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Commodified Education within the University Marketplace: Examining the Erosion of Adult Education

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Abstract: Education for adults is complicated the time of global economic growth, domestic/international unemployment, and increased presence of higher education in the marketplace. The purpose of this paper is to uncover ways the adult learner is challenged and shaped by the context of commercial education. Motivations, perceptions of success (or lack of), and the overall experience are gauged.

Seftor and Turner (2002) discuss collegiate education for adult and higher education learners as an opportunity to remedy or increase financial security and stability long-term. No doubt this is the thought process bringing countless adult learners to the undergraduate or graduate classroom. Poon (2006) suggests that adults return to the classroom in order to stay competitive and marketable in a global economy that is constantly evolving and demanding of new skills and knowledge. The changing goals of the learner create new avenues of discussion in and challenge traditional notions of adult learning theory and practice. Additionally, the commodification of higher and continuing education and increased presence of the university in the marketplace has occurred as a result of the demand in educational services. In order to get a sense of how the learner is shaped by the context three over arching research questions were considered: (1) What motivations does the learner have for his/her educative experience at this particular institution, (2) what did the learner feel contributed to successful or unsuccessful learning experiences, and (3) what meaning was made in general about the educational experience at the educational institution.

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

Poon (2006) suggests each and every adult is touched or in some way shaped by an increasingly competitive market. Additionally, the ripples of globalization have impacted the international macroeconomic landscape offering more effortless foreign investment and mobility, encouraging transnational commerce, and ultimately creating stiffer and more aggressive competition throughout an assortment of industries. In turn, corporations have re-configured, laid-off, and subcontracted globally to tightened production costs leaving higher unemployment and underemployment both domestically and internationally in industrial advanced nations. The aforementioned factors, consequently result in, what Poon (2006) calls a “knowledge based economy...a context in which knowledge and skills have to be continuously upgraded and broadened to meet the constantly changing requirements” (p. 83). Education then becomes a highly marketable and highly sought after service to remedy the demands of a rapidly evolving marketplace. As an additional product of the interaction of these factors, education in and of itself becomes a secondary goal to education as a good or service.

Traditional notions of adult education theory inform this research. The self-directed nature and complex decision making process associated with adults returning to the classroom, continuing studies, upgrading skills/knowledge, or broadening through a graduate education journey suggest intrinsic adult education processes at work (Cafarella and O’Donnell, 1987). Considering motives and the complexity of individual disposition is an important, yet sparsely emphasized idea in the discussion of adult learning

and adult education. Boyd and Williams (2011) indicate that learning that connects to the personal lives of the student create lifelong learning habits especially when education is self-directed.

The landscape in higher education has seen changes no doubt. Gillan, Damachis, and McGuire (2003) argue that as institutions of higher education move towards consumer based education students are, in turn, viewed as customers having stake in issues of cost, services rendered, and overall program design. Higher education institutions internationally encounter criticisms of the tacit or explicit commodification of undergraduate and graduate degrees (Molnar 2005). Noble (1998) introduced this idea by suggesting that instructors and faculty have become disseminators of goods, or commodity producers within an organizational system not aimed at education, but at earning capital. As a result, he says, what is left is “only a shadow of education, an assemblage of pieces without the whole” (Noble 2002, p. 31).

Considerations for adult education do not include the most recent contextual snapshot and fail to include what adult learning looks like when the goals of institution itself are commercial. Ahl posited adult learners’ motives can be characterized by an “innate need to learn and grow” suggesting motivation is always present, but can be impacted by a range of dispositional, situational, and institutional or structural influences (Ahl, 2006, p. 394). Additionally, life circumstances in terms of time and interest, educational/financial information, support through the school, and perceptions of learning/partaking in educational opportunities are all variables influencing motivation to participate in educational opportunities (Ahl, 2006). Thus, the motivations and manifestations of adult learning are influenced by not only the structural/organizational context, but also the support that is offered within that structure/organization.

Learners enter into academia and are shaped by consumer-producer organizational processes. Adult learning theory has limited applicability and is all together non-existent within these frames. Meaning made about being a learner is translated as a customer positioning the university as the producer of the knowledge or skills needed to improve financial security and stability. Finney and Finney (2010) take up this issue and explore attitudes of the learner/consumer reporting protestations/grievances as favorable or advantageous to their scholastic experience. Additionally, the learner is likely to engage in behavior that does not promote academic success. The research was undertaken to explore the motivations, perceptions of success and experiences of adult learners within the context of student-as-customer institution.

Research Design

An institution recruiting and targeting adult age learners with five plus years of professional experience was optimal for this research. This private institution of adult and higher education boasts accelerated graduate and undergraduate business education for adult professionals looking to secure long-term financial success in global business. The program boasts increased leadership skills, advanced technology access, and student centered approaches. This offered the researcher a frame to understand the overall goals and mission of the institution of higher learning as a whole.

An individual frame from the adult learner perspective gauged what meaning was made from learning and what were considerations that could be applied to adult learning theory. A purposive sample (n=34) was utilized as the data sources. Using a secure and password encrypted survey website, an electronic, open-ended questionnaire asked: 1) What brings you back to the classroom? (goals, motives or ambitions), 2) Tell me anything significant about your success and/or failures at [the private

institution], and 3) Share some thoughts about what was meaningful in your time at this institution. A were offered on the three questions. Students were at various phases of degree completion.

Findings and Conclusions

Students at this particular private institution believed that they had ‘say –so,’ not just in what was taught, but also in how the material was taught. Students’ responses about successes at this private institution indicated they viewed complaining about course material and instruction as constructive even when such complaints ran counter-intuitive to quality education, and ultimately, did not promote proficiency in the learning objectives for that course. Additionally, students’ responses about successes allude to the idea that because they had “input” in learning, they viewed the institution as a whole more favorably. Each student noted positive experiences supported by reasons that they felt they had a “voice.” Students were direct about what contributed to failures at this private institution suggesting that when their input about learning aims was not taken into account, their comprehension about the material and ability to master content suffered.

Motivations

Over 75 percent of the responses (25) suggested that motives to get back into the classroom centered around “professional growth,” “higher salary,” “professional networking,” and “new skills sets.” However, participant responses were consistent with Finney and Finney, (2010) who evaluated students’ perceptions, attitudes, and behavior when learners viewed themselves as customers in the higher education organization. Students at this particular private institution suggested that student centered learning meant having “control” and “influence” over teaching material and teaching methodology even when the learning was aimed at the goals set forth by the learner.

The Learning Experience

One participant shared, “I am happy to share my academic experience, while challenging, offered me lots of learning ... hopefully my thoughts will be used to make the program more efficient and effective.” Additionally, each participant shared a fairly individualized account of what they believed contributed to successes and failures throughout their academic experience based on interactions they had with instructors, their grades, and final career placement opportunities. One learner wrote, “my academic experience was a little drama, it started quick with a lot of requirements and not so much time...there is a lot of pressure to perform, and not much space for mistakes.” This participant also voiced that his grades were not very good at the beginning of the semester and suggested, “it could be I did not put time in, or I knew what I needed to do, but had difficulty executing.” He stated that his time was demanded in “too many” places and he felt “overwhelmed” by the volume, all of which were factors he contributed to failures. This respondent reported feeling like “I would not be able to do well on any of my assignments because there was just really too much going on.” The participant’s response also stated that discontent grew when the instructor did not attend to or alleviate these concerns with modifications in the course requirements and expectations.

While adult learners recounted different experiences that contributed to failures, each suggested that when learning was modified to accommodate their preferences, the result was successful learning. Several learners echoed this idea. One participant noted, “we were all glad to know that the first few assignments could be re-submitted, it made it easier to understand what the big mistakes were and put

less pressure to crack the mid-term exam.” Another response suggested, “the critical thinking module was really tough, but we agreed it would not be markable and so it made it easier to focus on other learnings of the course I felt would value add.” Ultimately, learners reported that having “input” in the course and having “opportunity” to voice concerns to the individuals who had the authority to make changes were the most important factors contributing to their success in the program.

Successes and Failures

A comparison between learners in early stages in the program and those nearly graduate revealed a trend in their ability to navigate their own uncertainty. Participants who were still fairly new to the program accepted a higher degree of uncertainty and were more open to challenges with reference to course material and exams. These participants noted “...we expect it to be a challenge.” However, over the course of the time in the program less of this uncertainty in tolerated, learners report “teaching to the test” is more important, although this type of learning does not promote leadership practice or understandings of global business.

16 of the 20 participants who were at the end of their time in the program reported negative feelings about the volume of course material and the assignment schedule establishing expectations for when work was to be handed in. The adults in this study report learning dispositions atypical of the standard adult learner where “application was not preferred” a more simple and “easier” method of assessment was ideal. Responses reveal that authentic experiential based learning was not only not preferred, but it was perceived as unfavorable because of time and resource commitments.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study explored open-ended responses about motivations, perceptions of success (or lack of success, and overall experiences at a for-profit undergraduate and graduate education. Findings from the research suggest that the mission, goals, and overall organizational structure of an institution bare direct influence on the overall experience of the learners, and overtime shape their motivations and perceptions of success or failure. Additionally, the meaning of student-centered learning is discussed with reference to the theory and practice of adult education.

The analysis of student responses emphasized individual student experiences and motivations, however, findings reveal that learners feel a communal educational experience and report solidarity with fellow cohort members using terms like “we” and “us” in their responses about personal questions. Further, learners are collectively impacted over time depending on the bend and flex of their instructors, program design, and administration response. At the beginning of their educational journey there are fewer complaints and demands. Over time, and with strength in numbers, it becomes normative behavior to request modifications because of difficulty, inconvenience or preference. Amendments to assignments, approach to instruction, weight of projects, and grading only continues to encourage the pattern and trend even when learners recognize deficits in their skills and/or knowledge on the same topic.

Part of the advertisement and marketing campaign for these undergraduate and graduate programs emphasizes goals on accelerated and student centered learning. Thus, learners enter into the program tacitly mirroring these goals. While adults may enter into academia looking for new knowledge and marketable skills, ultimately, what they want is to make more money and/or a better job. When instructors or administration do not accommodate learning preferences, the individual then becomes a ‘disgruntled customer’ demanding what they paid for.

Student-centered learning, which places focus on experiential (Kolb, 1984), transformative (Mezirow, 1991) and reflexive learning (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985) for the individual has now taken on new meaning. In the case of this institution, student-centered has come to mean customer centered. In many ways this approach runs counter to the goals of adult learning where andragogy becomes transactional rather than interactive. Reflexivity is not encouraged, previous experience does not become integrated into knowledge and practice, and finally, learners insist on instruction that does not promote or foster professional development. Learners become discouraged to direct learning that is important for practical use and instead embrace learning down a path of least resistance. Unfortunately, this path runs counter to self-directed, lifelong learning and offers few places to foster transformative experiences.

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Learning From Within Ambiguity: Developing Adult’s Capacity for Generative Learning and Timely Action

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Abstract: In this paper I present a study with the purpose to deeply understand how adults learn when they encounter ambiguity. I focused my inquiry on developmentally mature adults: those who make meaning—cognitively, affectively, and interpersonally—with an extraordinary capacity for complexity.

Introduction

An incessant feature of our current living, working, and learning contexts is persistent complexity that includes conflict, volatility, and ambiguity that place intensified demands on adults for constant adaptation, rapid learning, and unlearning habits of action. This complexity infuses systems with a dynamic that is “paradoxically stable and unstable, predictable and unpredictable, known and unknown, certain and uncertain all at the same time” (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 7). Examples of this complexity abound, consider the rapidly aging societies that are facing unsustainable policies with respect to health care provisions and later life financial security. These types of collective challenges are intensifying adults’ lifeworlds (Habermas, 1983) and, when coupled with features of the “new normal¹” (McNamee, 2004), present a new curriculum for living that is largely ambiguous and, hence, beyond our current individual and collective capacity for understanding and meaningful action. To develop a better appreciation for how adults learn in relationship to such ambiguity, I studied the lived experiences of nine developmentally mature adults to explore the extent to which—as well as the ways in which—adults learn their way through the unprecedented demands for rapid change and adaptation of early 21st century life.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do nine developmentally mature adults describe and understand ambiguities in their most serious personal or work dilemmas?
2. How, if at all, do they describe an experience of relationship/connection to ambiguity?
3. What, if any, process of learning do they describe in relationship to ambiguity?
4. What, if any, relationship is there between one’s developmental action logic² and one’s experience of ambiguity?

In the following sections, I succinctly discuss my conceptual framework that integrates three literatures supporting this study; complexity theory, learning from experience, and developmental theory. Next, I describe my research method, and conclude with a discussion of three main findings and contributions to theory and practice.

Conceptual Framework

Three theoretical lenses shape this study in order create the conditions to explore the essential features of adults’ relatedness to ambiguity. These literatures will be briefly exposed with a greater emphasis on adult developmental theory, due to the unique population participating in this study.