Social Networking: Revitalizing Adult Education as a Field of Social Practice

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For many years it has been my dream to discover ways to create and sustain online social networks using twenty-first century tools to provide the inspiration and on-going mutual support that twentieth century social activists and community educators found by physically journeying to Highlander. At the 2009 AERC I shared this idea with adult education colleagues in an interactive session in which we identified key characteristics of the Highlander experience including the development of supportive friendships, reflection on practice, creative strategies that could be adapted to particular settings, and the buoyancy of being part of a social movement. I went home more determined than ever to find ways to make the dream a reality. In some ways, this paper is a report to fellow adult educators on progress toward these goals over the past year. The interactive session at the 2010 conference will allow for reflection on the several new developments and their implications for adult education as a field of social practice.

My basic approach to community organizing, developed over many years is to first engage with others in broad exploration and conceptualization in a variety of settings that I think of as "dreaming the future". As I listen to others' hopes and dreams, I find that images begin to form of how life might be in the future. These images tend to be kaleidoscopic they flow, merge, and change as new ideas are added in a form of divergent thinking. Then they begin to converge or "jell" into viable possibilities. I have found that this process of creative divergent thinking followed by convergent thinking can be tricky. Too much divergent thinking and dreams never become reality. While moving to convergent thinking too quickly may lead to what I call "jumping to solutions" thus thwarting creativity and making it difficult to change directions when needed.

In my original "dreaming" of an online Highlander, I had imagined that, together with other adult educators, I would develop some kind of social network site using Ning, Facebook, or some other social networking tool and that this site would either be free standing or connected in some way to my work with SUNY/Empire State College. I pictured this institute as a place for community educators (in the Horton tradition), social activists, grassroots community leaders, community organizers as well as undergraduate and graduate students to share ideas in an attractive online setting.   This dream is becoming a viable possibility as I am in serious discussions with SUNY/Empire State College's President Alan Davis about the possibility of forming an Institute for the Support of Community Initiative.

However, as the year went by I found myself wondering how such an institutionally based effort could avoid becoming isolated from and/or competitive with the many similar efforts I had been encountering in my on-going research and writing into six different types of altruistic grassroots community organizing. I also found myself exploring how three seemingly different parts of my professional life: adult education as a field of social practice, self-directed learning and online education could be reconciled. I decided to do what I call "weaving", first by doing some review and exploration of these three threads and then by doing some preliminary thinking about what participants in each might learn from one another.

I continued my exploration of adult education as a field of social practice through polishing a textbook *Community Organizing: Theory and Practice*, continuing to teach undergraduate and graduate students, and assisting with the development of a critical adult education thread for a new online Master of Arts in Adult Learning that SUNY/Empire State

College has in the draft proposal stage.   I participated in the International Self-directed Learning Symposium held annually in Cocoa Beach, FL a gem of a conference where I was able to reflect on the nature of self-directed learning, especially in online settings.   Finally, and most importantly for me, I almost literally stumbled on the Open Education Resource (OER) movement and fell instantly in love.

The Open Education Resources movement is based on the very simple, but revolutionary premise that all of the world's knowledge belongs to all of the world's people.   I entered this new world in summer, 2009 when colleagues of mine at SUNY/Empire State College discovered an organization called wikieducator then sponsored by the British Commonwealth of Learning and now sponsored by a relatively new organization called the Open Educational Resources Foundation/wikieducator (http://wikieducator.org retrieved March 15, 2010).   While other open educational resources efforts such as the Open Educational Resources Commons (http://www.oercommons.org/ retrieved March 15, 2010) are essentially top-down efforts in which famous institutions such as MIT have made lectures and course syllabi available for free use, wikieducator is a community of educators from around the globe who work together to create a wide variety of usable materials primarily for the developing world.   Wikieducator provides a wide variety of services including its Learning4Content workshops where literally thousands of educators from across the world have been trained to use wiki technology to create sharable content.   Wikieducator fits very well with adult education philosophy because it encourages self-direction, collaboration, and an emphasis on the needs of learners rather than the needs of educational institutions. I am very hopeful that Wayne Mackintosh will be able to join us at the AERC via skype as he joined us at the International Self-directed Learning Symposium so he can share the work of the foundation with us. I have thoroughly enjoyed my association with wikieducator which sponsors frequent synchronous worldwide discussions on a variety of topics.

While wikieducator is my own personal favorite, there are a growing number of organizations involved in the open educational resources movement. It has had major moral support from the United Nations through the UNESCO Virtual University (www.**unesco**.org/iiep/virtualuniversity/forums.php   retrieved March 15, 2010) and major financial support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (www.**hewlett**.org retrieved March 15, 2010)

Like many social movements, OER has a number of related subsystems all dedicated to openness and accessibility.   Important components include the work of the Creative Commons (**creativecommons**.org retrieved March 15, 2010) to develop a series of copyright designations that authors can use to free works for distribution so that they can be used and modified as long as attribution is given.   The Creative Commons has developed four such designations ranging from very open to somewhat restrictive.   Open textbooks make a wide variety of textbooks available for free online or that can be downloaded and distributed for only printing costs. Open textbooks are a major help in an era where the average college text may cost upwards of $150. Free and open source software (FOSS or FLOSS) may be copied and used by anyone.   It is especially important in the development of free online courses. Moodle (**moodle**.**org**/ retrieved March 15, 2010) is one example of such a free platform. Social networking sites also have a place in the movement with Facebook and Ning providing educational forums.   As with many things on the web, there is such an abundance of riches that the problem for the educator becomes how to sort through the best options and use time wisely.

This relatively brief paper has been intended to simply provide a springboard for discussion of the Open Educational Resource movement especially as it relates to adult education, emancipatory education, and adult education as a field of social practice. I believe that the open educational resource movement has a great deal to offer adult education practitioners, especially those who work with the disenfranchised.   On the other hand, I think that adult education particularly critical adult education, participatory research/popular education, and self-directed learning have a great deal to offer the OER movement in terms of our understanding of learner involvement as well as the needs and learning styles characteristic of adults.

I also have an intuition that creative ties can be forged between OER practitioners and those of us in adult education who dream of an online space or spaces that provide us with the fellowship, stimulation, and sense of unity that the physical Highlander provided in the twentieth century and still provides today. I look forward to our conversation in May.

References

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