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A Critical Review of Race, Class, and Gender in Adult Development Models and Theory: Implications for Adult Education

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Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable is to discuss North American literature showing how race, class, and gender has been treated historically and presents three approaches or perspectives that inform contemporary literature.

Content of the Roundtable

A critical review of race, class, and gender in adult development and theory will be addressed by an analysis of the literature which directly addresses adult learning and development in North America. The competing approaches that emerged from the literature include an examination of traditional and emerging diverse models/theories regarding adult development (Merriam, 1984; Levenson and Crumpler, 1996; Caffarella and Olson, 1993; Peck, 1986; Clark and Caffarella, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Amstutz, 1999; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2000; and Goodman, 1990). The roundtable will promote an action plan that will encourage adult educators to engage in conversations about ways how we: 1) can meet adults where they are, 2) better service adults based upon their social location, and 3) dialogue about ways within which to encourage and promote the development of learning communities with the specific needs of diverse adults in mind. Moreover, the roundtable will provide increased awareness of adult development models and theories.

Reason for Research

We are witnessing radical transformation in society due to change. Such change is evidenced by shifts in technology, the workplace, and a renewed definition of family, and hence, family roles and responsibilities (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, P. 1-23 and Hart, 1992, P. 1-28). Further, there exists increased uncertainty about the work of political institutions as well as ambiguity regarding economic and financial stability. As a result of these changes and societal shifts an increasing number of adults are experiencing critical change and conflict in their struggle to make meaning out of their circumstance (Merriam and Brockett, 1997, P.140). Much of what we believe about adults as learners and leaders, with regard to how adults develop has largely been influenced by the literature on adult development. Inclusive discussion and thinking warrants the recognition of difference (race, class, and gender), which means placing the experience of adults at the center of thought so that we may better understand how diverse adults as learners and leaders develop and change (Rogers, 2000).

Action Plan Activity

Upon analysis and discussion of the three approaches that inform contemporary literature regarding adult learning and development models/theories the roundtable will move to address thoughts, and/or ideas about how we: 1) can meet adults where they are, 2) better service adults based upon their social location, and 3) stimulate dialogue about ways within which to encourage and promote the development of learning communities with the specific needs of diverse adults in mind.

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