Reflections: life in adult education in the era of globalization (Roundtable)

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Globalization shapes philosophy and practice of adult education today in the USA. Taking my cue from works by such distinct authors as David Held (1995), Carlos Alberto Torres (1998), Lee Herman and Alan Mandell (2004), and drawing on my own teaching experience, I contend that adult education, whose objective and obligation is an expansion of the freedoms of human beings, reflects challenges, rewards and dreams of globalization in at least three ways. First, mentoring as a constructive collaboration between educators and students in intellectual inquiry, where all involved are interlocutors and active learners, open to question and expand their knowledge, evokes the idea and dynamics of building partnerships in a global world. Second, the growing interest of adult students in creation of individualized degree programs within broad academic guidelines can be viewed in light of both integration and diversity, which globalization celebrates. Third, the rapid increase of adults who prefer to learn in an on-line classroom makes one rethink the notion of place.

Mentoring exemplifies the realization of globalization’s most promising potential: the creation of new cultures of partnership and reciprocity. This teaching philosophy and practice opens a wide array of opportunities for both independent learning and collaboration between faculty and students, and challenges a view of the world in terms of binary oppositions. I suggest that successful mentor-student academic relationships make one question such dichotomies as authority/uncertainty, autonomy/collaboration, evaluation/reflective learning, and classroom/‘lifeword.’

In my institution, which primarily serves adults, a necessity for balance between these concepts becomes especially evident during the educational planning process, the purpose of which is to advance students’ understanding of their professional, personal, and academic needs. This process culminates in design of a rigorous, individualized degree program within broad university guidelines for the specific area(s) of study. Associate, bachelor’s or master’s programs most often combine earlier earned credits from other universities, credits by evaluation obtained through prior learning assessment that involves evaluation of learning that takes place outside the classroom, as well as credits from the institution where students are currently enrolled. In addition, students write rationale essays, where they explain how their respective programs will help them to achieve their academic, professional, and personal goals. Students also have to demonstrate that their programs follow the area of study guidelines designed by the university; and a comparative analysis between the individually created program and programs in the same area of concentration, offered by other universities is also required. A growing success of the educational planning process, and an eclectic nature of degree programs, I suggest, exemplify a current demand for individualization, integration, and diversity in democratic education, as well as in life in the global era.

As new empirical data shows, in recent years, there is a consistent increase in the number of adult students who prefer to create and follow their degree programs via distance
Learning at a distance today is the fastest growing segment of adult education. Celebrating fluidity and blurring geographical boundaries, virtual academic classroom defies a traditional notion of place, associated with stability and limit. Instead, being empowered by the Internet or the World Wide Web, often viewed as an Information Superhighway, a metaphor that suggests a fast and accessible transmission of information, the on-line environment in itself alludes to the shrinking of time and space. This process allows distance learning to open multiple opportunities to experience globalization and to participate in the formation of the global identities of both students and faculty.

Luckily an audience of a cyber-classroom in itself exemplifies globalization in an organic fashion for it often attracts people of different ages, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and even residents from various countries. To teach this audience, who often has its own well-established political and cultural views is both a rewarding and challenging task. The major challenge consists in providing a training in critical thought to people, who enter a virtual classroom with already formed ideas about their country and the world, its political, cultural and economic aspects. For this learning community, their own experiences acquire particular significance and can be seen as points of departure for the exploration of students themselves and for exposition, questioning and often revision of their perception of the surrounding world.

Working in an on-line foreign language and culture classroom, I have found that it is crucial to work on developing 8 different skills or abilities of adult learners to advance their understanding and appreciation of globalization and to foster a continuous pride in their own contribution to the world in which they live. They are (1) Open Mindedness; (2) Sense of Humor, (3) Communicativeness, (4) Flexibility, (5) Curiosity, (6) Tolerance, (7) Positive regard for others and (8) A strong sense of self. These skills turn out to be of determinative importance for both the development of critical thinking about the culture in which they live as well as for recognizing the significance of contributions of different groups and individuals to the formation of our society.

Some of the questions that I suggest to discuss at this forum include: How has life in adult education changed in the era of globalization in your country? What implications does globalization have for adult education? What demands does globalization create for adult educators and our institutions?
References


*This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008*