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Nakita Dolet
_Pennsylvania State University - Main Campus_, ncd138@psu.edu

Maeghen L. MacDonald
_Pennsylvania State University - Main Campus_, mlm629@psu.edu

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Personal Growth, Social Change or Human Capital: A Document Analysis of an Online Education Program from Adult Learners

Nakita Dolet and Maeghen MacDonald
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: This document analysis interrogates how one institution balances classically competing objectives of emancipatory learning, personal growth, and human resource development in an online adult education program.

Keywords: online education, transformative learning, human capital, adult education

Purpose of the Statement

In 2005, Penn State’s World Campus made a decision to explicitly recruit and develop programming particularly for adult learners. From conception, enrollment was a driver of World Campus’ vision to “expand access of the University’s strongest academic and professional education expertise to adult learners” (The World Campus, 1996). The decision to expand the online program to a larger adult population creates a need for developing program objectives. Historically, higher education has struggled to balance education for “improved economic aspects” versus education that “confers upon individuals a variety of personal and social benefits” (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris & Dorman, 2013).

This discussion regarding the purpose of higher education is illustrated in World Campus program documents and reflective of a much larger conversation within adult education. Placing this debate in the context of an adult education program in many ways heightens the tension between both sides. One group of “adult educators [views…] the most important project for the field, and the most significant contribution of adult learning [as…] learning how to extend participatory democracy into the economic sphere]” (Brookfield & Holst, 2010). In turn the opposing perspective “the human resource development view is considered as fundamentally flawed in many adult education circles (Brookfield & Holst, 2010). Document analysis of an online education program during the early stages of development to implementation demonstrates how one institution attempts to balance these different and often competing goals.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous educators in adult education debate the purposes and drive of adult education (e.g. Brookfield, 2013; Cunningham, 2004). For some scholars adult education is described as a vehicle for developing the skills integral to advancing in the workplace. Human capital theories are generally used as the organized set of ideas to describe and understand the relationship between educational attainment and economic growth. The theories define “human capital [as the] knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are developed and valued primarily for their economically productive potential [and] refers to the productive capacities of human beings as income-producing agents in an economy’ (qtd. in Baptiste, 2001).

Other scholars view education as a tool for fostering transformative learning in adults. Transformative learning focuses on the belief that “it becomes imperative in adulthood that [learners understand]” how to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings [in order] to gain greater control over all lives as socially responsible clear thinking decision makers” (qtd in. Taylor, 2000). Transformative learning is centered on the idea that
education should challenge the students’ current worldviews in a manner that ultimately leads to change in the individual perceptions of their environment.

Finally, there are many adult educators that view education as a progressive force in society, as a source for social good. This vein of adult education posits that “the objective of adult education is to transmit culture and social structure to promote social change [...] and that] the role of adult educators is to give adult learners the practical knowledge and problem-solving skills necessary to reform society” (Wang & Sarbo, 2004). Here education begins with the individual and radiates outwards toward society.

While each approach to adult education is generally examined independently at the theoretical level, at the practical level, in the actual development of adult education program, exclusion is difficult. Mission statements or program objectives must not only represent the diverse needs of the student population, but also respond to societal need. Can an adult education program ignore the role of education as a means to a job attainment? Can educational programs ignore the need to foster transformation in individual learners? Can we educate learners without encouraging learning for the benefit of the community?

Research Design

The creation of World Campus is an ideal case study as one of the most successful examples of academic entrepreneurism in higher education. Excerpts from the strategic plans, policy documents, annual reports, and fact books are included in this document analysis.

In order to investigate how one adult education program negotiates implementing program objectives from three adult education theoretical perspectives, the researchers analyzed eight years of documentation from various stages of program development. Initial review of documents like emails between faculty and staff tasked with program development, training documents, meeting minutes and other key documents were reviewed, isolating and organizing (chronologically when possible) any documents that discussed program objectives. The researchers also utilized the documents to identify a program specific definition of an adult learner in order to better understand how program goals were developed to accommodate the target population of adult learners.

These documents were then reviewed and a process of initial coding was used to assign codes to sections of the document that represented one of three adult education perspectives (progressive, transformative, or related to human capital/ career focused objectives). Researchers also identified sections of text that seemed to embrace overlapping perspectives. After organizing documents based on specific adult education perspectives, the researchers conducted a second round of document analysis to identify how each perspective is expressed, what kind of data is used to justify program and learning outcomes and how strategic plans are developed in support of each perspective? By engaging with and placing these documents in conversation with one another we hope to “determine how [these] documents were consumed and used in organized settings [...] and] how they functioned in the development on an online adult education program (qtd. in Owen, 2014).

Findings and Conclusions

Despite beginning with a number of documents, presentation materials provided useful source material for examining the development of the online adult education program. While documents like committee papers, emails and training documents also provided valuable information, the presentations allowed researchers to analyze the program over time while
highlighting topics that were likely viewed with a great deal of importance. Furthermore, unlike other documents, the presentations were generally neutral in tone or opinion in relation to program goals and agendas which allowed researchers to engage with program materials as artifacts. Though a target audience is not specifically identified, presentations are seemingly geared to Penn State employees and used to summarize program objectives. The presentations also include dates, demographic information about prospective students and defines “adult learner” within the program parameters. In a series of presentations entitled Introducing the Adult Learner, one slide specifically defines the “Penn State adult learner […] as follows: [a] new student over 24 years old, veteran of the armed services, student of any age returning to school after four or more years, a person who assumes multiple roles such as parent, spouse/partner, employee, and student (including those under 24 years of age) [and/or a] staff member who is taking courses” (Academic Outreach and World Campus, n.d.). In addition to describing the adult learner, the series also includes an entire presentation geared to identifying and understanding the adult learner’s motivations for returning to school. The presentation includes survey results from adult learners indicating why they returned to school. The collected data indicates that the decision to return to school is multilayered. Adult learners list reasons like: personal enrichment (65), improving pay for current job (49), a desire to change careers (21), preparing for a new job within their field (34), earning a required credential (33), interaction with other students and networking (26), returning to complete a degree (22), the availability of tuition assistance (22), and renewing a certification (13) (Academic Outreach and World Campus, n.d.). Other notable data in this series includes information about levels of degree attainment and the job market within the state of Pennsylvania. These presentations describe a diverse adult learner population that is motivated to return to school for a variety of reasons. This information not only provides a foundation for program development, but also highlights a need to develop an educational program that must often address different educational goals (Academic Outreach and World Campus, n.d.)

In order to recruit adult learners, World Campus has to develop a program that can support the adult learner’s individual goals. The presented information serves as a foundation for creating such a program. Researchers can also draw links between this information and overarching adult education theories. For example, in the presentation focused on adult learner motivation we read that “an adult learner may be motivated by life transition or ‘trigger’ events” to return to school (Academic Outreach and World Campus, n.d.). This description of the adult learner coupled with demographic data and information about learner motivations can be characterized as a transformative view of adult education. A scholar that subscribes to Mezirow’s view of adult education would agree that adult education is a “process of transformation […] set in motion by a disorienting dilemma, such as job loss, that may stimulate adults to reflect upon and examine their beliefs […] and understanding of their needs, wants, and interests” (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Though the materials do not explicitly cite theories grounded in transformative learning we can begin to make links between theory and practice by examining program materials through this theoretical lens.

A number of presentation materials focused specifically on program development based on job outlooks, the students’ futures as potential employees, and educational attainment in relation to career goals. In one presentation titled Degree Completion Strategies for PA’s Adult Non-Completers (2009), the Pennsylvania Workforce Investment Board, Adult Learning Task Force and the Degree Completion Subcommittee join together to develop a career focused educational program. The Pennsylvania Workforce Investment Board is comprised of state officials as well
representatives from businesses like Proctor and Gamble, Volvo, and Harley-Davidson. Supporting partnerships between businesses and educational institutions and describing education as a vehicle for investing in people in relation to their value within the workforce reverberates human capital theories. Human capital theories view education as avenue for investing in humans “learning capacities [in a manner that is…] of comparable value to other resources involved in the production of goods and services” (qtd in. Cornacchione & Daugherty, 2013). In a section of the presentation titled Why Does Degree Completion Matter? the committee sets the goal of degree completion as a requirement for “[meeting] workforce needs” (Degree Completion for Pennsylvania, 2009). The presenters state that the committee is finding a way to “reprioritize existing public aid programs so that the aid is targeting individuals obtaining skills for demand occupations” (Degree Completion for Pennsylvania, 2009). In this presentation the goal of education clearly shifts from learner-centered to embracing a development model more concerned with supporting larger state and business interests. This is a perspective that believes that educators must support “a strong link between the world of school and the world of work, requiring active engagement by the private sector […] with high-quality training geared towards areas characterized by labor market shortages” (UNESCO, 2010).

The influence of the labor market is also apparent in other presentation documents. In another presentation entitled Adult Learner Research (2009) the World Campus staff discuss the “marketing process” for program development. In this presentation, we not only see the labor forces directing educational outcomes, but also influencing the language Penn State representatives use to discuss program development. The student is cast as a consumer, other schools are labeled as competitors, a number of slides discuss the Penn State “brand” and there is a continued practice of linking degree attainment to market demands by focusing on “growth sectors” (Adult Learner Research, 2009). As universities align themselves with the private sector “university administrators borrow terms from Business School M.A. programs that reference market efficiencies, branding opportunities, and consumer satisfaction” reinforcing the relationship between both parties (Cox, 2013).

We also reviewed presentations to evaluate whether or not they embraced an “emancipatory learning [perspective] where learners are positioned more for social and political action than individual learning” (Hansman & Mott, 2010). In another presentation entitled The Penn State Campuses and Outreach: A Vision for the Future (2010). The presentation lists a need to “serve the people of the commonwealth and beyond” as a primary goal of their strategic plan. The document also supports a view that educational programs have a duty to solve problems that impacting their larger communities. The presentation described extension and outreach initiatives as an avenue for “[addressing] pressing economic and social issues facing Pennsylvania” (Penn State Outreach, 2010). It is clear that university accepts responsibility for promoting social and political action, but we must also ask how these ideals are embedded within adult education programs. It seems that the value of these statements can only be judged if learning to promote positive social change is a requirement or goal of their educational program. In another portion of the presentation we read that university officials should “provide [students with] more curricular and co-curricular learning experiences [through] internships and service learning” (Penn State Outreach, 2010). Promoting co-curricular activities and service learning opportunities both suggest that the institution places some importance on the need for students to engage with their community in through meaningful action, and that these goals are included as objectives of the online program.

A number of presentations were reviewed, but the researchers ultimately focused on four
presentations for this discussion. A majority of the presentations contained in the dataset discussed educational attainment as a vehicle for career development, and in turn repeated a similar message. The chosen articles were served as a foundation for exploring what kind of language a real-world online education program uses when describing adult education’s theoretical perspectives. These presentations allowed researchers to see how theories can be embedded in the actual practice of program development.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The idea that adult learners represent a unique target population for institutions of higher education is one that is illustrated in the formation of adult-centered educational programs across the nation. By working through the documents it can be determined what unique characteristics of adult learners are expressed in the development of such programs. Examining the relationship between program objectives and adult education theories can help educators begin to understand how to expand their programs to the online space.

The emphasis for staff to understand adult learners and identify as an adult learner was becoming increasingly important as adult learner populations at World Campus grew and continued to rise throughout this period of development. In the 2008-2009 academic year, Commonwealth Campuses of Penn State were seeing a decrease in the number of adult learners while World Campus was experiencing a 24 percent increase (Senate Committees on Outreach and Student Life, 2010). In this same academic year, adult learners accounted for 84% of World Campus students (Academic Outreach, 2011). After this increase of students, Academic Outreach and the University as a whole began to find develop resources and recommendations for enhancing the educational experience for adult learners.

In the 2011-2012 academic year the Academic Outreach department spanned from deployed a workshop series with the goal of World Campus staff members to be a “better resource to [their] clients, whether [they] deal with students directly or whether [they] provide services and expertise to others who do have direct contact” and “to understand what being an adult learner ‘feels’ like” (Academic Outreach, 2011). Some of the presentations in this workshop series were used in this dataset and referenced in the previous section. Penn State sought to emphasize that everyone is an adult learner as those working in World Campus are “are adult learners [who] learn about the different aspects of [their] job, both initially and then continuously in response to organizational changes,” (Academic Outreach, 2011). The dedication to serving adult learners at a high level of quality through practice and theory was found by the statement “The more you know, the better you can fill your role as a lifelong learner, the better you can serve the students you work with, and the better you can be a resource for others who work with adult learners,” (Academic Outreach, 2011).

While adult learners are a unique and growing subpopulation in higher education, there is no one set of demographics, goals, and learning styles that can be applied to the group as a whole. Each learner is unique and pursues higher education for a variety of reasons. Penn State was successful in developing resources to research, acknowledge, and support adult learners for both fulfillments of obtaining career and becoming a lifelong learner. The presentations evaluated in this study provide groundwork for further research in the purpose of institutions serving adult learners and how they execute their programming.

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