From Research to Practice to Researching Practice

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Abstract: The Midwest Research to Practice conference faces a diminishing audience of adult education doctoral programs and students who want to learn the academic skills of presenting research. This paper presents another option for this conference to be able to better connect with Master's degree students and the recent alumni who are adult education practitioners. The co-authors of this paper, one who works as a graduate level faculty member and one who works in community development and educational reform, believe that the conference may serve as a reality check for practitioners who are trying to bring new knowledge and skills about social change into a workplace. While adult educators often sit in power-poor positions as middle managers and consultants in larger organizations, they are able to find creative ways to negotiate power to best serve their learners. We propose multiple ways to enable practitioners to test out their skills before being fully exposed to the barriers and challenges of a resistant workplace. We conclude with a call for action among colleague to explore opportunities such as creating a new certificate of performance in adult education practice.

Introduction

At the close of the Midwest Research to Practice (MWR2P) conference last year, there was an engaging discussion on the challenges our conference is facing, like other small conferences, this conference faces low attendance coupled with reluctance among the members to assume the coordination of the next 2010 meeting. Why are we in this situation? Several answers were suggested including: a) reduced budgets for faculty and graduate student travel; b) in hard times priority is given to other professional meetings over MWR2P; c) the closing down or merging of existing adult education academic departments with other “professional” departments in our membership universities; and d) shifting of professional opportunities in which fewer positions or hires are being made in traditional adult education programs for our doctoral graduates.

Discussion on these and related issues was lively and included an air of urgency. It was suggested that this group of issues pointed to a trend that has been unfolding within the field for several years. Budgets are tight, departments are being closed or merged, and students come to adult education to enhance their own professional development within their respective fields of practice. This discussion lead to reflection on the original intent of the MWR2P conference and whether to revisit who we are and where are we going as a small professional conference. The historians in the group pointed out that the original intent was to provide an opportunity for graduate students (mostly doctoral students) to gain experience in publishing their research findings in a professional setting—research to practice. Is this still a viable strategy given the changing nature of the academic, research, and practice environment in which adult education operates? Alternative ideas were explored including changing the name of the conference (and subsequent call for papers) and, perhaps, giving greater billing to what adult education practitioners are encountering in their non-academic areas of practice such as nursing, business,
engineering, ABE, HRD, etc. A consensus emerged that the original intent should remain the primary focus of the MWR2P conference and its emphasis on providing opportunity for the next generation of research scholars in adult education to conduct their research studies with opportunity to present their findings in a relatively safe yet professional, peer review environment.

**Practitioners Concerns**

The closing discussion at the 2009 MWR2P conference raised an interesting question. Can the changing environment in which our small conference operates provide opportunity for renewed commitments and sustainable growth over the next five to ten years? Clearly, graduate programs in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education serve students who come from many sectors and many backgrounds, including health, social services, business and industry, and education. Since there are few if any undergraduate programs in adult education, our students come from a wide variety of undergraduate programs, usually discovering adult education after they have practiced adult education in the field for a number of years.

Accordingly, graduate programs in adult education seek to provide the theoretical and philosophical framework to undergird our students’ practice as well as practical tips and skills to add to their toolkit (program planning, evaluation, grant writing, critical reflection, and much more) (See the CPAE Standards for Adult and Continuing Education). Many of the students enter the programs with experience from practice; they come to a Masters level graduate program for theory; and they return to their field of practice. Many leave with the expectation of being able to apply the newly learned theory in ways that will bring desirable change in their own practice, the environment in which they work, and to benefit the participants in their programs. Regretfully, many are greeted with skepticism and resistance among their colleagues and find themselves ill prepared to deal effectively with the change process that awaits them. This expectation in conjunction with the challenges that our graduates encounter while attempting to produce change actually provide a wellspring of opportunity for on-going collaborative research among the academic faculty, current Masters and Ph.D. students, and the alumni base of most adult education programs and departments. In fact, finding ways to connect with this alumni base may be a strategy for not only sustaining and growing the MWR2P conference but also creating opportunities for scholarship and participatory research into practice to improve practice among those engaged in practice.

This paper and presentation will explore how the academic faculty can better connect with the field of practice to help teach our students how to navigate through the changing terrain of their workplace. Often the university seems very disconnected from the world of practice where our students live and work. How can faculty be in better tune with the big issues of social change that occur outside of academia, so that we can be role models for the masters and doctoral students that we teach? Faculty purport to train their students to enter, negotiate, and navigate these community spaces without being immersed in them directly.

The co-authors to this paper, Dan and Michelle, both work with adult educators to help them initiate change in their own thinking and practice. Dan is able to work with practitioners to help them recognize and overcome barriers as they work to reform and improve schools and life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Michelle works in the graduate classroom at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana to gain trust in order to teach models of social change and reflective practice.

We seek to answer this question: **How can we create a better model of common ground for social action, community development and scholarly research both theoretical and applied?**
We believe that the conference could be a safe space for graduates of adult education programs to return and reflect on their experience trying to implement this new learning back in the real workplaces. Here are brief descriptions of the ways that both co-authors engage their learners and practitioners.

**Connecting with Real World Examples - Michelle Glowacki-Dudka**

As an adult education faculty member, I am able to work with students in Masters and Doctoral programs who usually are coming from another field of study and employment. The students that we serve are usually over 25 years old and they take courses at the local campus, at extension campuses, or through the Internet. Knowing that classroom experiences need to be reinforced by connection to lived experience, I encourage students in many of my courses to go out and talk with adult learners, practitioners, planners, teachers, and others to observe their practice and understand their contexts. Since adult educators often serve at the margins (Wise & Glowacki-Dudka, 2004) of their fields in middle management or consulting positions, I like to have the students learn about how these practitioners attend to or negotiate issues of power.

Cervero and Wilson (1994) began to write about issues of power in program planning. They have continued their work and it helps to serve my students in considering these barriers and strategies for their own experience. I am consistently surprised at the creative ways the students have negotiated for more power and control of their workplaces. Those learners who have not been in tuned with these issues, begin to understand the world in a different light.

In my teaching, I also use Brookfield’s (1995) reflective practice tools of the Critical Incident Questionnaire to gauge the progress of the classroom and the learning journal summaries to gauge the learning outside of the classroom. These tools help the learners examine their inner learning and what is most significant to them at that time. While I do not require students to have transformative experiences in the classroom, I do want to give them the tools to examine their assumptions, recognize their position of power, and reflect on their practice.

Once the students are able to understand and use these skills, it would be wonderful to have a place to enact them after they have completed a graduate program and are out in the real world. The conference could serve that purpose.

**The Center for Urban Community Development – Dan Folkman**

The Center for Urban Community Development (Center) is a programming unit within the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, School of Continuing Education. The Center’s mission grew out of the social turmoil of the 1960s when it was created by the University of Wisconsin-Extension to create an urban extension program within the central city of Milwaukee. Today, the Center works with a wide range of nonprofit, public, and private organizations in addressing community development issues facing local residents, neighborhoods, and urban areas generally. Its historic origin, however, remains at the core of Centers current vision and mission.

**Vision:** Educational programs aimed at bridging the social, intellectual and political gap between mainstream institutions and people from diverse, low-income, and marginalized communities through community education and participatory action research strategies.
**Mission:** As faculty and academic staff engaged in community development practice we design, promote, and facilitate action-learning programs in which people from mainstream institutions and members from community-based organizations and local residents learn to dialogue, plan, and act collectively to address common needs, issues and concerns.

The participants in the Center’s program activities are focused on addressing specific community needs or issues and are not necessarily seeking to further their own education through formal university studies. Accordingly, interest in adult education theory is tempered with a focus on practice and how to address immediate and often intractable issues facing their community and the children, families, and adult learners they serve.

This focus on praxis provides the Center with an opportunity to engage practitioners in addressing issues of social and organizational change within the context of their own practice and to explore why overcoming the status quo and producing change is so difficult when the will and resources are available.

An example of the Center’s programming activity is a job-training program being developed and implemented through a collaborative partnership that includes nonprofit community agencies and local businesses. The need is the exceptionally high and persistent unemployment rate among central city residents. Current research has documented an extensive network of job-training programs within the greater Milwaukee area coupled with widespread discontent among local employers with the results of these training programs. In short, employers complain of a high turnover rate that stems from a lack of basic employability skills among the trainees they hire. The research recommendations include designing job-training programs with greater involvement of the employers in all phases of the program design, implementation and evaluation process. The challenge is to create a program planning and implementation environment that includes both the job-training agency and the future employers of its trainee graduates. A critical added dimension would be to include the trainees in the design of the program as well as recipients of training services and employment.

Over the past several months, the Center has helped to create this kind of planning environment. A nonprofit neighborhood center has been working with a local economic development corporation and several area employers in designing a job-training program. The participating employers are committed to not only hiring from among the program graduates but also participating in the development and teaching of the training curriculum. In a separate but parallel program, an employment club has been operating that includes parents from a charter middle school that is located in the above mentioned neighborhood center. The participants in this employment club have contributed substantially to the design of the emerging program. Eventually, the employment club concept will be integrated into the job-training program that is being created.

At the time of this writing (July 2010), this collaborative group has secured funding of more than $600,000 from a local foundation and a Wisconsin state agency. Training is scheduled to start in August 2010. The results of this training program and the learning about what it takes to create and sustain this kind of public-private partnership could be the basis for a conference paper and presentation in next year’s MWR2P conference. Also, the implementation of this program could serve as a model and demonstration program to foster similar initiatives. Further, this program could provide a research and/or field experience opportunity for graduate students in an adult education masters or Ph.D. program.
Conclusion and Suggestions

In our opening comments, we pointed to the changing environment within which many graduate programs in Adult and Continuing Education must operate. One way to address these changes is to see them as opportunities to grow and develop new programmatic initiatives within our respective areas of practice including graduate education, research, and field applications. The following are several ideas that we wish to explore with colleagues during our conference presentation with the intent of enlisting several colleagues to co-design a field practicum that would: a) Include a certificate of performance in adult education field applications; b) online adult education courses that would be of interest to both students graduating from our programs or thinking about returning to school graduate studies; and c) create a renewed stream of papers and presentations at our annual MWR2P Conference.

A Certificate of Performance in Adult Education Field Applications.

Many of our students come with extensive experience in their respective fields. This prior experience serves as background against which to reflect on the adult education literature and to explore how it may be applied back in one’s work setting. Many graduate programs include field work and practicums through which to gain some field experience. Imagine if this was taken to a new level where it was possible to earn a certificate of performance as an adult education practitioner. This opportunity may not only be of interest to graduates of our programs but also to practitioners who are beginning to think about returning to school. Such a practicum could be a vehicle for testing the waters as part of their decision making process. This also could enable students to gain credit through experience.

An Online, Multi-school/Campus Program.

This Certificate of Performance program could be a collaborative venture among several Adult Education programs in different schools throughout the Midwest. Online classes can accommodate this distance learning framework while local action projects would be designed and implemented by the class participants. The faculty at the local campus would serve as advisors, coachers, and mentors for the students throughout the project implementation process. Students thinking about entering a graduate program could actually complete an action research class, earn credits, and decide if returning to school was the right thing at this time. Recent graduates could use the certificate as additional credentialing in their respective field. They would also gain direct experience and coaching services as they struggle with the real world realities of introducing change and innovation into their practice environment. The faculty participating in this program would have direct access to real world practice settings and the opportunity for research into the theory and practice of adult education.

The Annual MWR2P Conference.

The annual Midwest Research to Practice Conference can be a vehicle for sharing what is being learned about producing sustainable change through the efforts of field practitioners enrolled in this certificate program. Envision a stream of papers and presentations from field practitioners that document efforts at implementing change, identify challenges that emerge from within the practice settings, design strategies to address barriers in practice, develop theories-of-action that have produced results, and suggest mechanisms to adapt this learning to other practice settings.
Convene an Action Inquiry Group.

The purpose of this paper and conference presentation is to explore these ideas among colleagues and to gauge whether there is sufficient interest to explore these ideas further. If there is interest, a planning group can be created that would work together on developing these and/or related ideas. On immediate and practical outcome would be to develop, identify, and encourage a stream of conference papers and presentation for next year’s MWR2P conference. The planning group could also report progress in developing additional ideas such as a certificate of performance as mentioned above.

References


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Presented at the Midwest Research-to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Michigan State University, September 26-28, 2010.