

## Issues and Perspectives

# Undergraduate Adult Education in the Contemporary Neoliberal University

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*In contemporary times, undergraduate adult education programs have to respond to changing student profiles and needs, institutional requirements, marketplace and workplace demands, and emerging technologies. Students in these programs tend to be non-traditional learners who are usually older and employed. They come with an array of prior learning experiences in life, work, and community contexts. These motivated learners have diverse reasons for wanting to engage in academic studies in adult education: They require knowledge of adult education to become trainers in business and industry; they have been educators, but they need to know what's new to enhance and update their everyday pedagogical practices; they seek a university credential to ensure a new future; they need new learning for job transitions; they need to learn new modes of assessment; they want to work with industry partners to write curricula. This list of reasons is far from exhaustive. Considering the kinds of non-traditional students seeking a Bachelor of Education in Adult Education today, admission requirements need to be more in tune with what they bring to the learning table. For example, prior learning assessment that recognizes significant experiential learning could be a stronger criterion in the admissions process. In this perspective piece, we examine the current learning milieu in the neoliberal university and some matters affecting student participation in undergraduate adult education.*

*À l'époque contemporaine, les programmes de premier cycle d'éducation des adultes doivent s'adapter à l'évolution des profils et des besoins des étudiants, des exigences institutionnelles, des demandes du marché du travail et des milieux de travail, et des nouvelles technologies. Les étudiants inscrits à ces programmes tendent à être des apprenants non-traditionnels qui sont souvent plus âgés et salariés. Ils arrivent avec toute une gamme d'expériences d'apprentissage dans la vie, au travail et dans la communauté. Les raisons qui poussent ces apprenants motivés à entreprendre des études académiques sont diverses : il leur faut les connaissances fournies par les programmes d'éducation des adultes pour devenir formateurs dans le monde des affaires ou en industrie; ils ont été enseignants mais doivent se mettre à jour de sorte à améliorer et moderniser leur pratiques pédagogiques; ils désirent une accréditation universitaire pour s'assurer un nouvel avenir; ils ont besoin de nouvelles connaissances pour changer d'emploi; ils doivent apprendre de nouvelles formes d'évaluation; ils veulent travailler avec des partenaires du secteur pour créer du matériel pédagogique. Cette liste est loin d'être exhaustive. Compte tenu du genre d'étudiants non-traditionnels qui s'inscrivent au Baccalauréat en Éducation en éducation des adultes, les exigences d'admission doivent être davantage en phase avec les compétences et les expériences avec lesquelles ils arrivent à l'université. Par exemple, une évaluation des connaissances acquises qui tiendrait compte de l'apprentissage par l'expérience pourrait constituer un critère de choix plus important pendant le processus d'admission. Dans cet article d'opinion, nous nous penchons sur le milieu actuel de l'apprentissage dans le monde*

*universitaire néolibéral et sur quelques enjeux touchant la participation des étudiants dans les programmes de premier cycle en éducation des adultes.*

### **The Contemporary University Learning Milieu in the Education of Adults**

Since the 1970s, the mediation of life and work and the navigation of learning in adult and higher education have taken place in a contemporary culture precariously shaped by neoliberalism and globalization (Barros, 2012; Grace, 2013; Harvey, 2005). With regard to higher education and undergraduate adult education as a constituent, there is pressure to prioritize the economic context to shape learning with most worth (Grace, 2013, 2014a). Thus, in the face of these predominant, coexisting forces, instrumental learning generally supersedes social and cultural learning as learning with currency in the institutionalized contexts of neoliberal universities. In higher education, there is a pronounced emphasis on learning for new economies from local to global contexts, with a pragmatic emphasis on technical knowledge and skill acquisition so learners can be shaped as commodities (Grace, 2013; Greenspan, 2008; Holmwood, 2014). Although *lifelong learning for all* has been the mantra of the supranational Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development since the mid-1990s, in the contemporary higher education learning milieu many learners feel sidelined, and even disenfranchised, as institutionally prioritized learning trumps individual learning in setting parameters in formal learning programs (Grace, 2013, 2014a).

With learning today linked to the knowledge economy and to progress, as defined by neoliberalism and globalization, higher education and constituent academic adult education are expected to be predominantly instrumental endeavours in order to be sustained (Grace, 2013). The social and cultural purposes of higher education and adult education appear less important in this milieu marked by uncertainty and a survivalist mentality. This can alienate learners who wish to become social educators and cultural workers concerned with freedom to learn in addition to just and ethical practices. Indeed, even learners seeking instrumental forms of education can feel marginalized when they realize they can't reach the knowledge-and-skill threshold needed to transition successfully into instrumental learning in neoliberalized higher education. Moreover, learners who already have significant education credentials are not immune to negative feelings as they experience instrumental learning as a perennial effort to keep up in order to survive in a neoliberal work world. Of course, educators can also be affected. For example, academic adult educators committed to engaging students in social and cultural forms of education that abet holistic living are commonly relegated to a lower level in the educational hierarchy compared to those educators who prioritize instrumental learning to benefit a burgeoning knowledge economy (Grace, 2012, 2013). In the next section we will look at how undergraduate adult education is positioned in the contemporary neoliberal university.

### **Undergraduate Adult Education in Today's University**

Both of us have had the experience of conducting an external review of undergraduate adult education programs in a Canadian university. We are both critical educators who recognize the need for instrumental education, but want to see it juxtaposed with the needs for social and cultural education. We value programming in undergraduate adult education that is not only responsive to stakeholders like employers (a pragmatic need tied to the performance of new

economies), but also responsive to students (a critical need tied to democratic forms of education, learner freedom, and lifelong learning for all). In this regard, we see an important challenge: we must develop and implement adult education programs that are capable of responding to what both the market and learners demand. Regarding learners, these programs have to be able to respond to contemporary needs associated with changing learner demographics. Programs should also demonstrate the potential for future growth and development as new priorities emerge connected to shifts in the ways students desire to learn and in their demands and priorities. In the end, as critical educators we want learners to be prepared to navigate everyday existence by having their own arsenal of knowledge and skills that enables them to attend to matters of context, disposition, and relationship in planning, problem solving, and executing other functions of living, learning, and working.

In Canada, academic adult education found space and place in the university during the 1960s. Historically, with Faculties of Education predominantly focused on teacher education, academic adult education has often been viewed as something lesser as faculty conflated academic adult education with other forms of adult education such as literacy and community education (Grace, 2014b). There remains a need to lift up academic adult education, focusing on the breadth and depth of the field of study and practice. Faculties of Education that have academic adult education programs as components of departmental offerings have to provide appropriate recognition and accommodation of these programs and their foundational methods, program design, and evaluation elements. This work begins with a strong and clear focus placing value on academic adult education in a Faculty Strategic Plan. Such a plan should seek synchronicity between teacher education and academic adult education in ways that clarify how these forms of university education can be complementary, benefiting the Faculty as a whole. In this regard, academic adult education should be an integrated part of a Faculty of Education. This requires building awareness of adult educator roles and creating community among educators working in academic adult education and teacher education.

Logically, from institutional and academic perspectives, adult education programs like teacher education programs need a structural base as degree granting programs requiring an array of institutional supports. The unique contributions of adult education programs have to be recognized. These programs provide opportunities for students to employ self-directed learning as a staple of andragogy and to engage in holistic learning that enables students to deal with changes required in workplace knowledge and skills and workplace culture. More specifically, these programs prepare graduates to work in an array of contemporary adult learning environments. They are valuable programs for professionals working in diverse contexts including healthcare, policing, the military, finance industries, and community colleges. Often students seek a Bachelor of Education in Adult Education for credentialing so they can be more innovative and skilled workers or for adjusting careers and career paths to meet the changing demands of today's workplaces. For those students whose daily job is to facilitate adult learning in workplaces, the degree program is a vehicle enabling them to learn about the pedagogical and practical dimensions of training workers to be productive in contemporary workplaces where periodic updating is normalized. Here faculty members with responsibility for developing and implementing academic adult education programs need to consider what constitutes both relevant and meaningful curriculum and a unique and satisfying student learning experience. They also need to focus on innovative course delivery, including an emphasis on pedagogical methods conducive to online delivery that have transferability to students' workplaces. Faculty need to remember that working students appreciate flexibility in programming as well as the

ability to be able to work on a degree over an extended period while juggling work and family. This is especially important for women who continue to carry the lion's share of family and home care (English & Irving, 2015). They often appreciate the ability to study part-time and asynchronously online as key factors enabling their participation.

Given that working students often prefer to complete their program requirements online, faculty have to pay attention to appropriate and adequate use of educational technology. As they develop courses for online delivery, they have to consider methods, strategies, activities, and modes of instruction and evaluation that are conducive to online learning culture. It is vital for faculty to consider how online adult learning is different from face-to-face adult learning in terms of the learning culture and instructional methods employed. In academic adult education, this means keeping curriculum and instruction innovative and relevant in online learning contexts. It is vital to create a continuous positive learning environment using online delivery since it has become the preferred mode of engagement for students with busy work and family lives.

Good undergraduate adult education programs are concerned with depth and breadth of knowledge, knowledge of teaching methodologies, application of knowledge, communications skills, awareness of the limits of knowledge, autonomy and professional capacity, and social responsibility and awareness. Addressing these concerns helps position these programs as an engagement in education with critical dimensions. Here it is important to focus on program integrity, articulating a set of values that sustain program strengths in meeting the holistic needs of students. These values shape a framework for organizing and revising core and elective courses that provide students with increased opportunities for modeling and practicing principles, methods, and techniques specific to adult education. Core courses can cover such areas as foundations of adult education, curriculum design for adult learners, facilitation, adult learning theory, evaluation, work and learning, and research. Elective courses can cover such topical areas as gender issues, older learners, inclusive education, intercultural communication, digital learning and technology for pedagogical purposes, and instructional design for those students interested in delivering online distance education courses in their own workplaces. Regarding electives, students want choice, accessibility, availability, and relevance to be markers of their delivery. In undergraduate adult education programs, it is important to review what kinds of electives are appropriate to the design and quality of the degree. It is also important to consider whether elective clusters grouped by themes might be feasible to meet contemporary demands in areas like instructional design for online engagement and appropriate use of technology. In sum, contemporary undergraduate adult education programs that meet market demands while being critically oriented offer quality programming that is attentive to student learning-and-work needs while being encompassing and holistic, considering learner diversity. Such programming juxtaposes concerns with the individual and the institution; pays attention to social, cultural, and economic contexts; provides choice and flexibility; focuses on authentic contemporary adult educator practices; considers the whole person living a whole life; encourages learning partnerships; links evaluation to specificities of curriculum and real-world simulations; and provides students opportunities to be self-directed. With respect to these criteria, there should be regular assessment of an adult education program's relevance in terms of providing meaningful curriculum and innovative course delivery. This can include practical foci on pedagogical methods conducive to online delivery and on knowledge, skills, and techniques transferable to students' workplaces.

### Concluding Perspective: Be Open to Possibility

When faculty and students provide input and constructive critique, it is possible for contemporary undergraduate adult education programs to be critically oriented while meeting market and workplace demands. Such programs constitute advocacy for lifelong learning as critical action that prepares adult learners for work and for the rest of life (Grace, 2013). When undergraduate adult education keeps students at the heart of matters, it focuses on fostering holistic development, political and economic understanding, and cultural change involving social agency, support, and action (Grace, 2016). This creates opportunities for academic adult education to have instrumental and inclusive dimensions as faculty and learners critically examine what constitutes worthwhile learning, quality work, and “the good life” (Grace, 2013, 2016). This is difficult work for all as everyone strives to determine what constitutes adult learning with meaning and value in a world where employers and other interest groups have their own sometimes competing, sometimes opposing perspectives (Grace, 2013, 2014a).

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