GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY
IN THE ADULT EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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## Abstract

Teachers and learners increasingly attribute classroom tensions and conflicts to sharp age differences among students. Supported in part by inter-generational research, I suggest that these tensions and conflicts may also reflect broader struggles for expression of identity and self-authorship in an increasingly postmodern context, and a transition in how we think about the classroom itself.

## Introduction

Adult education and community college classrooms represent some of the most diverse learning settings in the practice of education. Students with quite different stories and from widely different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds often find themselves closely working together, and teachers are challenged to address this range of experience and difference. One of the ways in which this difference is being manifest is in the diversity of learners' ages, ranging from their late teens to mid forties and fifties, and even older. While this mix of age groups is not a new development, recent popularization of generational research has heightened awareness of these differences. There is an increased tendency to attribute a variety of misunderstandings, communication problems, and conflict to intergenerational difference (Thau & Heflin, 1997; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Younger students sometimes complain about how older learners obsess about their experiences, how they constantly talk topics to death, and get them "off track." Older learners point to the lack of seriousness for learning among younger students and how disruptive and even disrespectful they can be to the learning environment. Faced with what often feels like irreconcilable differences, teachers agonize over how to accommodate these differences in ages.

Some notion of a "generation gap" has always been a part of our cultural scene, as older generations have perennially bemoaned deviations manifest among the young. The "baby-boomers," who are now at midlife or near retirement, warned their peers as they were coming of age in the fifties and sixties to "trust no one over thirty." However, it is only within recent years where attention has been drawn to the multiple generations within the same social environment, and the potential for serious conflict. Considerable energy is going into developing and marketing interventions to address these differences. In this paper, however, I will argue that what is being touted as intergenerational difference really reflects the confluence of three inter-related phenomena: 1) increased mixing of different age cohorts due to changing structures and organization of work and education; 2) a growing recognition of the importance of self-authorship in the development of identity; and 3) an increasingly postmodern world.

### Intergenerational Difference and the Changing Nature of Work and Education

The basic premise behind the idea of intergenerational difference is that we are seeing an increasing trend towards the mixing of individuals from different generations in social contexts such as the workplace and education. While such a blending of different age cohorts can at times foster amazing surges of creativity, it more often seems to represent fundamental differences of and conflicts around values, ambition, world-views, mind-sets, and ways of working and thinking. As Zemke et. al., (2000) suggest, "The sounds of generations in conflict are heard around the water cooler, across the cafeteria table, at the office, at the coffee bar, and on the e-mail whine boards of 1,001 corporations and public servers" (p. 11). To this list we could add classrooms in adult and higher education as well, where teachers often complain of the lack of respect for authority among the younger students, younger students complain about the ways in which older adult learners like to go on about their experiences, and older learners decry the lack of

seriousness to learning among the younger students. While business organizations anticipate the presence of four different generations within the workplace, educational institutions are already facing this reality in their current programs and learning settings.

Although the idea of a generation gap has been with us for a long time, certain socio-cultural changes have brought about situations in which we are experiencing a mixing of generations that appears relatively unparalleled in recent history (Zemke, et. al., 2000). Changes in the ways in which workplaces are structured and organized have virtually eliminated the ways in which older workers were typically kept separate from newer, younger workers. More emphasis on performance and less emphasis on seniority has resulted in relatively rapid movement of some young workers, at times ahead of more seasoned and experienced workers. Flatter organizational structures and increased emphasis on teamwork and collaboration has brought together workers from different generations. While the notion of intergenerational difference has become most apparent and visible in the workplace, changes in career paths and an increasingly volatile employment climate have resulted in more adults returning to school. This trend is perhaps most noticeable within community college classrooms, where it is not uncommon to have students ranging from their late teens to late fifties or older. In addition, among teachers in adult and higher education, there is a growing awareness of the need for learning experiences to be collaborative. They are designing more learning environments where students work together in diverse groups on common group tasks and goals. As these trends continue, more and more community college teachers are seeking assistance and advice to manage emerging conflicts among students, derived in part from what they perceive to be differences in how younger and older students think about and approach learning.

Generational research has expanded our understanding of diversity within settings for adult learning. Fueled in large part by emergence into young adulthood of those born in the late seventies and early eighties, this scholarship underscores the significance of this historical period in adult and higher education. Rapid escalations in technology have shaped the core beliefs, values, attitudes, and styles of a whole new generation of learners, with a worldview dramatically different than many of the preceding generations. Yet, this "digital revolution" has also served to radically re-shape the workplace and many career paths, resulting in more adults pursuing additional education while they raise families, change careers, or keep pace with changing knowledge and skills in their present positions. The digital revolution has also changed our educational processes and environments, providing more access to more people across a much wider range of topics, and doing so much quicker than ever before (Tapscott, 1998). Not only are learners from widely different generations being increasingly asked to work together but the tasks and problems they are being asked to work on and the knowledge necessary to address these problems are more complex, uncertain, and ambiguous.

Like differences attributed to race, gender, and learning styles, educators are being encouraged to learn to work across and manage differences among learners who represent fundamentally different age cohorts. In large part, this process of managing these differences emphasizes the need for educators to learn more about the core values, beliefs, and attitudes represented by these different groups. Through such knowledge, educators can hopefully develop deeper insights into what are often experienced as confusing, baffling, and even frustrating differences in learning experiences. Teachers and learners, however, bring to the learning setting expectations of one another that are informed not only by their generational location but also by differing developmental levels that shape their understandings of self-other relationships. Framing conflicts in the educational environment as arising from intergenerational differences fails to adequately reflect the changing nature of self-object relationships in adulthood and how cognitive structures influence our expectations of one another, what counts as knowledge, and what it means to learn.


Adult Learning, Development, and Self-Authorship

If one listens closely to the interactions between teachers and learners, or among learners of differing generational cohorts, it is possible to hear differing views of knowledge and how one comes to know. Connecting learning with the idea of self-authorship reflects a constructive-developmental perspective of learning, a view articulated by Robert Kegan (1994; 1982) and elaborated upon within the context of higher education by Marcia Baxter Magolda (1999) and others. In essence, this view suggests "(1) that students construct knowledge by organizing and making meaning of their experiences, and (2) that this construction takes place in the context of their evolving assumptions about knowledge itself and students' role in creating it" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 6). Kegan (1994) stresses the importance for educators of knowing not only *what* students understand about the subject they are teaching but the *way* they understand it. Central to this process is incorporating learners' experiences in our teaching and the ways in which they organize and make sense of these experiences. Their present methods of meaning-making serve as a foundation for developing more complex and elaborated ways of knowing themselves and their worlds. This emphasis reflects a focus on *self-authorship*, our capacity to construct and reconstruct a sense of who we are in the world.

According to Kegan (1994; 1982), the self comes to be constituted by movement or evolution through six different levels of subject-object relations, ranging from the incorporative and impulsive stages characteristic of infancy and early childhood to institutional and inter-individual stages of mature adulthood. Each of these stages reflects differing understandings of personal boundaries, of what is self and not-self. Earlier stages reflect a relative inability to maintain a differentiation between self and other. For example, the young child often confuses the mother with him or herself (Kegan, 1982). As we mature, our development is marked by recurring issues of differentiation and integration, indicative of the various developmental stages. Transitions in these stages are marked by the emergence of fundamentally different ways of making sense of our selves and our worlds, in *how* we think and feel as well as *what* we think and feel. As we develop and grow, what we initially claimed intuitively as a subjective part of ourselves comes to be "thrown off" as an object, which we are then able to see and reflect on apart from ourselves. For example, as teenagers and young adults we typically move from implicitly seeing our friends as part of who we are to explicitly recognizing that we have friends who are close to us but are none-the-less different from us in important ways. In many respects, these different stages of development reflect what Mezirow has referred to as frames of reference or meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). Depending on where we are as learners in this journey of development, we will see and make sense of our worlds in much different ways than others who may be in a quite different place in their own journeys. These locations inform and shape our expectations both of ourselves and of those with whom we interact.

To help learners develop mastery and deeper understanding of the subject matter, we in adult and higher education have increasingly moved toward more active, collaborative, and experience-based forms of teaching and learning. But we sometimes forget that these methods are fundamentally grounded in constructivist views of knowledge. Thus, as we gather learners together in diverse groups to collaboratively work on tasks and problems, we may be implicitly creating environments that encourage learners to express themselves and give voice to their sense-making and understanding. That is, these collaborative, experience-based activities become locations for fostering and forming self-authorship. Given the opportunity, learners will come at these tasks and problems from their respective developmental locations and their own experiences, both of which are significantly shaped and influenced by the historical period in which they have come of age. The notion of constructive-developmentalism and the related ideas of meaning-making and self-authorship have increasingly but largely implicitly shaped an emerging understanding of teaching and learning in adult and higher education. Not only are we witnessing more of a blending within our educational institutions of adult learners from quite distinct generational eras but we are also creating learning environments that give voice to learners from differing developmental locations. The bringing together of learners with such diverse frames of reference within learning environments that implicitly encourage voice and self-authorship often results in inevitable disagreements, clashes, and conflicts. Learning to work

across these differences becomes a critical need for educators helping adults learn (Sidorkin, 2000), a task further compounded by an increasingly postmodern world.

## Identity and the Confusing World of Postmodernism

The last thirty years have witnessed dramatic changes in social, cultural, and economic dimensions of society, including the growth of service-sector employment, post-Fordist models of production and organization of work, globalization of business and economies, and new forms of communication and information technology (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). We are less anchored to traditional forms of community and family, and choices and directions of lives have increasingly become the responsibility of individuals. As a population, the United States has become more diverse and pluralistic. Taken as a whole these changes, reflecting what some have come to call "postmodernity," undermine long-held assumptions about structures of society, the functions of its political and economic institutions, and even notions of goodness and truth. While present space limitations preclude an indepth discussion of this complex idea, we can summarize several points that relate to and help clarify what others refer to as intergenerational difference.

For many, the emergence of postmodernism reflects the failures of the promises of modernity to contribute to the betterment of humanity. For the past two hundred years, human society in the western world has been dominated by notions of reality and knowledge arising out of the Enlightenment. Central to this view is that idea that realities – truth, beauty, and morality – have an objective existence beyond what we represent them to be (Hancock & Tyler, 2001). Furthermore, human betterment can be achieved by careful study and articulation of these realities. Enshrined in most cultural institutions, including adult and higher education, these modernist values and beliefs are now increasingly being called into question. While claiming to neither necessarily refute nor reject these claims, postmodernists point to the incredulity of a world-view informed by the Enlightenment and modernist assumptions. This critique has resulted in decentering knowledge, undermining certainty, and devaluing specialist, discipline-based forms of knowledge (Usher et. at., 1997). Knowledge is constantly changing and it has become widely and even overwhelmingly accessible. With the emergence of the postmodern condition, uncertainty has come to pervade thought, action, and identity. All of this has contributed to a growing skepticism in the idea of progress – the idea of human betterment through increased knowledge - and conflict over the overall power, aims, and purposes of education. The effects of postmodernism, however, reverberate beyond the hallowed halls of educational institutions, workplaces, and economic and political structures. Associated with the decentering of knowledge is a decentering of the self. Modernist ideas of searching for a true, authentic, unitary self are giving way to continual shaping and reshaping of subjectivities and identities (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). We are drawn to an increasing variety of novel experiences that are no longer anchored in a stable and unified sense of self. Experience becomes a context for "a constant unfolding desire that is never fully and finally realized" (Usher et. at., 1997, p. 10).

Changes associated with postmodernism have generated a recognition of and pride in difference, and a revival of identities that have been suppressed. According to Usher et al., (1997, p. 5), "Valorization of difference and a recognition of the significance of the particularities of differences" have given impetus to the emergence of postmodern identities. Our classrooms have increasingly come to represent a wide diversity of meanings, lifestyle choices, and identities. Expression and recognition of these differences involves contestation and struggle. As this diversity is recognized, honored, and expressed, we begin to realize that difference is what makes us human (Sidorkin, 1999), and that "sameness can only be maintained through the repression of difference" (Usher et. al. 1997, p. 7). Postmodernism, therefore, calls into question the very assumptions that have traditionally structured the social contexts of classrooms in adult and community college education. The declining authority of the teacher and text, a growing recognition of the importance of difference, an increasing reliance on experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, a loosening of the role of community, and the highly volatile environment of work and

the economy contribute to learning environments marked by high levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, and confusion.

## Generational Differences and the Problem of Identity

The tensions and conflicts attributed to intergenerational difference, then, can now be seen as a broader set of issues. One's sense of self shapes expectations of one' self and of others, and that ongoing processes of meaning-making are located within a social context in which all the rules seem to be changing. These differences reflect the ways in which, in the adult education and community college, classroom, learner identity is formed and re-formed. The apparent tensions and conflicts associated with learners from different age groups reflect a questioning of an increasingly problematic modernist perspective and the widely different expectations that learners bring to this process. This is not to say that intergenerational differences are not important. The lenses of constructive-developmentalism and postmodernism, however, help us to better understand what is at the center of these tensions and conflicts - the problem of identity – and how both psychological processes and changing social and cultural institutions serve to inform identity formation.

Differences in our expectations of one another constitute much of the disagreement and tension reflected in the generation-related conflict being voiced by both educators and learners.  These differences in expectations, in part, flow from fundamental differences in what we regard as self and other. For example, behaviors that teachers might regard as outright disrespectful of their authority as a teacher are often not even "seen" by younger learners. Because what they do reflects so much a part of their subjective sense of who they are, they are unable to full grasp and understand the teachers' objections to their behaviors and, more importantly, unable to comply with what the teachers expect of them. Similar conclusions might be drawn regarding disagreements among learners from different generations. So the beliefs and values that are reflected in members of different generations are not just assimilated from their outer environments but represent the learners' sense-making capacities arising from their experiences of these contexts. We can no more get learners who do not have the cognitive structures necessary to meet our expectations to change than we can get apple juice from oranges. Regardless of what generation they are from learners' beliefs about authority, knowledge, truth, goodness, and what it means to learn are intimately bound up with their evolving sense of self. As they continue to recognize more and more of their worlds as something they explicitly *have* as a part of who they are, rather than *being* implicitly bound up with who they are, these beliefs will change, becoming more complex, multiplistic, nuanced, uncertain, and tentative.

## Conclusion

This process of "development" proceeds in a world where modernist worldviews and assumptions are coming increasingly into question. A major aspect of this difficulty is that adult education and community colleges, and the educators who work in these institutions are embedded in and reflect largely modernist understandings of the nature of the world, of knowledge, and what it means to learn and to know. In a sense, generational differences, along with other forms of diversity, might be thought of metaphorically as the expression of the multiple identities of our learning settings, and the struggle for a kind of collective self-authorship. We might think of our classrooms in terms of the struggles we as individuals have with being able to see and recognize that which is different from us. As educators and learners, we want to focus on the *transitions* that enable us to perceive as other that which we were previously implicitly seeing as part of ourselves. Perhaps the attention to intergenerational difference in these settings suggests that we are in such a transition, moving from a perspective where we all conform to some modernist notions of teaching and learning to one that admits and honors difference instead of sameness. That we don't know how to work across these differences right away should be no surprise. But as we come to recognize others who are different from ourselves and to value and honor these differences, we engage in a kind of collective self-authorship, in which the "selves" of society (or a

classroom) become increasingly differentiated and re-integrated. Both exciting and challenging is the realization that learning to work across intergenerational differences takes place within a network of power relations. This struggle for individual and collective self-authorship involves contestation against dominance and subordination. Becoming aware of power and how is it used to address differences are important dimensions of this process of self-authorship and identity formation.

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