Refereed Articles

Community: A Mecca for Adult Learning Opportunity

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Abstract

The community is a natural setting for the adult educational process to flourish in an autonomous and democratic manner. The purpose of this article is to assist adult and continuing educators and learners in recognizing the multitude of opportunities to participate in educational encounters. A framework for connecting the community and adult education is provided that suggests it can be viewed through three mechanisms: community formal adult education, community nonformal adult education, and community informal adult education. Examples of each type of community adult education are provided.

Community is a word and concept that generates a multitude of images and perspectives. Communities are diverse entities that allow adult learners to engage in purposeful learning. As community members, we draw on our powers of creativity and sensitivity to make learning rewarding and meaningful. Galbraith (1990a) writes: "The community provides not only the connection between private and public life but the foundation of our survival as a free and democratic society" (p. 1). Therefore, the community becomes the learning environment.

The primary purpose of this article is to assist adult and continuing educators in recognizing the wide range of educational opportunities that exist in the community and to show them how they can assist adult learners in finding meaning in education through community organizations. First, the concept and definition of community will be examined. Next, a framework for connecting community with adult and continuing education will be described. This framework will include examples of various adult education programs that fall within each category of the framework.

The Concept of Community

Various writers suggest community is multidimensional in scope and in perspective (Bellah, et al., 1985; Brookfield, 1983; Galbraith,

1990b; Warren & Lyon, 1988). As a result the term generates a host of definitions, missions, aims, and images; it is a value-laden term that evokes a variety of descriptions by a diverse range of individuals.

Over 30 years ago, Tonnies (1957) used the German terms **gemeinschaft** and **gesellschaft** to describe two ways in which people relate to each other. The gemeinschaft community is characterized by families, neighborhoods, and friendship groups that relate to each other in a sense of mutuality stability, common identity and concerns, and subscribe to common social norms, bonds, and obligations. For some this type of community will be considered in geographic terms that call forth an awareness of mutual assistance and a development in the interrelationship and cohesiveness of its membership that will ensure a harmonious existence. Warren (1970) suggests that this type of community be called "the good community" because it is concerned with primary group relationships, autonomy, viability, power distribution, and participation. In addition, the good community is people-oriented and democratic in nature.

The gesellschaft community refers to the way people relate to each other in a means-ends relationship. It is characterized by various forms of exchange with other people for the primary purpose of serving individual interests. Galbraith (1990c) suggests: "There is little sentiment involved and the rationality within the gesellschaft community is definitive in that their is no shared identity, mutuality, or common concern" (p. 4). Of these two perspectives on community, a gemeinschaft community seems most appropriate as it subscribes to a democratic and harmonious existence for its membership.

Defining Community
According to Warren (1978), the idea of community is deceptively simple "so long as one does not ask for a rigid definition" (p. 1). For some community is defined in geographic and locational terms such as neighborhood, city or village boundaries, or residential surroundings. Warren considered a community to be "that combination of social units and systems which perform the major social functions having locality relevance" (p. 9).

While some define community in geographic terms, others suggest that the emphasis should rather focus on the common interests, concerns, and functions of people (Bellah et al., 1985; Brookfield, 1983; Galbraith, 1990b; Hiemstra, 1972; Roberts, 1979). Aside from the locational expression of community, there are "communities of interest" in which groups of individuals are bound by some single

common interest or set of common interests such as leisure activities, civic and special political interests, or spiritual and religious beliefs and affiliations. In addition, "communities of function" exist which are linked by major life roles such as teacher, attorney, doctor, farmer, student, homemaker, and parent. Geographic communities, communities of interest, and communities of function intersect and overlap in the broader conceptualization of community. Other types of communities exist as well, such as demographic communities in which groups are bound by common characteristics such as race, age, and sex. Examples of demographic community are the "black community" or the "elderly community." There is also the psychographic community in which commonalities of value systems, social class, and life style exist. Examples are "the yuppie community," the "elderly community," and "the welfare community."

Thus, we are members of various communities, and different frameworks can be used to understand and define the community. In a recent book entitled *Education through Community Organizations,* Galbraith (1990b) defines a community as a "combination of geographic, locational, and nonlocational units, systems, and characteristics that provide relevance and growth to individuals, groups, and organizations" (p. 5). When community can be viewed as multifaceted, educators of adults, adult learners, and community organizations play an important role in assisting, recognizing, and providing options for community adult education. Most important is the fact that the community is a natural setting for the adult education process. The community helps individuals function within their own adult development processes by providing opportunities for growth and independence through formal, nonformal, and informal mechanisms. It is through nonlocational features (communities of interest and communities of function) that adult learning is facilitated and by which most adult education programs are designed.

A Framework for Community Adult Education

It is evident in the literature that community and adult and continuing education have been linked throughout history, as well as in the present, in an effort to understand adult education as a discipline and field of practice (Knowles, 1977; Merriam & Cunningham, 1989). If the community is viewed as a context for formal, nonformal, and informal adult education, then agencies, organizations, and activities in the community are automatically connected with the field of adult education. This approach suggests that adult education can serve as an

intervention in bringing about change and growth for adult learners, groups, and communities as well as for the roles played by educators of adults. In addition, this approach provides a framework for adult and continuing educators to explain to others the diverse educational opportunities that exist for adult learners within each community setting.

Community Formal Adult Education

When we think of formal adult education, we envision for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in the community such as community colleges, proprietary schools, state and regional universities, vocational and technical institutes, external degree agencies and public adult education schools that have as their primary function the delivery of formal education. The goal of the adult learner is usually to acquire some type of credential, certificate, or degree.

Among the roles of adult educators in community formal adult education is the counselor role. In this role, it is imperative that adult educators assist adult learners in recognizing the multitude of options for them, and that adult educators point out that within these formal settings the learners may have little control over what is taught and how it is taught. It is also appropriate to tell adult learners returning to formal educational settings that in most cases the educators with whom they will associate may not view themselves as grounded in adult learning principles and practices. Therefore, a warning is posted that these educators may make value judgments of what is appropriate, desirable, and realistic for learners to acquire through their formal educational pursuits.

Community Non-formal Adult Education

Each community also serves as context for nonformal adult education. Adult educators assist adult learners in recognizing the number of organizations within a community that use education as a secondary function of their mission. Community organizations such as religious institutions, health institutions, service clubs, voluntary organizations, business and industry and human resource development programs, libraries, museums, senior citizen organizations and a host of other community-based organizations are examples of such providers of nonformal adult education. Adult learners who participate in nonformal adult education are motivated by the desire to learn the activity that is presented. They usually engage in the learning activities voluntarily and are not seeking credentials or degrees, though they may receive a certificate of completion. For example, an adult learner who engages in

a CPR class sponsored by the local American Red Cross will receive a certification of completion, while the adult learner who participates in educational activities provided by the local library, museum, hospital, social and fraternal organization, church, or senior citizen center probably will not. The joy for adult learners is that they have, in most cases, retained some control over their learning needs as well as when, how and where these needs can be satisfied. Educators in community nonformal adult education operate on a nonstructured to structured continuum depending on the type of educational activity and who is the provider.

It is important that adult educators assist adult learners in recognizing that nonformal educational organizations can provide valuable and meaningful learning opportunities (Galbraith, 1990c). These learning opportunities take on many different forms that contribute to the learner's development and growth as well as to the development of the organizational provider.

Some examples of this diversity may be helpful. Social and fraternal organizations such as the U.S. Jaycees, Optimists, and Kiwanis provide leadership training programs throughout the United States. The Elks provide, through their vocational grant program, two years of technical training for dislocated workers, in addition to supporting drug awareness programs along with other socially conscientious activities. Numerous such organizations engage in educational activities for their members, who in return help inform and educate the general public to special concerns and programs (Ferro, 1990). Libraries provide very successful information and referral systems that connect learners with a variety of agencies, individuals, and programs in the community that can help meet their specific needs (Sisco & Whitson, 1990). In addition, they provide "books-by-mail" services and bookmobiles that serve the homebound and sight and hearing impaired. Libraries are assuming a brokering role as a link between users, information, and education through the advancement of technologies such as on-line computer catalogues, on-line database searching, electronic mail, and FAX machines.

Religious institutions provide lay leadership training; family development courses and seminars; reading programs for single parents, widowed, and divorced people; and addiction recovery programs in addition to the typical faith development courses and activities (Beatty & Robbins, 1990). Senior citizen organizations are engaged in a multitude of educational activities, from creative writing to holding discussions concerning foreign relations, humanities, and nutrition (Courtenay, 1990). Learners in this setting engage in activities that increase life enrichment and life skills and the ability to cope with

problems associated with growing old. Human service organizations such as public health and mental health facilities, welfare and rehabilitation agencies, providers of social services, and hospitals provide to their community of immediate clientele and to the general public wellness and life enrichment programs. Such organizations are actively involved in training lay leaders and volunteers (Marsick, 1990).

Museums also provide educational opportunities through incidental learning of the institution's collection and through specific activities such as classes, guided tours, slide shows, films, and lectures. In addition, many museums are involved in creative programs and dramas that create "living museum" educational programs (Chobot & Chobot, 1990).

A final example of nonformal adult education is the contribution of business and industry. While training and development activities are viewed, in most cases, as a benefit to the employee and an enhancement of workplace performance, this learning also can affect activities away from work. For example, if an employee is engaged in interpersonal skills building, then these acquired skills may be used to improve the employee's interaction with family, friends, and acquaintances in the community as well. If computer training is provided, then these skills may transfer to using the home computer more effectively for personal benefit. For many corporations, wellness programs, leisure sponsored activities, and educational partnerships with other community-based organizations are an integral component of learning opportunity, whether for health reasons, leadership development, organizational skill, or public relations benefit (Wiswell, 1990).

These are just a few examples of educational opportunities that exist in each community through nonformal educational modes. It is essential to recognize that through these mechanisms, individuals can realize social, personal, and professional learning needs that are meaningful and valuable to our adult development.

Community Informal Adult Education
While nonformal adult education is available through a multitude of community organizations, the majority of adult learning takes place within the context of informal adult education. Informal adult education is independent of institutional and organizational sponsorship. The community itself is the instrument of education, and adult learners are guided by their own desires and learning processes. Informal adult education is characterized by interaction among various human and nonhuman resources: engaging in informal debates and conversations in the work, family, and community setting; viewing television and other mass media; traveling; engaging in recreational activities; and listening

to audio cassettes, reading publications, or viewing videotapes. Adult educators can encourage and assist adult learners to recognize the vast potential that is before them to create, plan, and design independent learning activities that are personally meaningful, but within this type of educational mode, the adult learner has complete control over what will comprise the learning and how and where it will occur. In addition, the adult learner determines the level of satisfaction and provides his or her own evaluation criteria concerning what is learned and how successful the learning experience has been. Examples of informal adult education may be learning to use a new computer package, making or refinishing furniture, tuning up an automobile, learning to fly fish, or critically thinking about how the news media determines what will appear on the six o'clock newscast. Adult learners are in charge and responsible for their own learning activities and use those diverse community resources to reach their educational goals. In most cases there is no professionally trained educator to assist them in their endeavors. In essence, the community serves as the educator as well as a learning resource and laboratory.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of any community should be to develop a democratic and educated citizenry (Boggs, 1991); building communities of independent, thoughtful, and autonomous learners is one way to sustain the democratic process. Community organizations have contributed to this process by offering diverse formal, nonformal, and informal educational opportunities to adult learners through which the learners recognize their identity, potential, and significance within the lifelong education process. In doing so adult learners contribute to the commu- nity at large by gaining a better understanding of themselves; by finding meaning in work, family, and religion; by contributing something to the public welfare; and by providing a different voice in a common tradition. Adult educators play an important role in this process by realizing the educational opportunities available and then assisting adult learners to recognize the potential for participating in them.

As Lindeman (1926) stated 65 years ago, "The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings" (p. 6). Community formal, nonformal, and informal adult education contributes to lifelong learning through its educational processes and resources. It contrib- utes to the creation of "the good community" that exercises and demonstrates the elements of a harmonious existence (Galbraith, 1990d).

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