learning, Olson (2010) found that participants referred to their own "good work ethic" as a key motivator when they were first on the job. These participants attributed their ability to endure frustrating work settings and insufficient training to the work ethic they had learned as children, but that they were also learning to value as adults. Several scales for measuring work ethic have been developed. Parkhurst, Fleisher, Skinner, Woehr, and Hawthorn-Embree (2011) used the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP), which defines work ethic in terms of attitudes toward: centrality of work, self reliance, hard work (belief in the virtues of hard work), pro-leisure attitudes, morality/ethics, delay of gratification, and wasted time. Parkhurst et al. found that participants who valued leisure more highly were more likely to choose lower-effort tasks, while those with higher "hard work" scores were more likely to choose higher-effort tasks, suggesting that there may be a connection between work ethic and the aspect of grit that promotes "working strenuously toward challenges" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). This raises the second question: Are "work ethic" and "grit" complementary—or perhaps even synonymous—concepts?

A review of the literature reveals that research related to work ethic appears most frequently in psychology- and business-related venues (e.g., Kuhn, 2006; Parkhurst et al., 2011), with very few publications in education journals. Why is this? Are educators not interested in the effort put forth by learners? Of course we are. Embedded deep within the ethos of adult education is the drive to accompany adult learners as they pursue the learning that they have identified as important, for whatever reason. If work ethic promotes the achievement of these

goals, then work ethic is important. At the same time, work ethic—or perhaps more precisely "good" work ethic—hints at a normativity that many within adult education resist. "Good" compared to what? "Good" as defined by whom? "Good" as serving whose interests? In exploring these ideas, the third question emerges: Is it even appropriate for an adult educator to think in terms of a learner's work ethic?

The fourth potential question on the table—how can we help learners develop stronger work ethic—ultimately depends on how the earlier questions of "Is it beneficial?" "How do we define it?" and "Should we pay attention to it?" are addressed. If this is a helpful and appropriate concept, what strategies might allow learners to recognize the impact of work ethic on their own learner and how might the adult educator nurture and develop that work ethic? Considering these four questions will provide a base from which to evaluate the "fit-ness" of these two concepts—grit and work ethic—to the work and research we do as adult educators. This roundtable is presented as a forum to begin this conversation.

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