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**"A room of one's own:" A phenomenological investigation of  
class, age, gender, and politics of institutional change  
regarding adult students on campus.**

Peggy A. Sissel, Margaret Birdsong, Barbara Silaski

**Abstract:** This collaborative phenomenological investigation reveals the experience of adult student advocates in a university setting. The setting was interpreted as being mediated by interlocking systems of oppression. Issues included concepts of class, age, gender, and institutional politics related to resource allocation and meaning about the nature and needs of adult students.

### **Introduction**

It has long been recognized that colleges and universities must alter their institutional climate in order to accommodate the needs of adult students (Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering, 1989). While change in the entire structure of programming in higher education institutions has been called for (Conrad, 1993), the development of specialized student services that focus on this population has been a primary strategy through which it is thought such transformation can begin. Successes in this area have been documented around the U.S. (Turnbull, 1989), but too little research elucidates the factors which promote or impede the transformation of traditional institutions of higher education into those which are supportive to adult, reentry, nontraditional students. Rarer still in the literature is a critique and analysis of this setting from the adult student perspective.

### **Rationale for the Study**

According to Hatfield (1989), "the extent to which an institution is visibly and formally engaged in continuing education of adults is determined by the *perceived importance* (our emphasis) of its clientele to the well-being of the institution and the philosophy of the institution (p. 306)." This research addresses issues of the meaning of adult students on campus, and the way in which perceptions and understandings of the adult student as "other" (Kasworm, 1993) frames programming initiatives.

Through an examination of the life world of former and current adult students at a university, this collaborative phenomenological study explores the experiences of adult student advocates

engaged in the creation of a FIPSE-funded project at a mid-size, urban university in the southern region of the U.S. The project was conceptualized by and is administered by former students of that institution, and was designed to provide adult students on campus with information and advocacy services. As a result of their experiences, these former students cited the critical need for a specialized approach to programming on a campus wherein adult students were upwards of 50% of the student body. While other universities have had such programs for several years, this particular university had not yet undertaken such programming.

In funding this project, FIPSE envisioned that since former students were creators and implementors of this particular program, it would be especially successful at efforts of making change on campus for and with adult students. Unfortunately, from its inception the program met with a variety of institutional roadblocks which threatened its ability to engage in fully implementing its stated programming. Realizing that the success and integrity of the project was being compromised, the study authors began a collaborative, reflective exercise of review, introspection, discussion, and analysis in an effort to deconstruct the structural factors which were impeding development of the project.

While a few scholars have alluded to the importance of language and attitudes in relation to programming for adult students on campus (Kasworm, 1993), no study has attempted to address the way in which meanings about adult students translate into institutional practices. Utilizing this FIPSE project as a case study, this research investigates two primary questions: how do meanings about adult students translate into action or inaction within an institution? and what are the structural factors (the social order) that impede or promote the success of programming for adult students?

A second, yet equally compelling rationale for the study process was the desire to undertake an analysis of the setting that would promote a sense of empowerment and healing among the actors involved in this stymied effort, and to create an alternative, emancipatory "stock of knowledge" about adult students on campus from which creative action for change could take place (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). Because, as Holstein & Gubrium (1994) note, "social objects are constituted within discernibly organized circumstances (p. 268)", as former adult students, and as actors in the setting working for and with adult students, the program advocates embraced the opportunity to reflect on their role as social objects in the setting, and the way in which this duality was made problematic. Central to this reflective process was recognition of the legitimacy of their feelings, thoughts, and actions in the setting in relation to concerns about power and oppression.

### **The Phenomenological Method as "Demythologizer"**

A participatory action research methodology (Reason, 1994) which utilized a collaborative phenomenological approach (thINQ, 1994) structured the effort to develop "emancipatory forms of knowledge" relating to the advocates' lived experience (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991) within the institution. Furthermore, because of the similarities between the phenomenological method and the processes and goals of making transformative change in organizations (Apps, 1988; Kuh

& Whitt, 1988; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Spiegelberg, 1982), this method of inquiry was particularly suitable.

The inquiry team consisted of three women: the two program coordinators and a researcher/evaluator involved in the project from its beginning who acted as *animateur* in the reflective, discursive process. The collaborators met together on a regular basis, over two years, to chart the growth and development of the project and to ascertain and analyze institutional barriers related to programming for adult students.

Utilizing descriptions of talk and interaction as the topic for analysis (Stanage, 1987), the social facts of this particular campus environment were studied through the analysis of personal journals of the two advocacy project coordinators, in addition to meeting minutes, institutional documents, and observations and interactions with pertinent actors in the university setting. The "dailiness" of the personal journals provided a rich database, and in combination with the collaborative nature of the investigation this study provides a unique way in which to analyze the higher education environment for adult students.

The investigation was initiated by utilizing the classic framework of philosophical questioning as outlined by Stanage (1987). Questions such as "Who am I?" "What can I know?" "What ought I to do?" "What may I hope?" served as metaphorical tropes that allowed the trio to begin to address the feelings, experiences, and conscious thoughts about the self (as former adult student and advocate) and the other (current adult students and the institution). Open-ended reflection and dialog around these questions resulted in the illumination of problematic areas which merited further probing and analysis. In doing so, an attempt was made to "demythologize" and make explicit the reality of what was actually occurring (Kuh & Whitt, 1988) in the setting and to "'see through' the ways in which the establishment monopolized the production and use of knowledge (Reason, 1994, p. 328)" in relation to adult students within this university environment.

### **Interpretation and Discussion**

"Making sense" of the circumstances of the setting involved an analysis of "contextually grounded discourses, vocabularies, and categories..." and how they "defined and classified aspects of everyday life (Foucault, 1972, in Holstein & Gubrium, 1994)" in relation to the assumptions and values about adult students. By viewing the institution (it's policies, language, and behaviors) "as a cultural enterprise (Kuh & Whitt, 1988)," we began to understand the way in which the adult undergraduate experience was socially constructed. A variety of structural forces affected the institutional environment, and hence, the implementation of programming for adult students. These included issues such as age, class, gender, and the way in which they intersected with institutional politics. While discussed below in discrete categories, these structural factors were experienced as interlocking, simultaneous, interactive, and pervasive.

#### ***"A Room of One's Own"***

Having a space for adult students that would allow them to network and share was foundational to the project proposal. Despite the fact that having "a room of one's own (Woolf, 1929)" is considered imperative when responding to adults on campus (p.118, Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989), such a space was denied them repeatedly, with the rationale that there would be "no separate spaces" for adult students, particularly since "they were no different" than others on campus. While Kasworm (1993) cautions against creating "ghettos of exclusion, or delimiting categories (p. 163)," the lack of recognition of difference in needs and networking under the metaphor of community "suppresses discussion of the conflicts and costs that some students encounter in their efforts to join the academic community (p. 529, Grimm, 1996)." Indeed, Woolf's (1929) phenomenological reflections of the sexist prejudices, inequities, and hegemonic practices of higher education and society remain cogent reminders of the interlocking relationship that exists between the policies of institutions and oppressive cultural frames.

Thus, relegated to a small storage room out of the way of campus traffic, these "ladies in the closet" began the work of ascertaining institutional barriers, providing students with information and assistance, and developing a supportive network of faculty and administrative staff.

### ***"Bowling Alone"***

Gaining support among the various campus constituencies also remained elusive. While faculty participation and the building of a bridge between the two very different worlds of academic affairs and student services on behalf of adult students was another focal point of the project, the project's administrative placement between academic affairs and student services meant that support and ownership of the project was political, and problematic. The division and divisiveness that can exist between these two institutional segments is all but neglected in the higher education literature (with the exception of Clark, 1984, in Kuh & Whitt, p. 92; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 229). In this setting however, the tensions between the two cultures resulted in a lack of resources, low visibility, roadblocks to the project's implementation, and few predictable, consistent supporters. While Gramsci (in Grimm, 1995) believed that the greatest potential for change making lay in the spaces between individuals of different classes and allegiances, other campus initiatives which had tried to meld these two distinct groups had resulted in one professor's comment that everyone at the university seemed to be "bowling alone," and that no one worked together or communicated effectively.

### ***Defending the Status Quo***

In fact, as the advocates discovered, institutional policies, procedures, and potentially helpful services pertinent to the experiences and needs of adult students were often not understood or implemented by staff and faculty. Yet, despite the reality of adult students' experiences and complaints about the lack of attendance to their needs, many administrators and staff remained staunch in their view that the project was not needed. Anger, resentment, and defensive comments were a regular aspect of the advocates' experience with staff in other areas of the institution, who clearly felt threatened by the project. The message that the advocates were upsetting the status quo was heard in comments that ranged from "we know all we need to know about *them*," "adult students don't need services," "we tried that, they don't want services" and "we already do all of that." Yet, this expressed anger was not only directed at the advocates, but

in subliminal ways at the students themselves. Other researchers have alluded to the phenomenon of blaming adults for being different than the traditional student (Keeton & James, 1992; Spitzburg & Thorndike, 1992), for being the "other" who is outside of the typical college experience (Stalker, 1993). For example, until the advocates' arrival the little known policy of allowing students not right out of high school to take placement tests alternative to the SAT/ACT was rarely implemented, and staff resented having to provide this extra service.

### ***Adult Students, Invisibility, and Ageism***

The maintenance of the status quo was further reinforced by the institution's conceptual meanings about the adult student, which were inconsistent and contradictory. On the one hand, while adamant that the needs of adult students were already attended to, the view that they were "no different" and had no different needs was also expressed. Yet, because age as a demographic characteristic was all but ignored by institutional research, the university truly had no way of knowing what the differences were. Hence, in classic circular logic, because no differences had been discerned, none existed. This systematic exclusion of adult students, along with the recognition that student services staff are often not schooled in the needs of adults on campuses, the realization that colleges frequently ignore adult students (p.228, Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering, 1989), and that few faculty are apprised of the literature on adult learners (Spitzburg & Thorndike, 1992) raises questions about the implications of the broader culture, since "an institution's culture reflects to some degree the values and accepted practices of the host society (p. v, Kuh & Whitt, 1988)."

In this regard, the rhetoric used in the setting and in society also functioned to marginalize adult students. Kasworm (1993) eloquently deconstructs the label of "nontraditional student," exposing it as describing adult students as "nonnormative," and "outside of the dominant cultural circle (p.162)." Interestingly, regardless of which term (nontraditional or adult) was used on campus, objections were heard. Some noted that most of the university's students were "nontraditional" (as in adult, minority, or first-generation college bound). Others believed that applying the term "adult" to only those over age 25 was demeaning to 18-year-olds. Hence, in the silence and invisibility, the homogenization of the student body was reinforced, and was reflected in the lack of attention to adult students in virtually all areas, including recruitment, retention, student services, developmental courses, advisement, and accessibility to courses.

### ***Adult Students as a Class and its Function in the Institution***

Despite their institutional invisibility however, "adult students" appeared to be members of a socially constructed class bound by multiple, overlapping political, cultural, educational, and informational characteristics which kept them at the margin. Adult undergraduates come to higher education's traditional culture of meritocracy (Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992) with past experiences of dropping out, stopping out, or having never attended college. In relation to such a setting, these past experiences are not "meritorious" and promote personal and collective imagery of "not being college material" and of being "former failures," regardless of the circumstances of their past. Furthermore, the myth that "adult students are academically inferior to younger students (Kasworm, 1994)," is powerful, and when the institution (despite its egalitarian, metropolitan mission) wants only "the cream of the crop," as reflected in faculty and staff

attitudes, the decline in the availability of developmental classes, and lack of access to courses which allows the completion of a degree at night, then "former failures" don't fit in. This experience, in combination with being "off-time (Neugarten, 1979)" in relation to the historically normative age expectations of the college experience situates adult students as being outside of the dominant culture of college life.

Language such as "conditional" and "provisional status," and policies, programs, and imagery which reflect the institution's emphasis on youth remind adult students of both their potential lack of merit, and their difference of experience. For example, while high school students had access to guidance counselors and campus recruiters, adult students considering the possibility of college were told that they could not speak to a campus representative without first enrolling. Once on campus, adult students reported being scolded for not understanding policies and procedures, with the remark that "if an 18-year-old can understand this, why can't you!" Yet, "finding one's way into college, understanding its diverse environments, learning its routine and resources and then defining a relationship to it require a large new set of complex learnings (p.59, Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering, 1989)." In an effort to negotiate this environment which was not only alien, but unsupportive, many adult students try to "pass" as confident, knowledgeable and competent, which may reinforce the view that services for this group were not needed or wanted. This then further compromises those adult students who may have trouble "passing," due to racism, personal crisis, poverty, or academic distress, thereby functioning to reinforce traditional "class" divisions and inequities.

### ***Gender and the "White Male System":***

"Universities are grounded in masculine epistemology and hierarchical top-down decision making, and are charged with protecting knowledge and safeguarding traditions (Grimm, 1996). This "white male system (Schaff in Flynn, 1993)" represents a normative view of reality, that when questioned by women, or others outside of this experience, are told that they do not understand "reality." Thus marginalized by class, the politics of the institution, and gender, the advocates' attempts at negotiating the administrative ropes revealed the patriarchal attitudes inherent in the system. Indeed, one outside observer noted the obvious way in which gender was constructing this setting. For example, rather than being provided with "real resources," they were to use "the power of your personality," or "more makeup." Having begun the project believing that their role as both "insider/outsider" would empower them, the factors which allowed them to connect with their constituency were those which were considered to have little value. The euphemistic label of "dynamic duo" that they acquired reflected not only the reality of their lack of power, but belittled their attempts at fostering affiliation, and denigrated their caring and commitment to students, which was the very heart of this project.

### ***Getting to the Heart of It All: Toward an "Ethic of Caring" in Administration***

In the culture of higher education, "masculine attributes like an orientation toward achievement and objectivity are valued over cooperation, connectedness, and subjectivity (Capra, 1983; Ferguson, 1980, in Kuh & Whitt)." While advocates for equal access in higher education (Spitzburg & Thorndike, 1992) call for justice as "fairness," this concept remains grounded in a male model which emphasizes rights and rules. Based on this experience, justice as fairness must

be expanded to include an "ethic of care," which, as defined by Gilligan (1982) has as its foundation an understanding of contextual concerns, an emphasis on responsibility and relationships, and bases judgments and actions on needs. While the notion of care has been linked to the teaching function in higher education (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989; Kasworm, 1993) this ethic of care must extend beyond teaching to administrative functions as well, for students must negotiate the "bureaucracy" of the institution before they can get to the "knowledge."

### **"Coming Out of the Closet:" Concluding Thoughts**

While "higher education has made its finest contributions from the creative and programmatic margins (p. 314, Hatfield, 1989), being the "other" clearly makes the change making process political and problematic. Yet, in marginality one has the space to "find and name (the) contradictions, the places where (hegemony) leaks (p. 541, Grimm, 1996)." Indeed, as a result of this naming, and while little (yet) has changed, the institution has begun some introspection. While adult students still remain without "a room of one's own," the advocates are being moved out of the closet (at least for the short term) into a more visible space. Although the future of this project is unknown, it is clear that it must continue to be based on the need to question and the ethic of caring, and that it must model this ethic for others.

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