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Adult Learning and the Shrinking Globe

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Keywords: adult education, andragogy, vocational education, Western Europe, globalization.

Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable is to explore the evolution of Adult Education in several European nations relative to the United States and the advantages of the broadened European vision of adult learning as lifelong-lifewide. Through examining these practices we may discover options for inclusion in the United States.

The Evolution of Adult Education in Western Europe

To gain an understanding of the evolution of Adult Education in Western Europe one must first understand the social/political landscape of Western Europe and how it differs from our common frame of reference, the United States. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the emergence of the institutional basis for Adult Education in Europe; Mechanics Institutes and worker's colleges in Britain, and in Germany and Austria the Arbeiterbildung & Erwachsenenbildung evolve out of the Workers Education Movement (Savicevic, 1991). Adult educational offerings and practices have developed in response to local social, cultural and educational traditions, as well as to unique regional needs. Policies and legislation related to Adult Education vary by region and nation, and depend on national and local governmental structure. Common throughout the Western world is that both private and public funds and interests are focused on Adult Education; however the offices, agencies, organizations and their specific foci are greatly varied.

Andragogy, a Theory, a Model, or a Science?

Lifelong or 'Lifewide,' Learning (Reischmann, 2004) and Adult Education have their roots in Greek and Roman philosophy and thought (Savicevic, 1991). There has been much discussion in the literature about Adult Education, as well as the term "Andragogy" since its first noted use by Alexander Kapp in Germany in the 1800's (Reischmann, 2004; Savicevic, 1991). This discussion increased significantly in the last 40 years since Malcolm Knowles proposed his "Andragogical Model." Unlike in the United States, where Knowles' model predominates and Andragogy remains relatively confined to specific methods and application, much of Europe has adopted a wider view. In Europe, Andragogy has been seen as a moniker or name-space for an emerging science or discipline, as well as to describe a specific practice, or implementation of theories and practices within other disciplines (Poggeler, 1994). Understanding the origin and use of the word Andragogy, and what this may imply in different regions, is essential.

Global Economic Change and the World of Work

Free-market economics, the globalization of production and technological advancements in production have caused a shift of large-scale industrial and technological manufacturing to less expensive production centers in other countries such as: China, India, Asia and South and Central America. The result of this is the downsizing or complete cessation of production of many products in both the United States and in Europe, and thereby a shift of jobs to other divisions and sectors (Cheney, 2009; Singh, 1998). These displaced workers must enhance their skill-set or completely retrain for new areas of production and/or entry into new fields; without

this re/training and effort they will remain unemployed. Given these conditions the demand in/for Adult Education has risen, and to meet this need, new programs and funds are being developed and devoted to this purpose. Vocational education, workplace skills, retraining and continued professional education are the focus of many programs in European nations (Mulenga, 2006).

The Potential Promises of Distance and E-Learning

Technological advances have increased efficiency and broadened the reach of human communications, and these technologies are being adapted to the educational environment to help meet the increased demand in Adult Education. In the view of Singh (1998, p. 15) flexible learning systems are required to support horizontal and vertical occupational change; he also states that increased modularization of curricula will be required to achieve this. The use of videoconferencing, learning management systems (LMS), digital presentation programs, electronic documents and texts, and other e-learning technologies enables educators to transmit coursework and interact with learners and educators around the globe synchronously or asynchronously. Perraton suggests that this one-to-many approach allows content/subject matter experts, educators, to reach a much wider audience, students, at a significantly reduced cost (as cited in Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003, p.45). Even with the benefits of E-learning, significant investment in programs, educational centers and an increase in the number of educators and training on technology use for educators will be required to meet expected demands.

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