

Perspectives

RURAL ADULT EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS OF A STUDENT EDUCATOR

Patricia Kilgour Anderson
Red Deer College

Abstract

This essay takes the reader through the 20-year personal journey of the author as an adult student and subsequently an adult educator in rural Alberta. Six "truths" learned by the author about returning adults in rural settings are presented, and challenges to rural adult education discussed.

Résumé

Cet essai fait revivre au lecteur les 20 ans de l'auteure à titre d'apprenante adulte, puis de formatrice, dans une région rurale de l'Alberta. L'auteure présente six « vérités » apprises au fil des ans sur les adultes qui reviennent sur les bancs d'école dans les régions rurales. Elle énonce aussi les défis que revêt l'éducation aux adultes en milieu rural.

Introduction

In 1980 I began the long and sometimes rather arduous journey of an adult student, studying for a B.A. degree in psychology at a distance from my home in rural Alberta. By 1994, I took on another role—that of adult educator at the Big Country Educational Consortium in Drumheller, teaching Communications Studies to Computer Technology students. Through each of these roles, I gained insights into the unique needs of both students and instructors involved in rural adult education. In this essay, I will share six truths I learned about rural adult education. These truths focus on the adult learners' past experiences, stage of life when returning to study, need for learning to be relevant, need of support, and the benefit of having their lived experience recognized and valued in the classroom. The truths are a

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culmination of reflected learning and praxis (Apps, 1991), as well as the critical learning I have undergone during the process of writing this essay.

1. The Importance of Childhood Literacy Experiences

I was raised on a rural Alberta farm and my parents were typical of other farmers in the area in that they did not have a lot of formal education. My parents were, however, voracious readers. After exhausting the choices available in our local library, my father discovered the extension library at the University of Alberta. Imagine what that meant to our household. Suddenly a world of books was available through our mailbox!

In the late 70s and early 80s, my father took volunteer positions with CUSO (Canadian University Services Overseas) and the U.N. Development Programme in East Africa and the South Pacific. Although these positions involved only my parents and youngest sister, the family members who stayed in Canada felt our lives were also changed just through hearing their experiences. Through reading and travel, my parents have modelled life long learning to their children and grandchildren, and I know I was very fortunate to have been raised in a home where learning was valued.

I now work with women in Life Skills and Career Development programs. Some of my students are reluctant participants. Often they had unpleasant school experiences in the past and many feel “forced” to attend by the counsellors who referred them. Looking back at my first experience as an adult student, I can see that fear played a big part. I was scared. What if I didn’t measure up? What if I wasn’t smart enough? Can you imagine how much worse it is for someone whose memories of education include rigid rows of desks, dusty-smelling libraries, prissy looking teachers correcting their grammar—and the feelings of failure that all too often go along with those? Learners may not be encouraged to learn during their childhood, but they can come to value learning at any point in their lives.

Library books and travel have greatly impacted my family. This is not the case for many of the residents in my small village. Our public library is underused and there is a reluctance among village residents to trust “outsiders.”

Much has been written about barriers and enhancers in the transfer of learning (Caffarella, 1994; Quigley, 1998; Taylor, 2001). As an adult educator, I need to create a climate where adult students will experience more enhancers and fewer barriers. Although I realize that each student will

experience rural education in his or her own unique way, because of my own experience of being an adult learner in a rural setting, I may assist them in the process.

Of the factors considered throughout the literature, the lack of literacy skills is of particular interest to me as an adult educator. Almost thirty years ago, Staples (1976) indicated that the further education councils in Alberta had begun the process of providing learning opportunities for adults. These councils have provided the Alberta answer to the British term "lifelong education." Although some government grants are available for programming, board members volunteer their time and expertise in developing plans to meet the learning needs of the community. By the late 1970s, literacy programs evolved from these grassroots councils. The literacy programs, like the libraries in small rural communities, are underused.

Although studies on adult literacy abound, they appear to ignore the rural experience. A recent book on adult literacy (Taylor, 2001), is one that gives exclusively urban examples with no reference to rural literacy. This lack of inclusion highlights the need for further study of unique rural education issues.

2. Acknowledging Changes, Choices, and Challenges

In 1980, I was a young mother with a toddler in a crib. While reading the newspaper one day, I saw an ad from Athabasca University that said something about, "completing your university degree at home." That really caught my eye. I had always intended to go to university, but in those years it seemed that if you didn't go directly from high school, you just didn't get there. I thought that university was not available to me because of the choices I'd made to marry, become a parent, and live in a rural area. I sent for information and was soon enrolled in a course that was pertinent for me at the time: child psychology. I was given six months to complete that course, weekly access to a tutor by telephone, as well as full access to the university library. I took the full six months to complete the course, but I didn't spend a huge amount of time on it. At that point, it was just another hobby.

Distance education made it possible for me to return as an adult to my education. This has been a wonderful experience for me, and one that I share with others who feel that because they didn't go immediately from high school, it is somehow too late. Formal education doesn't have to be completed in a certain predetermined time frame.

After reviewing my students' files I find that most of them are returning adults. Many have had recent changes in their lives and need to make a new start. Most feel a sense of doubt in their ability, and some mask this doubt with anger because they were "told" to be there by a social worker or other professional in the community. I believe that some of these issues are more exaggerated in a rural setting. For instance, one hindrance to student participation in my community is the lack of childcare services. Family members, who traditionally provided these services, are no longer available because difficult economic times for many rural families require that both adults be employed. The one and only daycare in our town closed its doors a few years ago, leaving many young families scrambling for private child care services.

Recognizing the issues unique to our rural student base, I need to make the act of returning to school as easy as possible. One way I do this is by sharing my story, and the stories of countless others, with those who are just beginning their journey. Inviting successful former students into the adult classroom can provide motivation as well as practical ideas for all of us.

In the past, rural residents were "left out" of further education because of geographic distance. If unable to move to a larger centre, they could not pursue post secondary education. The availability of on-line learning has changed this to some degree. However the cost of up-to-date computer equipment is prohibitive to some, and many rural areas still do not have quality high-speed Internet connections.

Time is also a factor in rural residents' not continuing their education. Many farmers must take off-farm work just to keep their farming operations afloat. While on-line delivery offers flexibility in schedules, the amount of reading required makes it more time-consuming than classroom delivery. As adult educators, we may feel a certain level of pride in offering online courses to those in remote areas. However, I believe that those taking the courses are the privileged few—not the majority.

3. Making Learning Relevant

While I was studying that first course, my son was experiencing night terrors. Because I wanted to learn more about it, I chose to write a paper on sleep disorders in children. This was one of the earliest lessons I learned about adults: If I study something that I can use in my personal or work world, I will be more interested in it.

I completed that course but didn't take any others until a few years later, when I was working full time as a secretary, and my son was in

school. This time, I took a literature course by teleconference from the University of Calgary. I continued on with another course from Athabasca and after a year or so, I started looking at the courses I had completed, and decided it was time to get serious. I planned a schedule for myself and found that I could complete the degree in five years if I finished each course in two months. By that point, I was obsessed. I really wanted to have a university degree. I wasn't using the degree as part of a career plan—I simply wanted to complete it for my own satisfaction.

As it turned out, my education did lead me to a career change. And because of what I know now, that learning must be relevant to the learners' personal and work lives, I ask my students every day, "How will you use what we covered today in your life?" If they don't have an answer—I haven't done my job.

Many adult learners have memories of authoritative instructors giving them material considered by the instructor to be valuable, but of limited use to students. As a rural educator, I must be mindful that the material I share in the classroom has meaning for the learners. This can be done by focussing on students' community-lived experiences along with theories of learning.

Program scheduling presents another challenge in the rural community. Although not all of our students are farmers, they do make up a portion of our student body. Because programs are cut every year due to low enrolments, the agricultural calendar must be considered when planning adult courses. A program scheduled, for example, during calving, seeding, or harvest, would not likely attract learners involved in cattle or grain farming operations.

Adults return to school for a number of reasons. One of the most common is the link between educational attainment and income (Demers, 1991). Many rural students have low levels of education. Because of this, they are not qualified to take jobs that pay a good salary and many find themselves employed in low-wage, sporadic, service sector jobs (DeBell, Vi & Hartmann, 1997; Spalter-Roth, 1994).

Each student coming through the door of my classroom will be motivated by her own unique situational factors. Each one will also have a sense that both the program and the timing are right. Once there, participating with other learners and pursuing goals, students' lives will change forever.

Feminist pedagogy rests on the assumption that empowerment begins when we can see our potential and the possibility of our achieving roles of

power (Hayes, 1989). Many women in my classroom indicate that they not only “found themselves” through the process of adult education, but also found new and interesting pathways in life. The process of working in a collaborative setting is as great a factor in this growth as is course content.

Education provides returning adults the opportunity to consider possibilities previously unseen (Meisol, 1999). Caffarella (1994) indicates that program planners should demonstrate flexibility in planning for these unanticipated achievements which may result. As an adult educator, I must continue to be mindful that those “ah ha” moments will be unique to each student and cannot be predicted with any certainty. I must be open to the possibility of their existence and join in celebrating them when they arrive.

4. Support for Learning

Support came from many different people in my life: contacts at the university, library staff, my employer, friends, and family. Looking back, I can see that their support was often the reason I could keep going.

Of course there were times I wanted to quit. I was working full time, trying to maintain my household, and taking an active role in our farming operation. I could study at only a half-time rate. One day I was complaining to my mom that I would be 35 years old before I finished that degree. She replied, “Pat, you plan to be 35 anyway, would you rather be 35 with the degree or without it?” That comment really put it into perspective! I was going to be 35 anyway, why not continue and be glad I had? The last thing I wanted to do was wake up on my 35th birthday and say, “Gee, I wish I’d kept on, I would have been finished by now.”

I graduated in 1993 and took an instructional contract position at the Educational Consortium in Drumheller. Five years later, I enrolled at the University of Calgary, and began to study Adult and Community Education.

A decade later I have the same complaint about my studies taking so long, but the number has changed. This time, though, I have my own answer: “Since I’m going to be 45 anyway, I’d rather be 45 with the degree than without it.”

Many returning students struggle because they lack support in their personal lives. Lewis (1985) found that for female students, husbands and boyfriends made up the largest group of non-supporters who encouraged them not to pursue their studies but remain where they were. She also reported that negative support has a direct effect on attendance and success. “Despite the

barriers that at every level operate to limit women's movement and push them back into the home, it is clear that in this movement out of the private sphere of the home, women stand to gain far more than they have to lose" (McMinn, 1995, p.153).

However, women are not alone in this lack of personal support. Men, too, often face opposition to their studies from those they are closest to. The threat of having a loved one change (and perhaps leave?) is very frightening to many adults whose partners pursue further education.

Having even one person believe in the learner, encourage them, and give them a pat on the back can make all the difference. For some adult learners, not a single person in their lives plays this role. If they are going to receive that crucial support, it will be because administrative and instructional staff members make the time for it. As a rural educator, I play a supportive role with my students. I also play the role of motivator.

Hitt (1990) states that the "primary function of the transformational leader is to lift followers to their better selves" (p. 137). Caffarella (1994) says that assisting people in making change is what transfer of learning is all about. In the classroom, this means presenting material so that learners will integrate new knowledge as they reflect on past experiences (Morrow, 1993). As a rural educator I have learned to motivate students by bringing out the best in them and encouraging them to stand in their own voice (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986).

5. Learning from Learners

When I returned to study for my next degree, I found the instructors now operated from a belief that we all have something to share and we all learn together. This was perhaps the biggest difference I saw between my two degree programs, and it was hard to understand at first. Coming from a background where the teacher is the expert with all the knowledge, I almost felt as though I wasn't getting my money's worth when they deferred to the adult students' knowledge and experience. It was interesting to me to realize that although I operated from that philosophy in my own classroom, I felt uneasy in university courses when the instructors did the same thing. Maybe it was because they all had doctorates.

Personal experience is a critical source of motivation, learning, and meaning-making for adult learners. It serves to help us gain awareness of ourselves, see shifts in life, develop new adaptive strategies, and continue in dialogue with others about ideas, topics, and experiences (Fiddler &

Marienu, 1995). When this happens, we are learning and teaching simultaneously.

Authoritative "top-down" teaching styles are now under close scrutiny by educational institutions, educators, and learners alike. Where these styles persist in the rural adult classroom, I believe more funding must be set aside for staff development. Improved teaching methods may result from training opportunities where value is shown in the sharing of students' ideas both inside and outside of the classroom.

One criticism of adult education programs is their deficit model approach which is "oriented to detecting individual problems and prescribing solutions" (Parker, 1994, p.173). This approach is quite apparent in rural areas. A better approach may be to listen to the students (Cheng, 1990; Quigley, 1998). They know what they want and what they need. We need to be able to let go and listen. However, this will mean a change in the way we view power structures.

Many adult students view the classroom instructors as authority figures with power they do not share (Epp, Ford, Tripp-Knowles & Vanguois, 1996). One way to encourage equality is to have the students determine what and how they will study. The well-known *Worth Report* recommended exactly that: "to the greatest extent possible the individual should be the one to exercise choice in the planning and forwarding of his [sic] education" (Alberta Lifelong Education Task Force, 1971). Although I have seen this principle upheld throughout my M.Ed. program at the University of Calgary, I rarely see it in other programs involving adult students. The "outcomes focus" today makes adopting this line of thinking very difficult for the adult educator planning new programs.

When students view education as a valuable process and one in which they play an active role in determining, they will see it as an investment in themselves. Because rural students face unique challenges, special programs must be implemented to help them continue in their education. With a "hand up," I believe that those same rural students will take ownership of their education and come to view learning as a valuable experience just as available to them as it is to their urban counterparts.

I agree with Brundage and MacKeracher (1980) who suggested that our learning process is influenced by how we feel about and describe ourselves. Self-image and self-esteem are very real issues in our rural adult classrooms. Many of our students have not had successful experiences in classrooms previously. They may have been told they were not as good as someone else or that they were incapable of learning. The most horrifying aspect of these

insults is that in many cases they came from educators. As a rural adult educator, I need to value the self concept and self esteem of each learner in order to facilitate learning. I can do this by first being open to the students' rural experience. Understanding where they have come from is a good first step to understanding where they want to go.

Having a positive experience is especially important to returning students. For this reason, the screening process is crucial. Being "set up for failure" would just add to their previous negative experience and confirm their self-doubt. James (1997) found that those students she studied who had an external locus of control were more likely to shut down, give up, and drop out. However, students can learn to have an internal locus of control and accept responsibility for their actions and consequences. One factor in encouraging this internal control among students is found in the instructors' giving up their own control in the classroom.

6. Letting Go

Adult educators have to balance presenting new material with three other things: debate and discussion, students sharing their experiences, and the tic toc of a clock. If we are able to let go of our previously held ideas on lesson plans and methods of instruction in order to use all the knowledge present in the classroom, interesting things can happen (Zemke & Zemke, 1984).

Over the years I have seen great learning take place when the students take the lead. We have used our five senses in bread baking, scented candles and incense, music ranging from rap to classical, sweet grass ceremonies, and drumming demonstrations. Others might question my thinking, but if by relinquishing control of my old methods and lesson plans, we all learn more, I'll look for more opportunities to do just that.

A variety of teaching techniques must be incorporated into the adult education classroom to address the varied learning styles of all students (Brookfield, 1990; Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980; Knowles, 1980). As a "creatively challenged" educator, I worry that I do not have the necessary skills to offer unique and different experiences for the students. However, Caffarella (1994) indicates that even simple measures such as rearranging chairs and tables to encourage group interaction and team building can be a great start. Being open to others' ideas is also beneficial. By recognizing that there is always room for a new strategy, a new perspective, I keep the classroom open to better experiences for us all.

For far too long educators have held the philosophy that they were the “enlightened ones.” This has changed in urban areas and to a certain extent in the rural areas as well. However, because it is very difficult to encourage more progressive educators to come to rural and often isolated areas, we have a number of instructors who still hold fast to their traditional ways. A number of key barriers must be overcome.

Challenges

Funding

Adult education has been notoriously under-funded in our province even though studies have consistently indicated that education is an investment in both economic and humanistic terms. The *Worth Report* stated that

governments have a responsibility for continuing education for the same reasons that they have a responsibility for the public education of a child, or the training of a surgeon.... [E]ach individual in the community has the right to expect educational opportunities in order that he may realize his full potential, from his earliest years through to old age. (Alberta Lifelong Education Task Force, 1971)

As rural residents, we do not have large populations or strong lobby groups. Pride has often kept farmers and other rural residents from accessing public funds. Now is the time to organize and push forward our unique needs. If we work together, we can ensure equal access to educational opportunities for our community members.

Instructor Bias

Because of our traditional roots, rural educators may harbour biases which may affect their ability to connect with their students or other staff members. Biases about client groups and other types of “gossip” interfere with program efficacy (Imber-Coppersmith, 1982; Leahey, 1984). As adult educators, we must “accept the responsibility of accountability—facilitating the learning process for all students, regardless of age, gender, culture, or sexual orientation” (Morrow, 1996, p. 42). In order to do this, I have to begin with the premise that I have biases, and must be willing to understand them with careful and critical reflection.

Diversity

Issues of bias are certainly not limited to instructors. Because we live in a homogeneous community, some may question whether talk of discrimination is relevant. It is. The traditional “red neck” mentality is prevalent in all age groups. Education is our best hope for increased understanding and tolerance.

Collaboration

Team work is mandatory for adult education in rural settings. Because we have a shortage of qualified staff, we must look for ways to collaborate. Community "networks" help by providing a framework from which we can inform each other of our own agencies' work and together identify community needs. However, rural areas struggle with finding people who want to be involved. The same "faithful few" do the work while the rest of the community members sheepishly look on. As an adult educator in a rural community I must continue to learn new ways to involve community members in order to meet community needs.

Conclusion

Rural adult education can offer incredible benefits to the students in increased self esteem and self concept, improved lifestyle, opportunities, skills, taking back control, and understanding of self and others. It also offers unique challenges to administrators in staffing, scheduling, funding, and enrolment numbers.

Through my experiences as a student and educator, I have gained insight into the adult education movement—its roots, its present challenges, and its future possibilities. The truths I gleaned from my journey certainly impact my work as an adult educator. I understand that students come to the classroom at different times in their lives, for different reasons, and with vastly different backgrounds in terms of experience, encouragement, and support. However, they all want an educational experience that will be relevant to them. If I don't recognize and value each individual's lived learning, and create a climate for it to be shared, I will have missed the mark. We all have something to learn as well as something to teach.

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