From Marginalized to Mainstream: Different Stories, Similar Needs
Encounters with Diverse Groups in the Practice of Adult Education

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Abstract: This roundtable will explore the practice of adult education within four separate groups of learners: functioning adult schizophrenics; informal caregivers of persons with Alzheimer’s; women with rheumatoid arthritis; and secondary school teachers trained in teen suicide-intervention. Roundtable participants will provide a distinctly practitioner perspective as they share accounts of their respective inquiries.

Introduction
At first glance it may be difficult to imagine what could be learned from a discussion involving such diverse populations of adult learners. The participation of each group in a different adult education program provides the context for this dialogue. The respective stories and needs of the learners as expressed in the group interaction, or in one-on-one interviews with the researchers, are compared and contrasted. The sharing of those privileged experiences and the insights gleaned through listening can be valuable learning tools for practitioners as we search for answers, meaning, and guidance in the practice of adult education. It is hoped that the discussion will inform the study of adult education, in particular its application in the realms of mental health, community activism, and professional development. Each presenter's empirical research contributes in some way to issues that arise as we (collectively) focus our attention on various groups in the community.

In the study involving functioning adult schizophrenics, a narrow cognitive aspect of this severe mental illness was addressed as were the social and emotional needs of those afflicted. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a practical and moral dilemma of prescribing skill building for school teachers to make them alert to potentially suicidal students. This ongoing research investigates the application of learning following professional development pertaining to suicide intervention. In the arthritis support group, motivation and participation were key factors examined by the researcher. The student-practitioner looked at the holistic aspects of informal care-giving with the benefit of insights accrued firsthand through years of caring for parents with Alzheimer’s.

Mission Statement
The perspective underlying this presentation is one of the practitioners’ commitment to the shaping of community consciousness to foster understanding, cooperation and collaboration among all sectors of society in support of lifelong learning.

Research Issues and Questions
The research issues to be addressed in this roundtable are: adult learning in diverse contexts; learner empowerment and citizenship; practitioner advocacy for learners in their unique circumstances as well as for adult education; program planning and funding; and assessing whose needs are being met in adult education programs. Some of the questions to be discussed include: who advocates for and with these groups? Are these programs of value and who determines their value? How can all learners be good citizens in an alienating world? What of the controversy over where government funding for adult education programs should be directed: for example, to marginalized groups such as adults with schizophrenia or mainstream groups such as teachers? Who gets support for adult education in our society and how is this determined? Should government funding be provided to a mainstream group of teachers to educate them about a social issue in their schools and not an academic issue?

Conclusions

Today, we as educators are attuned to the need for programs for marginalized as well as mainstream groups. We can empower our learners to become self-directed through critical reflection and transformation of meaning schemes not only for themselves but for society as a whole. Inclusivity is paramount. The voices of all learners must be heard for their needs to be validated. Their stories, in their own words, are an example (and a necessary component) of participatory democracy. The target populations in the different research projects indicate that individuals benefit from coming together to address their unique needs. In this sense each one is a social movement. As practitioners, we have a responsibility to advocate on behalf of needy groups in the tradition of the social activist movement in which adult education is rooted. All groups have valid and pressing needs for information and education. Raising individual and collective consciousness can help alleviate or prevent human suffering. As we search for meaning in the practice of adult education, there is an increased awareness that we must work in conjunction with school boards, government agencies, and community organizations to influence policy and thereby ameliorate the pressing needs of society.

References

Briscoe, K. (1996) *Concentration deficit in schizophrenia: Does adult education have the means to mitigate?* Paper presented at the meeting of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, St. John’s, Newfoundland.


