Introduction

Whither adult education in the learning paradigm? This paper describes the discourse with which Canadian universities currently position their adult education activities. The purpose of the paper is to inform and encourage discussion at a SCUTREA 2008 conference session. The focus of that discussion will be to examine the social and political implications of the learning paradigm as expressed through the contemporary websites of Canadian universities. The discussion will be guided by my own knowledge of the history of university-based adult education in Canada, and enriched by participants’ knowledge of related forms of education in other countries.

University continuing education refers to various activities through which universities provide educational programs and services to those not enrolled in traditional on-campus study. Virtually every major university in Canada has a continuing education unit, responsible for organizing initiatives such as non-credit courses, certificate programs, distance education programs, customized training, public lectures, and degree-credit classes offered in the evenings, on Saturdays, during spring and summer months, or off-campus. University continuing education in Canada is a major activity, with hundreds of thousands of students engaged in continuing studies each year. The Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) represents nearly fifty universities having significant continuing education activities. A majority of CAUCE members are known as 'continuing education' units, although some members are known as 'distance education' or 'extension' units.

In the summer of 2007, I conducted a content analysis of the public websites of all CAUCE members. From each CAUCE member’s website, I selected the text of the clearest statement of the purpose of the continuing education unit’s work. I did not seek statements about what the units did (e.g., programs, services, or schedules), but rather sought statements about the purposes that animated or inspired such activities. Overall, I selected 7,147 words for analysis, with an average number of 149 words per institution. Having identified the passages that would be included in my analysis, I carefully read those passages to identify keywords, phrases, and concepts that would indicate the expression of various purposes for university continuing education. Four thematic groupings emerged from my reading: (1) the roles played by university continuing education units; (2) the audiences served by such units; (3) the attributes of the programs delivered by such units; and (4) the linkages between such units and the broader society.

The body of this paper describes the qualitative results of this content analysis. Please note that a more detailed version of both qualitative and quantitative results has recently been published (McLean, 2007a). The paper’s conclusions pose questions intended to provoke critical thinking among SCUTREA participants regarding the political-economic
implications of contemporary Canadian discourse about university continuing education.

Readers wishing to review literature regarding the discourse of university continuing education in Canada should consult: Cram and Morrison, 2005; Cruikshank, 2001; Kreber and Mhina, 2005; Nesbit, Dunlop and Gibson, 2007; and Selman, 2005.

Institutional discourse

My analysis of the websites of CAUCE members indicates, in the most general terms, that CAUCE members typically claim to meet the needs of learners seeking professional development, personal enrichment, or the furthering of knowledge and skills. They claim to deliver programs and services that promote lifelong learning by adults, whether as individuals or as members of communities and organizations. These programs and services are characterized as enabling access to quality education in flexible and innovative ways. The work of continuing education is presented as a means to link universities with communities, and with external agencies such as businesses, governments, and professional associations. These broad claims are exemplified through the following presentation of direct quotations from the website passages used in this analysis.

Roles

Meeting the needs of learners and communities is central to the expressed purpose of many CAUCE member institutions. The School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto begins its mission statement with the phrase: 'To respond to the advanced and diverse learning needs of adults in the Greater Toronto Area and beyond' [http://learn.utoronto.ca/PageFactory.aspx?PageID=491]. The notion of goals is sometimes used rather than that of needs, as in the following passage from the homepage of Continuing Education at Wilfred Laurier University: 'Are you interested in personal development, expanding your knowledge, improving your career, or just learning new things? Whatever your educational goals, continuing education at Laurier can help' [http://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp_id=160].

What are the needs and goals addressed through university continuing education in Canada? Primarily, they are needs and goals associated with either professional development or personal growth. The following quotations present several illustrations of the manner in which personal and professional needs are positioned as the focus of continuing education.

1) Investing in your personal and professional growth is the right thing to do and our dedicated and enthusiastic program administrators, support staff and instructors look forward to serving your educational needs - Concordia University, Centre for Continuing Education [http://sarno.concordia.ca/conted/director].

2) The non-credit Continuing Education offerings described on this website give you the opportunity to enrich your life through learning, whether to nourish your creativity, to gain new understandings of self, or to acquire essential skills for career success - Mount Saint Vincent University, Distance Learning & Continuing Education [http://www.msvu.ca/continuing-ed/Directory-welcome.asp].

3) Continuing education allows you to pursue areas of professional or personal interest or to enhance your professional qualifications in an increasingly competitive and rapidly changing labour market - York University [http://www.yorku.ca/web/futurestudents/continuing].
Frequently, assisting learners to acquire new knowledge and skills is the mechanism through which university continuing education units claim to enable learners to pursue such personal and professional growth. As one example, the homepage of the College of Extended Learning at the University of New Brunswick states:

We are the lifelong learning outreach arm of the University of New Brunswick, bringing higher education expertise and knowledge to adult learners. Whether you are interested in honing your work skills, taking university courses, or embarking on a new hobby, we strive to meet and exceed your needs [www.extend.unb.ca]!

In summary, the primary role claimed by CAUCE members for their work is to address people’s needs for professional development and personal growth, often through assisting them to learn new knowledge and skills.

**Audiences**

For whom do Canadian university continuing education units provide their programs and services? For lifelong learners. The notion of lifelong learning for all is central to the welcome message of the website of Continuing Studies at Royal Roads University:

We aspire to support and celebrate the personal and professional development of all citizens in the community. Please join us for a lifelong journey and celebration of learning [http://www.royalroads.ca/continuing-studies/about-continuing-studies.htm].

In a similar manner, Continuing and Distance Education at Acadia University claims that it 'is dedicated to offering the best, most convenient education options for students across Canada and around the world because we believe learning is for everyone and learning is for life' [conted.acadiau.ca]. Adults are the lifelong learners most typically served by university continuing education units. For example, the Centre for Continuing Education at McGill University claims that it is ‘a multidisciplinary academic unit with the primary goal of meeting the educational needs and aspirations of the adult members of a rapidly changing society’ [http://www.mcgill.ca/conted/about].

CAUCE member institutions define their audiences variously as individuals, organizations, and communities. The College of Continuing Education at Dalhousie University identifies all three audiences in its homepage: 'we support individuals, communities, organizations and businesses in a way that develops competence, confidence and good citizenship' [http://collegeofcontinuinged.dal.ca]. The individual learner as the focus of university continuing education is succinctly illustrated by the homepage of the Division of Continuing Education at the University of Winnipeg: 'Because of our size, we are able to provide individual attention to help you plan your educational goals' [www.dce.uwinnipeg.ca].

While individual learners are the intended readers of CAUCE members’ websites, such members frequently claim that their programs and services are of broader value to the community. As one example, the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Regina claims that it 'makes a significant contribution to the intellectual, economic, social and cultural development of our community by offering high quality, accessible and responsive education and training programs to learners of all ages' [www.uregina.ca/cce]. Another manner in which the audiences of university continuing education are specified is through providing programs and services tailored for specific organizations. The mission statement of the Centre for Continuing Education at McMaster University illustrates this: 'We provide quality professional education to individuals and corporate clients, in order to enhance careers and foster workforce development'
In many cases, CAUCE members suggest that they serve international learners. As one example, the mission of Continuing Studies at the University of British Columbia claims that it 'is an academic unit that inspires curiosity, develops ingenuity, stimulates dialogue and facilitates change among lifelong learners locally and internationally' [http://www.cstudies.ubc.ca/about/mission.html].

In summary, those served by Canadian university continuing education units are primarily adult, lifelong learners. These learners are individuals, but they are often considered as members of communities and organizations. International learners figure prominently for many units.

**Attributes**

What are the key characteristics of the programs and services of university continuing education units in Canada? CAUCE members' websites identify four key attributes: accessibility, quality, flexibility, and innovativeness. Making post-secondary education accessible is a key purpose of some units. In its mission statement, Athabasca University declares that it 'is dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to, and success in, university-level studies and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for adult learners worldwide' [http://www.athabascau.ca/aboutAU/mission.php]. The Centre for Continuing and Distance Education at the University of Saskatchewan asserts in its mission statement: 'We are the University’s centre for planning and delivering innovative continuing and distance education programs that assist individuals in overcoming geographic and other barriers to learning' [http://www.ccde.usask.ca/ExtensionDivision/about/vision.html].

Flexibility is often claimed to be a core attribute of programs and services provided by CAUCE members. The following examples are illustrative:

1) Open Learning at the University of Guelph provides you with flexibility and choice in meeting your educational goals [http://www.open.uoguelph.ca/about/about.html].

2) …the flexible programming offered through the Office of Continuing Education and Distributed Learning is designed to meet your needs both on-campus and through distance education - Lakehead University [http://cedl.lakeheadu.ca].

3) …you can study when and where it’s most convenient for you - University of Waterloo, Distance and Continuing Education [http://de.uwaterloo.ca/index.html].

In addition to being accessible and flexible, the programs and services of CAUCE members are claimed to be innovative and of high quality. For example, the mission statement of the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University is 'To be a leader in innovative, quality, lifelong learning that empowers adults to reach their life and career goals' [http://ce-online.ryerson.ca/ce_2007-2008/default.asp?id=71].

In summary, CAUCE members identify four key attributes of their programs and services: accessibility, quality, flexibility, and innovativeness. Claims regarding these attributes are combined in various ways by different members. For example, the homepage of Extended Education at the University of Manitoba asserts: 'Your learning needs are changing to meet new challenges. To help you satisfy the diverse demands of lifelong learning, we extend a wide range of innovative programming and flexible study options' [www.umanitoba.ca/extended].
Linkages

The work of university continuing education in Canada is often presented as a means of connecting universities and communities. The following mission statements illustrate claims to such linkages:

1) To create opportunities for lifelong learning in response to the needs of individuals and society by engaging the university and communities in learning, discovery, and citizenship - University of Alberta, Faculty of Extension [http://www.extension.ualberta.ca/faculty/deansmessage.aspx].

2) The Division of Continuing Studies seeks to ensure access to the academic wealth of the University of Victoria by a broad and diverse community of adult learners, and provides leadership in the development and delivery of innovative continuing education programs, in cooperation with academic and external partners [http://www.continuingstudies.uvic.ca/pdf/dcs-strategic.pdf].

The metaphor of a ‘bridge’ between the university and the community is sometimes used, as in the following example:

The hallmark of Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University is the leadership role the unit plays in creating a bridge between the university and the community by providing university-level programming that meets community needs and enhances faculty research. The relationships flow two ways as university expertise is extended to the community, and community knowledge and priorities are brought into the university [http://www.sfu.ca/cstudies/about.htm].

In addition to linking universities and communities, continuing education units often claim to connect universities with a range of organizations, including governments, businesses, unions, and professional associations. Through working in collaboration with such external agencies, university continuing education units claim to develop programs and services consistent with needs in a range of communities.

Political-economic implications

This paper has described the public claims made by Canadian university continuing education units about the purposes of their work. A primary role of many university continuing education units was expressed in terms of addressing the needs or goals of learners seeking professional development, personal enrichment, or the furthering of knowledge and skills. Such units claimed to deliver educational programs and services to promote lifelong learning by adults, whether as individuals or as members of communities and organizations. These programs and services were characterized as enabling access to quality education in flexible and innovative ways. Finally, the work of continuing education units was often presented as a means to link universities with communities, and with external agencies through processes of collaboration.

Do the claims described in this paper accurately reflect the full range of purposes served by university continuing education units in Canada? There is no doubt that such claims help guide the work of hundreds of academic, professional, and administrative staff people. However, is it possible that such work has unintended consequences, or that it serves purposes other than those toward which it is consciously dedicated? I briefly identify several possibilities here, to set the stage for discussion at SCUTREA 2008.

Is university continuing education ‘just a business’?

As a continuing education programmer and administrator, I have learned that some
members of university communities view continuing education primarily in terms of its public relations value, or its financial impact on the rest of the institution. There seems nothing wrong with expecting that university continuing education units would build public support for the broader institution, nor that such units would conduct their work in a financially responsible manner. And yet, is there a chance that managing public relations or generating financial surpluses are alternative priorities that could put at risk the expressed purposes of continuing education units? As one example, if promoting lifelong learning is a valued goal, then what obligation do continuing education units have to setting prices or having admissions policies that promote widespread access to education – even if such prices or policies might run counter to practices or expectations elsewhere in the parent institution?

*Does university continuing education reproduce social inequality?*

As a student of sociology, I have learned that universities have a role in the reproduction of inequality in society. Simply put, universities are key institutions in an educational system that enables people with privileges (wealth, social status, education) to pass on those privileges to their children, in a manner that seems fair to everyone. Empirically, the level of education and income of one’s parents is a strong predictor of whether or not one will graduate from university. Further, university education is a strong predictor of one’s subsequent income and wealth. Admission to university is typically a meritocratic competition, based on objective indicators such as high school grades and entrance examination results. As such, all people would seem to have an equal opportunity to obtain a university education and enjoy the benefits of that education – as long as they are willing to work hard enough to merit admission. In reality, children of relatively privileged parents have a higher likelihood of doing well in high school, and thus gaining admission to university, than do children with less privileged backgrounds. As such, universities are, perhaps unintentionally, institutions that reinforce and give legitimacy to social and economic inequalities. Do university continuing education units have an unacknowledged role in this process? Do such units serve adults who were unable to access university education and credentials as youth? Or, do such units provide additional opportunities for the already well-educated to build their expertise and credentials, further distancing them from those who did not have the privilege to attend university in the first place?

*Why have institutional discourses changed over time?*

In recent publications (McLean 2007b; 2007c; 2008), I have argued that universities in Canada have historically made three basic claims regarding the purposes of their extension and continuing education units. Prior to 1940, universities claimed that such units extended the resources of the university for the benefit of citizens not enrolled as full-time students. In the 1940s and 1950s, universities claimed that such units fostered social and economic progress. Since the 1960s, universities have claimed that such units existed to meet the lifelong learning needs of individuals. I have also argued that the evolution of such claims reflected ideological and political-economic developments, such as the rise of wage labour as the primary means of making a living. In short, ‘extending the resources of the university’ made sense when many provincial economies in Canada depended on geographically dispersed commodity producers, and when many universities depended on the extraction of tax revenues from such producers. ‘Fostering progress’ made sense when such economies were being transformed through processes that separated commodity producers from their means of production, and integrated them into wage labor relationships. ‘Meeting the needs of lifelong learners’ has made sense ever since economic life in Canada became firmly based in wage labour, and since wage labourers demonstrably needed education and training in order to obtain good jobs. To
what extent does the evolution of Canadian discourse and political-economy reflect realities in other countries? Does the international evolution of discourses of adult education and lifelong learning reflect the evolution of the means through which people earn their livings?


Does vocabulary matter?

While ‘lifelong learning’ may have replaced ‘adult education’ as the vocabulary of choice for Canadian university continuing education units, I am not convinced that this discursive shift represents a substantive change in the material experiences of students or educators. In the broadest sense, the political-economic implications of university continuing education in Canada have not changed significantly. This is clear when looking back to earlier discourses of adult education. University-based adult education consistently served the interests of government officials seeking to develop adults’ capabilities to undertake productive roles in a changing economy and society. Such education helped produce independent commodity producers in the early twentieth century, just as it helped produce wage labourers in the late twentieth century. The process was parallel, even if the production of independent commodity producers generated educational discourses and practices quite distinct from the production of wage laborers. At this point in history, university continuing education units are helping to develop adults’ capabilities to undertake productive roles in societies and economies whose relations of production have become even more complex than the classical or fordist forms of capitalism. Is the vocabulary through which administrators and scholars represent university continuing education important? If the role of universities in reproducing inequalities and shaping citizens’ productive capacities to fit economic structures has not changed, then why would it matter if someone talks about the process as ‘lifelong learning’ instead of ‘adult education’?

References


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