

Dilemma of Adult Educators

**Adults must have some say in structuring the type
of educational experience offered
if it is to meet their needs**

STEPHEN L. BROWER

RAPID CHANGES in all aspects of our American economy have forced many new and different demands on education. The mushrooming of adult or continuing education since World War II is one of the significant responses to the changing educational needs of people. Adjustment to a rapidly changing world has now become an overworked theme for speakers on almost any subject today. But it is important to note that most of the adjustments that people have to make are related to acquisition of new skills and knowledge. Therefore, education is at the cutting edge of a majority of modern man's efforts to adapt or adjust to changing times.

An educator in the late 1940's predicted that adult educators were on the threshold of discovering a startling "new approach" to meeting the educational needs of adults. Then he noted that this "new approach" was one which had been tested and used successfully for almost 50 years by the Cooperative Extension Service in every state of the nation. However, he went on to predict that there was little or no likelihood that adult educators would recognize that the "new approach" was basically the same that Cooperative Extension had developed and used successfully in rural areas. Further, he predicted that there would be little or no combining of forces between these two educational movements.

The heart of the "new approach" is the involvement of the student (people) in the process of determining, planning, and carrying out educational experiences (referred to in Extension as program development). Extracting learning from experience is a built-in edu-

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cational goal. The central focus is on meeting the "here and now" educational needs of the student by "helping people help themselves."

Recent writers—students of the whole adult education movement in the United States—have alluded to what I choose to call a basic philosophic dilemma confronting educators who deal principally with adult population. This dilemma grows directly out of the technique and methods implicit in the "new approach." Most of today's educators were trained by traditional academic classroom education approaches, and are naturally oriented toward these methods. (Traditional method means the attempt, by an authoritative person with a captive audience, to transfer knowledge, usually by lecture, from teacher to student—who is usually immature and inexperienced.) When this type of educator moves to the sphere of adult education, he is confronted with adjusting or adapting his teaching techniques to meet the educational needs of mature, experienced people. The adult student is much more goal-directed and frequently wants to acquire a new set of skills and knowledge quickly in order to adjust to some changed economic need.

Awareness is growing among adults and adult educators that students learn best when they help determine the educational goals and are involved in planning and carrying out educational experiences. This notion was fostered early with rural adults by Cooperative Extension—and more recently by adult educators through university-sponsored community development programs.

In their recent book, *University Adult Education*, the Petersens make some critical comments about this new approach in defense of traditional educational procedures: "Perhaps the most pernicious doctrine in adult education is the notion that democracy demands that the educator abdicate his professional authority. Education is not democratic. It must be directed by those who are already educated. . . . Those who stray into university programs . . . should not be permitted to pervert the program."¹

The dilemma for the educator is how to reconcile what he sees as a need for preserving the integrity of the subject-matter content and the integrity of the authority figure, specialist, or teacher, as contrasted with involving people (students) in the process of designing an educational experience which specifically and directly meets their needs. The implication of the last alternative is that the student (in this case the adult) needs to have a hand in designing his educational experiences. In further reacting to this spectre, which so

¹ Renee Petersen and William Petersen, *University Adult Education* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 50, 72.

threatens the university level educator, the Petersens pass on an anecdote about Dean Nolte who asked his audience to imagine the figure of the university holding aloft the flaming beacon of truth—with its ear to the ground to catch from afar the first rumblings of the peoples' will. (The Dean did not think it necessary to specify what part of the anatomy is most prominent to the beholder.) They further identify the real nature of the threat of this "new approach" by warning that "when everything else has been sacrificed to this false image of 'democracy,' it must not be imagined that the educator's dignity has been saved."²

APPROACHES TO PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS

The conflict in educational philosophies essentially emerges from the adult educator's attempts to involve people in the total educative process. The following model (Figure 1) brings into sharp focus relationships between the variables responsible for the conflict.

		STUDENT OR PEOPLE	
		<i>Involve</i>	<i>Not involve</i>
Specialist, Professor, or Teacher	<i>Involve</i>	I Education for reality	II Academic
	<i>Not involve</i>	III Grass roots	IV Propaganda

Figure 1. Model defining alternative approaches to educational program development for adults

The model is set up as a simple two-way table—it forms the basis for explaining the philosophic dilemma of adult educators. The variables grow out of the dilemma of involving versus not involving the student and/or teacher in the total educative process. ("Involve" means the significant and appropriate inclusion of the student and/or teacher at each stage of the educational process, i.e., identifying needs, setting goals, identifying subject matter, and designing and executing educational experiences.)

Two elements are inherent in the involvement versus non-involvement of the authoritative figure (teacher or specialist) side of the model. First there is the authoritative person with his attendant roles, needs, and prerogatives. Closely related to this is the value of pre-

²*Ibid.*, p. 148.

servicing the integrity of the subject-matter content. The other side of the model contains the variables to involve or not to involve the student (people). There are also two basic elements of concerns on this side of the model: First, it takes into account needs of the recipients of the educational experience; second, it assumes that people learn more effectively when involved in the total educational process.

Four basic types of educational approaches emerge in this model. In type I both the people (students) and the professional authority (teacher) are involved in the total educative experience. In creative and imaginative ways the needs of the people and the integrity of the subject-matter content find common ground. Type I is labeled *education for reality* for the obvious reason that it provides a way for educator and student to work with the specific "here and now" needs of both student and teacher.

Type II involves the teacher in the total educational process but excludes the student from all but the barest minimum of involvement. The student is simply the passive recipient of the pre-programmed experience. The dignity of the professional authority and the integrity of the subject matter have first and major priority. This type describes the traditional university educational teaching approach and is therefore labeled *academic*.

Type III excludes the professional educator or the authority person from all but a bare minimum of the educative process. After most of the decisions on the educational content and process are decided, then the specialist or authority is called in to answer the questions. In fact, what often happens is that a third party represents the teacher or specialist in determining the content of the educational experience as well as how the subject matter will be taught. The "people" are involved in designing and carrying out the total educational experience. This type is labeled *grass roots*.

Type IV functions by excluding both the teacher and the student. The educational content and the process of carrying it out are determined by a third party. Type IV describes propaganda. Interestingly, some of the more spectacular current adult education programs fall into this category. This is especially true of programs of various agencies or organizations who are promoting or selling their particular ideas or vested interests.

Obviously each of these types is polar or extreme—what takes place in actual practice may be somewhere between two or more of these types. However, in practice one can identify the educational philosophy of an individual or organization as being most nearly represented by one of these four basic types.

The Basic Dilemma

The basic philosophic dilemma for adult educators is actually between Type II (the pure academic approach) and Type III (the pure grass roots approach). Those who hold rigidly to the academic approach are insulted by the notion that anyone other than the professional authority should or could determine the content of a specific course or the curriculum of a given subject area. They hold that, by virtue of the special knowledges of the authoritative person, he should have exclusive right to determine both the course content and the means by which it is taught. In fact, much of the emotionally laden discussions about academic freedom are directly related to the threat posed by those who might espouse a philosophy that incorporates notions inherent in Types I and III—that the student can and should be involved in the educative process.

The philosophy that the student, particularly the adult student, not only can but has the right to have a voice in formulating the educational experience he is to be involved in and that it should be fashioned and geared directly to his needs is in direct opposition to the pure academic (Type II) approach. This means that, relative to establishing the optimum kind of learning situation, a course or educational program should be designed to meet both subject-matter and personal psychological needs of the student. Thus, those who take a strong stand oriented towards either the academic or grass roots approach will naturally see themselves in open conflict with those who hold the opposite view.

Although, ideologically, Cooperative Extension and community development workers espouse the philosophy inherent in the Type I (education for reality) approach, they often operate in practice more in line with the grass roots (Type III) approach. This, of course, makes the academic university professor and the Extension specialist highly suspicious of such educational efforts. He perceives that his subject matter and professional authority is being ignored or misused by the uninformed nonprofessional. The threat is intensified when the design for an educational experience is finalized without consulting the subject-matter specialist at any point in the planning process. The specialist is simply invited to be at a meeting and speak on a topic without knowing, in many cases, the nature of the audience or the background for the request. Often, this kind of experience is not satisfying for either the people (students) or specialist.

Relatively few adult educators oriented toward either Type I or III approach are adequately trained to understand and manage the

sociological processes they aspire to utilize. Organization, social action, and motivational processes are central to the success of educational efforts oriented toward Type I or III. Because of the complexity of the processes for involving people, it is not surprising to see adult educators caught in the web of these complicated processes and never quite getting around to carrying out a concrete subject-matter teaching experience. The academically (Type II) oriented educator, observing such efforts, is naturally fortified in feeling that involving people in developing and conducting the teaching program is dysfunctional to effective teaching.

There is real hazard in placing the grass roots label on the Type III approach to adult education. The term grass roots has something of a halo, particularly among Cooperative Extension and community development educators. The grass roots notion tends to be idealized by these professionals as more nearly describing the Type I (education for reality) approach. However, in practice major emphasis is on involving people in determining their needs and planning solutions to problems. However, as community development and Cooperative Extension workers utilize what they call the grass roots approach, the subject-matter specialist is not usually involved in the total educational program development process. Particularly, they are not involved significantly in helping determine needs, set goals, or assist with planning and organizing educational efforts. Thus the subject-matter specialist is placed in a very dissatisfying and ineffective role. This situation becomes the focus for much stress and conflict within the organization.

Combining Efforts

Cooperative Extension, with 50 years experience, has only been moderately successful in accommodating in the organization both those with the academic (Type II) and those with the grass roots (Type III) orientation. It is, therefore, understandable that the general extension adult education movement of more recent origin, which is more directly associated with the academic university, would face even more of a crisis in dealing with this philosophic dilemma.

The recent movement on some campuses to combine general university extension and Cooperative Extension into one united adult education effort tends to intensify the dilemma defined by our model. But according to some writers, this is inevitable. According to Houle, "everybody feels that general and Cooperative Extension must somehow be made to work more closely together but nobody knows how

that result can be brought about."³ Rovetch maintains that "both university adult education and Cooperative Extension are changing rapidly and some type of convergence is generally considered to be both likely and desirable." However, he says that the process of bringing them together "will prove to be considerably more complex than most persons imagine. They're animals of a different species."⁴

CONCLUSION

Regardless of orientation, as adult educators are challenged to provide meaningful educational experiences for adults they will be forced more and more toward an "education for reality" (Type D) orientation. The adult public has about the same variations in intellectual ability as is found among immature students. In addition, the vast range of differences in experience and prior training presents the adult educator with challenges not usually faced by the classroom teacher. Educators who are confronted with these challenges realize that adults must have some say in structuring the type of educational experience offered if it is to serve their needs.

Usually the adult becomes a student in order to accomplish some desired educational goal in the shortest period of time. They are involved in making a living, maintaining families, and keeping up with civic responsibilities. If educational experiences can be directly related to their "here and now" concerns and needs, chances are they will have an optimum learning experience. This makes the adult educator's job much more varied and challenging—and potentially more rewarding or frustrating.

As more and more support is generated for realistic educational programs for adults, administrators will need to understand the nature of the philosophic dilemma confronting professional adult educators. Once this is understood and dealt with, programs for adults will, in a meaningful way, meet the reality needs of the adult student. The total resources of the university can then become a significant adult education force.

³ Cyril O. Houle, *Major Trends in Higher Education*, Notes and Essays on Education for Adults No. 24 (Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, 1959), p. 25.

⁴ Warren Rovetch, "Cooperative Extension and the Land-Grant System in University Adult Education," in Petersen and Petersen, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

THINKING is one thing no one has ever been able to tax.—
CHARLES F. KETTERING.