Reconstructing myths: a role for adult educators

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Introduction
As adult educators within higher education, we perpetuate a variety of myths that we tell our organizations and ourselves in order to survive both academically and operationally. These include the notion that our primary function is to serve the non-traditional learner, represent diversity, and advance the social agenda while remaining nimble and competent both programmatically and fiscally. This paper is presented from the perspective of two Canadian adult educators.

Continuing education has been traditionally associated with adult learners. As administrators of continuing education units, we tend to compartmentalize learners into traditional and non-traditional categories, the former typically representing 18-24 year olds studying full time and the latter representing older students studying predominantly part-time. While we specialize in learning for adults, we also provide opportunities for specialized learning to non-traditional learners whom the academy does not embrace. Our clients represent a diversity of learners ranging from international students learning English as a second language to adults developing skills to re-engage with their education. By targeting various student groups, we achieve diversity and interdisciplinarity in our offerings not present in the mainstream programming of post-secondary education. However, with recent changes in higher education, the boundaries between programmes in the academy serving adults and those developed by continuing education for non-traditional learners have become less pronounced, suggesting that both higher education and continuing education need to focus on shared agendas to move forward (Davies, 1997). According to the University Continuing Education Association, students in degree-granting colleges and universities in the U.S. will be older and more diverse in the next decade (University Continuing Education Association [UCEA], 2009). The increasing numbers of adults returning to school continue to blur the distinction we typically make between the adult learner and the traditional university student.

Critical literature about adults in higher education generally makes little distinction between different types of adult learners. Adult learners are more frequently discussed in the context of adult and continuing education programmes than in the realm of higher education. Generally, adult education has tended to focus on particular types of adult learners (such as the mature student entering university for the first time) while continuing education has focused on part-time professionals, workforce training, and alternate course delivery formats. In making our case that adult students are different and should be treated differently, are we inadvertently keeping them marginalized?
In this paper, we argue that by perpetuating historically based ‘myths’, leaders and administrators of continuing education units might be ignoring the potential impact of better integrating the adult learner within the higher education environment. In addition, we will consider how the production and reception of myths can be perceived around issues of power within the organization. We will also explore the possibility of reconstructing new identities for continuing education units and their adult students.

**The critical literature**

A number of articles were written about leadership and administration in adult and continuing education during the 1980’s and into the mid-nineties, a time when many continuing education units were seeking an identity and trying to secure a foothold in their institutions. After 1997, the literature began to shift its focus to how continuing education units were going to adapt to their changing social, political and economic environments with particular implications for administrators attempting to develop the internal capabilities required for their organizations to respond flexibly to these changes (Einsiedel, 1999; Wong, 2005).

While the literature on leadership in higher education has grown over the past fifteen years, little has been written specifically about leadership in continuing education. The discourse today with respect to leadership in adult and continuing education has shifted to the importance of looking at dimensions of power and politics in educational practice. Donaldson and Edelson (2000) argue in their article ‘From Functionalism to Postmodernism in Adult Education Leadership’ for reflexivity in practice in the field in order to avoid ‘...primarily monologic discourse about its leadership and organizational practice...’ (p. 205). Similarly, Cervero and Wilson (2001) encourage us to examine adult education as a ‘...site of struggle for knowledge and power’ (p. 10). This reflects a more critical approach to leadership that recognizes power imbalances and the need to challenge the status quo. However, the struggles involved in pursuing this discourse of change are not lost on those who must balance the daily demands of their administrative positions. Edelson reflects:

> But, I (Edelson) must confess that as a dean I operate within an environment of productivity standards and expectations. Very few of us, except perhaps those without direct managerial responsibilities, have the luxury of imagining the superimposition of value systems that conflict with those of the larger organization. My task, instead, is to modulate, humanize and operationalize these so that other significant organizational goals within the domain of continuing education can be attained. (Donaldson and Edelson, 2000, p. 203)

A second theme in the critical literature pertaining to leadership in adult education and related to the issue of power speaks to the challenges associated with administering units that are perceived as sitting on the margins of the university. Yet, positioning in the liminal space of the margins is seen as presenting both advantages and disadvantages. Burton Clark (2004) considers continuing education as part of an ‘extended periphery’ with the ability to ‘...move across old university boundaries to bring in populations, general and specific, not previously in the picture’ (p. 176). Glowacki-Dudka and Helvie-Mason (2004), argue ‘...that adult education will never
be mainstreamed, that we should embrace its position at the margins and use that position for social change’ (p. 11). Watkins and Tisdell (2006) suggest that by bridging interests amongst stakeholders it is possible to shift institutional interest in adult degree programs from the margin to the center. As adult educators we seem to be constantly balancing the needs of individual learners, community partners and the larger agenda for social change with our need to survive operationally. Sissel (2001) reminds us that regardless of these external influences, our fiscal responsibilities and lack of visibility, it is still within our power to influence our environments. The above theorists leave us to consider the important question, “whose interests are we serving?”

Our thesis
‘To think politically is to think critically about the expectation we hold about learners, ourselves, and others with whom we work’ (Sissel, 2001, p.8). As adult educators, we argue that we may be accepting our own marginality too readily, allowing it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This mind-set could lead to even greater marginalization by the parent institution. The changing contexts in which we work speak to the similar challenges faced by both continuing education units and their institutions—declining enrolments, government funding cutbacks, rapid technological change, and the emergence of for-profit higher education and globalization. Without government and institutional subsidies for programming, continuing education units have had to become increasingly entrepreneurial. For example, according to the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education, approximately one-third of all university continuing education units in Canada are expected to completely cover their operational costs (whereby all expenditure must be covered by revenue generated by the unit), with an additional 56% of units operating under the expectation that they will return a certain percentage of revenue generated to the institution (Canadian Association of University Continuing Education [CAUCE], 2007). Today many continuing education units offer credit as well as non-credit programmes, further blurring the lines between the mandate of continuing education units and the rest of the university.

In the past, continuing education units were often the incubators for distance education as this type of programme was seen primarily as addressing an access issue. The argument for serving the distance education student as part of the ‘underrepresented student’ category is now challenged as distance education becomes more widespread in organizations. In the January 2010 newsletter, University Continuing Education Association articulates that demand for online courses has never been higher as this form of education is particularly appealing to mature students, affording broader access and more flexibility (University Continuing Education Association [UCEA], 2010). Likewise, McLean (2007) points out that continuing education professionals persist in characterizing their programmes as ‘...enabling access to quality education in flexible and innovative ways’ (p.65). It seems clear however that continuing education units can no longer claim exclusivity in distance education.

Myths about continuing education units
What are the stories that we tell our institutions and ourselves and how might these very narratives be to the detriment of the adult learner and the mandate we provide for ourselves as continuing education leaders? Although myths are perpetuated
through many forms, in this paper we consider how we, as administrators, are unwilling producers of myths, how we can deconstruct the myths that we have helped create, and how we can, as leaders, reconstruct models to serve emerging possibilities. According to Roland Barthes, theorist and semiotician whose seminal work paved the way for post-structural analysis, ‘this type of focusing is that of the mythologist: he deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion’ (2009 p. 139).

There are in fact many ‘distorted’ myths in continuing education that we could reconsider if we assume the role of ‘mythologists’ (Barthes, 2009). For this study we will limit ourselves to three or four overarching themes (or myths), then deconstruct them as theorists who analyze the social implications of continuing education, and finally present some ideas for reconstruction of our mandates and organizational structures within our own institutions. The following myths have been grouped as ‘truisms’ or general concepts that we propagate as administrators within our units:

Myth #1: Our primary function is to serve the non-traditional learner; represent diversity; and advance the agenda of social change.
Continuing education students are often working adults who can include marginalized groups such as single mothers and aboriginals taking part-time courses to improve their opportunities in the workplace. While we may claim that programming with diversity in mind is a unique differentiator for continuing educators, the general student population within post-secondary education is also changing and becoming more diversified. For example, a majority of students are working part-time (and even full-time) to help pay for their studies, there are many more students for whom English is not their first language and adults are often taking full-fee professional degrees from private institutions. While we may help advocate for social change through the types of programmes we offer, we cannot always claim to be the forerunners in social change as our wider institutions have developed departments around institutional access, diversity training, career counseling, etc. In fact, educational institutions may be leading the charge on diversification through more aggressive recruiting techniques, including internationalization of their student body for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which is financial. Rather than cling to a previous notion of who is the prototype continuing education student, we may need to look at what the diverse student populations (including working adults) need in educational services to succeed in post-secondary education in general. This may mean increased services in English as a second language for conditional admission, programmes for learners with disabilities or intercultural training for immigrants. It may also be necessary to accept that change regarding diversity in today’s world is extremely rapid and educational needs evolve much quicker than in past decades. As educational providers, we could offer leadership in potential services for all learners within the academy when the lines between traditional and non-traditional learners are blurred.

Myth #2: Marginalization by the academy allows us to be flexible and nimble.
Continuing education units have learned to adapt by staying below the radar to protect liberty of action and protect our profit-based model.
As administrators, we have struggled with the concept of marginalization and the constant effort to be recognized by the academy, primarily as academic providers that are an ‘extension’ of our institutions’ core mission. Yet we have countless examples of innovative programmes that illustrate how this very marginality has
made us creative and enabled our rapid response to change. Our institutions often look to us to be ‘nimble’ and to create new programming quickly in reaction to immediate educational and market needs. For example, continuing education units have rapidly stepped into leadership roles in the emerging field of sustainability. Yet it is often the very fact that these innovative programmes may be separated or ahead of the core mission of the institution (sometimes distinct from its main academic plan) that allows us to operate successfully with a cost recovery or profit-based model not dependent on the rest of the institution.

Byprogramming effectively within this ‘marginalized’ context, we are actually contributing to some of the problems of lack of consideration and visibility from the rest of the institution that often plague continuing education units. It seems that our success is directly associated with our flexibility to implement new programmes, sometimes without approval through formal academic structures. However, while seeking validation by academic agencies such as senate, curriculum committees and academic advisory councils, continuing education units may effectively mitigate their own marginality. At the same time, our innovation and flexibility could in fact be compromised by the loss of marginality, burdening us with the very processes that support our institution’s core mandate. Moving out of the margins and into the centre could not only make our operations more bureaucratic academically, but could in effect reduce our ability to respond quickly and nimbly to changing socio-economic factors.

As leaders, we might make efforts to reconstruct this myth of the marginalization of continuing education by taking a closer look at the organizational model we espouse within our own institution. We can consider what parts of our organizational structure allow us to implement quality programming quickly while providing a test setting for future development within the institution and in educational partnerships. Seeing ourselves as pro-active testing centers (incubators) rather than marginalized units on the fringes would allow us to commit to ‘leading edge’ programming on an on-going basis with the full support of our institution.

Myth #3: *We are ahead of the academy (creative and innovative programming; alternate modes of delivery and leading edge distribution methods).*

Much of the expertise of continuing education units has been built around responding to the needs brought about by changes in society. Continuing education administrators have had more opportunities to develop these programmes by remaining ahead of the academy in the use of technology to deliver programmes in innovative formats. Continuing education is associated with these delivery methods and our units have often become responsible for programme delivery using the latest technology within their institutions.

Theorists who deconstruct the myth that continuing education units are leaders in technology and ahead of their institutions realize that when teaching with technology ‘takes hold’ within an institution, it does not remain the unique domain or area of specialized expertise of continuing education units. By deconstructing our need to be ‘ahead’ of the academy we show that reaction to change is not enough to build sustainable programmes involving creative programming and alternate modes of delivery. This is especially true as educational institutions commit to on-line delivery and web resources.
Maintaining distance education and technological expertise within continuing education units does not necessarily help advance the educational mandate of the parent institution. While providing expertise for distributed learning courses can help continuing education units achieve independence, they may also find themselves increasingly entrenched as ‘service’ units within the academy. Leaders of dynamic units for adult learners can reconstruct attitudes toward programming around the innovative use of technology. For example, in this age of distributed learning, open courseware and mixed mode learning, continuing education can no longer point to its unique advantage of being ‘first to market’ as the wider academy must embrace these forms of learning. Newer forms of communication such as pod-casts and social networking can situate continuing education as a catalyst to help adults re-engage with their education. Through innovative partnerships within and between institutions and increased resources devoted to leading edge on-line learning, continuing education units can support their institutions’ wider initiatives around technology while providing unique academic content through innovative technology and course delivery formats.

**Conclusion**
The stories that we tell ourselves and our institutions about whom we serve and how we serve do not adequately describe the reality of today’s learners and institutions. By reflecting on the myths we have helped produce, we can begin to develop agency in changing the discourse around positioning within our institutions and the academy. If we focus disproportionately on our facilitating roles, we may forget the importance of assuming our own power in the organizational structure of the institution. We may in fact be perpetuating an identity for ourselves that is no longer significant. We agree with Faber, who makes the argument that ‘...to change the ways we behave, think or learn requires a change in the structures we use to interpret and frame daily life’ (Faber, 2002, p. 79).

While higher education institutions are slowly recognizing their responsibilities to adult learners as well as the new opportunities in adult education, there remain many practices within the academy that discriminate against the older student. As adult educators, we need to return to our prime motivation of helping the mature learner choose the best educational path. This may involve changing our notions about who are ‘continuing education students’ as well as considering new roles for our units. These roles may involve leadership in interdisciplinary initiatives, customizing education to learners’ personal needs, enhancing our mission as ‘incubators’ for new programs and forming partnerships among institutions to leverage resources, experience and expertise. Faber (2002) cautions, ‘If those of us who believe in higher education do not produce the narratives that build up and sustain our educational structures, other people will start telling our stories for us’ (p. 107).

The authors of this article are encouraged that both continuing education and higher education are embracing lifelong learning in their strategic plans. However, this important concept has not necessarily translated into cohesive actions. The world and the contexts in which we teach and conduct research are changing rapidly, but our traditional institutions do not have the structures to evolve as quickly. Therefore, continuing education must continue to serve the diverse needs of adult learners until our universities close the gap between the rhetoric of lifelong learning and the needs of a truly heterogeneous student body.
While institutions position themselves for the ‘mainstreaming’ of lifelong learning, they will continue to look to continuing education units to help consider the necessary priorities in offering effective learning models for adults. Thus, our role as continuing educators will be at the forefront of helping students think through their choices and the necessary processes for their unique life situations. Our flexibility and nimbleness will continue to help us transcend traditional boundaries within the academy. It is these important roles as catalysts and innovators within our own institutions that will ensure our positioning for the future. Finally, we need to provide more space for the voices of continuing education administrators to be heard within the research. This would necessitate a dialogue in higher education among adult education theorists and practitioners. We should encourage self-reflexivity within the field of continuing education as an integral part of the change process taking place in higher education.

References
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