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CONTINUING AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION AS ENGAGED LEARNING

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Abstract

CPE providers focus on understanding learning needs, designing and providing educational offerings, and evaluating programs. Cervero and Daly believe these decisions are made within the contested spaces of the social, professional, institutional, and educational systems; however, CPE continues to focus on the needs of the workplace and economic demands. We argue for a re-framing of how CPE is conceptualized and situated within the realm of adult learning and development specific to higher education institutions which engage in the endeavor, proposing the Community Transformation Model for Continuing and Extended Education to address neo-liberalism bias.

Keywords: neoliberal ideology, continuing professional education, Community Transformation Model for Continuing and Extended Education

An early and significant goal of Continuing Professional Education (CPE) is the professionalization of the workforce through the provision of learning and development activities across a variety of providers and sites. CPE providers focus on understanding learning needs, designing and providing educational offerings, and evaluating programs. CPE is mainly focused on providing training and education for individuals to gain licensure or re-certification in their professions (Cervero & Daly, 2016). In this context, CPE and continuing pre-professional educators hold specific views of the individual, how the individual is situated within the broader societal context, and the individual's relationship to the workforce.

Cervero and Daly (2016) argue there is a shift occurring in CPE which has required providers to re-conceptualize how changing venues, shifts in pedagogies, and interdisciplinary aspects influence the overall goals and provision of programming. They argue, moving forward, theorists and practitioners need to reflect on the overall purpose of CPE, where and what is presented, who delivers content, and what systems are utilized. Cervero and Daly assert these decisions are made within the contested spaces of the social, professional, institutional, and educational systems. Ultimately though, in Cervero & Daly's conceptualization, CPE continues to focus on the development of the professional (or pre-professional) and is strongly connected to workplace and economic demands.

We argue this shift in CPE should also include a re-framing of how CPE is conceptualized and situated within the realm of adult learning and development specific to higher education institutions which engage in the endeavor. Contested spaces should include consideration of the larger societal contexts as well as community needs and engagement. In many aspects, higher education has adopted neo-liberal thinking and practices which have resulted in a market driven mission. Higher education institutions have altered how they frame students and how they engage with surrounding communities. As a result, community members are viewed from the lens of commodification and as potential customers for the university rather than partners.

Neo-liberal ideology incorporates the idea that competition across institutions is essential as it forces institutions to tailor course offerings to market needs, linking higher education content to for-profit business and workplace needs. Indeed, CEO's and leaders of for-profit organizations sit on university boards of trustees and influence university goals. Through this lens, higher and/or continuing education institutions that respond adeptly to overall markets will thrive, and those that do not will inevitably and rightly fail. Giroux (2018) argues that mission of higher education institutions are being reshaped "with an intense emphasis on privatization, commodification, deregulation, training, and managerialism" (p. 110) while becoming more inaccessible to American youth. There is less emphasis on the role of higher education institutions in support of the development of civic societies which includes the furtherance of economic and social justice (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). Furthermore, as higher education institutions focus on becoming more economically efficient in their operations, they have sought and engaged in alternative sources of revenue. Partnerships with for-profit organizations or international relationships have become increasingly common in higher education. Increasingly, CPE is viewed as another avenue to increase revenue and outreach to the community is framed through a consumer lens.

Continuing Education programs, in partnership with urban communities and local organizations, can provide avenues to develop lifelong learning networks. In urban centers, universities should understand the necessity of preparing new workers to fill talent gaps and provide opportunities for workforce development strategies emphasizing outreach for underserved communities. The problem is, however, that there is frequently a disconnect between Continuing Education and community-based development as an avenue to address social inequality and improve the overall wellbeing of urban areas (Martin, 2001).

Through discussions and experiences of the authors and theoretical discussion as Continuing Education Director, University Administrator, and Adult Education faculty members, we realized the disconnect between the purposes of the university as it plans Continuing Education programs and the needs of the urban community in which our institution resides. The university's mantra is "Engaged Learning"; however, we question how the university is engaging the urban community in meaningful learning networks and lifelong learning. Through our discussions, we asked questions, such as what needs are there in the community that the university is not meeting? Whose interests are being served by this university Continuing Education program? And what models might more accurately depict and assist Continuing Education planners to meet the university and urban community needs?

The purpose of this theoretical discussion and model is to describe a developing Continuing Education model for an urban university that focuses on preparing new workers to fill talent gaps while providing opportunity for workforce development strategies emphasizing outreach and training for underserved communities in partnership with community organizations and business sector stakeholders. This model is particularly essential in urban centers where high school non-completion is prevalent and significant numbers of individuals remain in low wage jobs.

Neoliberalism and Higher Education

The events of 2020 have highlighted ways in which American society has fragmented, compartmentalized, and rejected science and critical perspectives. The world experienced Covid19, a global pandemic, that had significant impacts on individuals' lives and health as well as major impacts to economic systems. In the United States (US), there was an outright rejection of science in respect to navigating and managing Covid19 beginning with the federal government. This directly contributed to the expansion of the pandemic, increased mortality,

and economic hardship. In concert, there were incidents of violence towards people of Asian descent as they were unjustly blamed for the spread of the disease. During the election of 2020 there was an increase in disinformation from political leaders that was amplified across social media platforms. A significant outcome of this was the idea that the 2020 election was invalid, resulting in violent protests and an insurrection attack on the U.S. government. In addition, the US experienced a reckoning in the widespread and long-term disenfranchisement of communities of color. These events and others have underscored the need for community engagement and individual development in areas of the critical consumption of media, understanding political systems, the role of science, critical analysis of societal structures that contribute to racial inequality and economic disenfranchisement, with the ultimate goal of better positioning communities to navigate and manage immediate and future challenges. We see an opportunity within higher education, specifically through continuing education, to focus on strategies that can aid in the continued development of the community in which the university is embedded with the hope of developing and maintaining a just and engaged society.

The framework of neoliberalism and marketisation is embedded within our national discourse and accepted without argument or critical analysis (Giroux, 2014). Neoliberal perspectives are embedded in the belief that individual and societal wellbeing are best achieved through private enterprise rather than government intervention (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). From a neoliberal perspective, individual worthiness is viewed through the lens of economics and consumerism. Members of society who are able to contribute to the economic health of the society as workers and consumers are valued. Individuals who are under-employed, non-employed, or unable to secure employment due to their health, ability levels, family issues or by choice, are perceived in a negative light (Giroux, 2018).

This neoliberal framework has been applied to services that were once solidly in the purview of government agencies and this includes K-12 education, healthcare, and higher education (Chomsky, 2017). In the example of higher education, we have seen a shift in the discourse that higher education benefits society broadly to higher education is a direct benefit to the individual specifically (Giroux, 2014). Using this lens, federal and state governments have increasingly shifted the cost of higher education to the student. Students are now perceived as consumers of education. The role of the university now "is to improve the country's economic performance, and that considers that the most valuable outcomes of higher education are exploitable knowledge and credentialed graduates" (Brown, 2018, p. 9). Lost in this discourse is "the notion of the university as a center of critique and a vital democratic public sphere that cultivates the knowledge, skills and values necessary for the production of a democratic polity" and is replaced by the "view of the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects" (Brown, 2018, p. 1).

Continuing Professional Education (CPE)

Viewed through a neoliberal lens, CPE can augment the income streams of universities and colleges (Cervero & Daly, 2016). From this perspective, CPE foregrounds institutional benefits in form of financial outcomes, potential students, and increased community awareness of the university brand. Individual benefits may be situated in a participant's ability to secure employment or progress within their current occupation. We argue that centering the development of the individual in relation to the strengthening of communities and community systems expands the role of CPE. Foregrounding the development of the person as an outcome is as important as the development of the worker and emphasizes the importance of the individual apart from economic systems. By integrating key tenets of adult learning, we argue it is possible to augment and expand the focus of CPE to include the development of the person

as a common good and in conjunction, facilitates the strengthening of community systems. Facilitating learning experiences that allow individuals to employ critical lenses on our political systems, environmental issues, community issues, among others, will foster a population that is more fully engaged.

The expansion of our framework includes the integration of the development of criticality, meta-cognitive strategies, and critical consciousness in appropriate areas of CPE. The focus is the development of the individual who can critically examine the world, solve complex problems, apply innovative strategies, and learn new skills. The social and economic impact universities have on communities varies in scope and range. Regional comprehensive universities address meeting local needs by providing economic and civic engagement initiatives (Orphan, 2018). Research universities use scholarship, creatives activities, teaching, and service to solve current issues and investigate solutions to future problems (Owen-Smith, 2018). As a subset, urban research universities have had a long history of placing service at the core of their mission going back to the late 19th century (Harkavy, 2006). Global urbanism has initiated attempts at reframing how urban universities could become more efficient and inclusive in their contributions to the knowledge economy, given their role as hubs of local development and economic activity (Addie, 2017). In this light, community engagement can inform CPE and WFD efforts undertaken by urban universities, as they (re)define and (re)present themselves to the world by a range of outreach programming (Weerts & Hudson, 2009).

Community Transformation Model for Continuing and Extended Education

Neo-liberal policies operate as a deficit model that have allowed some to achieve economic security while excluding others. Neo-liberal framing has resulted in a diminishment of the opportunities for university partnerships that promote lifelong learning in urban communities. The Community Transformation Model for Continuing and Extended Education (Figure 1) is a developing model that links continuing and community-based education. We argue Anchor Institutions are uniquely placed to strengthen the ties between the university and the community they serve as they have the capacity to aid in human, community, and economic development. Following the economic downturn in 2008, institutions of higher education have had to identify constructive ways in which to revitalize inner cities and their surrounding communities, while combating increasing nativism, racism, anti-immigration sentiments, and anti-intellectualism (Guarasci, 2018). Moreover, colleges and universities have had to defend their mission as it supports training, educating, and preparing for civic life (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016). Set within the larger global milieu, the social responsibilities of colleges and universities (Hayter & Cahoy, 2018) gives the concept of “anchor institutions” new meaning that emphasizes community outreach and sustained involvement that rely on shared value (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2016).

In this light, the Community Transformation Model for Continuing and Extended Education develops our university’s vision of engaged learning as a way to move away from neo-liberal and marketization frameworks that view Continuing Education solely as a revenue generating process. By drawing on anchor institution frameworks, continuing education literature, and critical theory (e.g., Freire, 2000), we argue that continuing and community education can be linked to diminish the distance between the institution and the urban environment while working in partnership with the community it serves.

Our model is significant because it takes into account the various models of planning (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Sork, 2010), leadership, and facilitating programs (Knox, 2016) at an urban-serving, public research university’s Continuing Education program, Our model recognizes the value of such programs to all stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, urban communities, local

organizations, institutions), as well as gaining an understanding of the current challenges facing public urban universities. The model also highlights the need for equal and collaborative relationships across contested spaces as identified by Cervero and Daly (2016) which include social, professional, institutional, and educational systems.

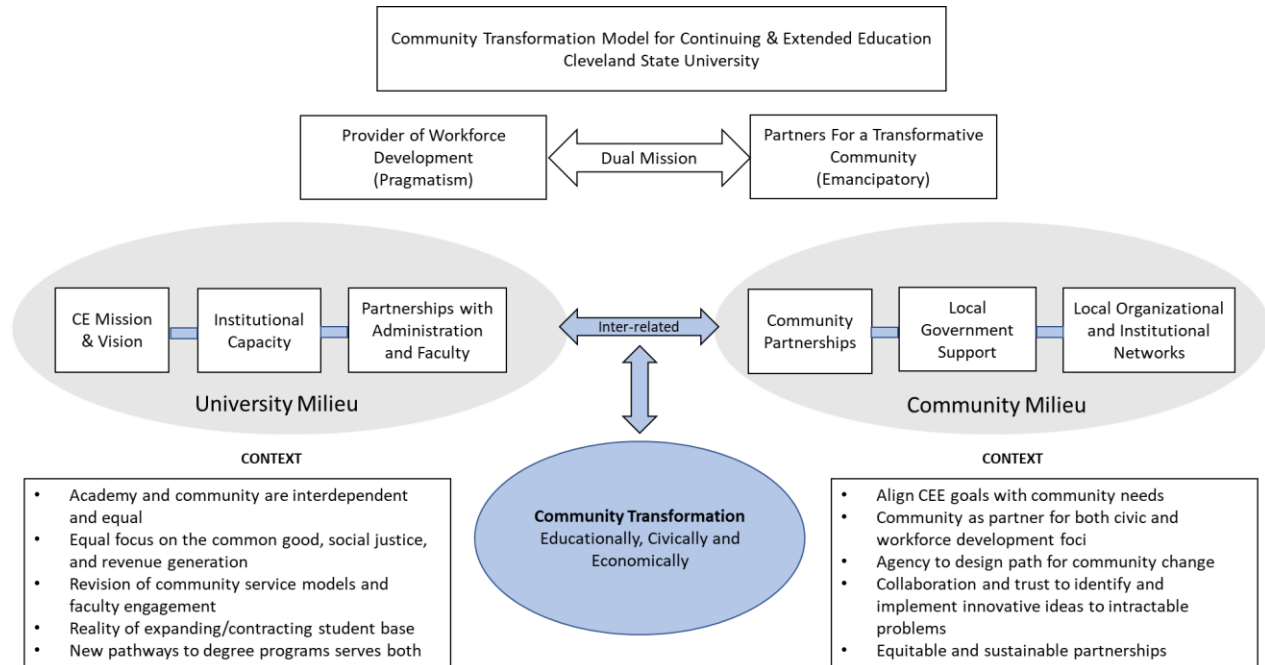


Figure 1: CTMCEE for Cleveland State

The challenge of implementing this model is to ensure it does not become co-opted by neoliberal ideology and is viewed primarily as a way to build the university brand or increase student enrollment. We argue the role of civic engagement and social justice is equal to and in some ways supersedes workforce development and the needs of for-profit organizations. At local, state, and federal levels there is much to accomplish in relation to major issues that face this country and its communities and this includes but is not limited to, unequal justice (e.g., policing, sentencing), racial inequality, environmental issues (e.g., water crisis in Flint, Michigan; Dakota access pipeline, climate change), and income and wealth inequality. Community engagement is essential in order to identify solutions and hold officials accountable to their constituencies. However, it is an open question whether these two visions can co-exist within a university that operates within a neo-liberal ideology.

Conclusion

Our local, state, national, and global communities are in the midst of unprecedented challenges, among them the ongoing pandemic, social justice and civil rights assaults, unequal wealth distribution, and environmental issues and changes. These challenges bring unprecedented opportunities for universities to engage with community organizations and groups to become a true partner in community reforms. The Community Transformation Model for Community and Extended Education that we developed can guide universities away from a neo-liberal ideology toward a more social justice oriented framework that will allow them to engage with the communities in which they are located, addressing community problems and stakeholder concerns, revising the overall goals of programming, and reflecting on and

transforming the overall purpose of CPE within the contested spaces of the social, professional, institutional, and educational systems.

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