Developing Community Expectations: The Critical Role of Adult Educators

The quality of life in a community is directly tied to the capital available to its citizenry. The idea of capital refers to the resources related to the population - the wealth, the open-minded nature of individuals, the potential for jobs and putting skills and talents to use to earn a living. There have been a wide range of studies and efforts to understand how capital affects individuals, ranging from educational choice (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008) to how individuals interact socially (Putnam, 2000). The result has been an accepted understanding that the social interactions and the nature of developing these interactions among individuals, both formally and informally, greatly aid in the formation of an individual's identity and ultimately influence life choices (Deggs & Miller, 2009, 2011). The implication of this understanding is that community organizations, including adult education providers and their agents alike, must understand and learn to appreciate the unintended consequences of their actions which affect the development and expansion of social capital among citizens within communities.

Almost any given community agency has the ability to influence directly and indirectly the formation of social capital and value citizens place on education. Organizations that value education and employ an educated workforce, for example, can increase the informal interaction between the educated and uneducated, and help individuals begin to identify value in learning, diversity, and employment. For example, a study by Miller and Tuttle (2006) highlighted a rural community college setting where the college served as a melting pot of community members. By bringing citizens to campus to watch a sporting event, participate in a summer cheerleading camp, or watch a local band competition, the college conveyed a value for the culture of education to the public. Further, by employing individuals with high levels of education, those who might not attend postsecondary education interacted informally with these teachers and college administrators as fellow church going members. The result is not a direct and easily visible correlation between exposure to an educated workforce and attending college, but rather, that there is a long term consequence to community agencies slowly influencing community members.

Challenges for the Adult Educator

The role of the adult educator can become more uncertain when attempting to address individual needs that are fundamentally representative of the complex issues within communities. The scarcity of resources in communities further contributes to the challenges that adult educators face in attempting to meet individual and community needs. Therefore, one cannot help but question the degree to which adult education programs can be successful given the forces within communities that negate educational attainment through obstructing the formation of social capital.

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Using Communities to Leverage Social Capital

The term community is well established in the social sciences literature and perhaps has been most appropriately characterized as a “group of people (a) [who] have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups” (Cohen, 1985, p. 12). Communities are social systems encompassing complex issues that have a profound effect on individuals. The need to focus on common issues and problems in communities was identified by Fordham as early as 1956. Studying communities and the interactions within is further complicated due to their complex structure. Levy (1966) identified four components of communities including role differentiation, common organizations, common relationship aspects, and common problems. These four components contribute to the complexity associated with performing community development work as well as studying communities and the interactions within.

In relating the role of community to the formation of social capital, Putnam (2000) argued that the “norms and networks that serve some groups may obstruct others” (p. 358). This creates multifaceted challenges for adult educators and other community educators who work to provide services to address critical adult learner needs. Adult educators should have an understanding of how their actions and even their existence can impact individual development and ultimately life choices among the citizens they serve. A necessity for this understanding is the acceptance of some framework of interactions and how those interactions inspire and influence the lives of citizens within the community.

Model of Community Expectancy

The Model of Community Expectancy (Deggs & Miller, 2009, 2011) provides a needed framework by recognizing constructs that are known to exist in all communities. The constructs included in the model transcend physical, cognitive, social and cultural components that can influence educational attainment and likewise the formation of social capital. The model contends that there are constructs that exist in all communities that affect educational outcomes for individuals that influence the level of educational attainment for individual citizens.

The model is predicated on the assumption that interaction among its five constructs and their associated constructs can significantly impact individual identity development and life choices among the citizens within a community. The constructs of the model can be traced to the commonalities of virtually all communities identified by Levy (1966) as well as the concepts of Cohen (1985) and Putnam (2000). The five constructs of the model include formal education bodies, civic agencies, informal associations, religious affiliations, and home life (see Figure 1). The model was intended to inform the practice and guide research regarding adult education programs in rural communities where the plight of undereducated citizens is exacerbated by the scarcity of resources that can develop and enhance social capital. The model was developed as a theoretical framework to guide research focused on the impact that various constructs of communities and the degree to which those constructs support or negate educational attainment. Following is a description of each construct of the model.

Formal Education Bodies

Formal education bodies include public or private Pre K-12 institutions in which youth are enrolled. These entities may include home-schooling, charter schools,
alterative schools, and adult education and literacy programs. The impact of formal education bodies can include formal interactions between students and teachers, but also informal interactions inside and outside of the school, exposure to education beyond the schools, and influence, including peer pressure, parental pressure, and media exposure to popular or dominant ideas.

Civic Agencies
Local government or municipalities and community-based organizations that provide services to members of the community encompass civic agencies. Examples of community-based organizations include after-school programs, sports leagues, job-training centers, community action agencies and related programs in which youth participate. These may also include single-gender organizations such as Boys Scouts, Girls Scouts, YMCA, or YWCA. Activities provided by these civic agencies can support an individual’s desire to be engaged in philanthropic activities, promote healthy living habits, and develop a sense of pride in community among youth and adults.

Informal Associations
Friendships and acquaintances, which may or may not be tied to any of the other dimensions of the model, are addressed under the informal associations' constructs of the model. This may include peers as well as adult mentors. Associations exist as relationships, friendships, mentorships, and other types of social interaction that are fluid in nature and may ebb and flow dependent upon the social situations in which individuals engage.

Religious Affiliations
Religious affiliations include church, synagogue, or religious organization to which individuals are a member or regular attendee. This construct includes the value placed on self-exploration, development, and the formal and informal religious education.

Home Life
Family unit in which youth reside embodies the home life construct. It can exist as either the nuclear or single-parent family structures depending upon the community. Foster homes, group homes, or adjudicated youth facilities are alternate examples of the home life constructs. The neighborhood, others living in the home or area, and extended family can also be incorporated into the home life construct if they influence individual life achievements and behaviors.

Application of the Model of Community Expectancy
The Model of Community Expectancy (Deggs & Miller, 2009, 2011) provides a framework for explaining the development of social capital as a product of educational attainment among individual citizens within a community. The model is also intended to inform the practice of adult education in numerous settings and to serve as a framework for research alike. The model provides a framework for identifying and understanding the intricate web of social interactions within communities that can either promote or negate educational attainment by influencing individual identity development and life choices. The net result of these interactions is the amount of social capital that exists within communities as well as the value associated with that capital. The model provides a powerful mechanism for recognizing that it is not one specific type of influence but rather a combination of influences from multiple sources that ultimately affects the formation of social capital and, thereby, the development of the individual citizen.

Application of the model must acknowledge, as Garcia (2006) indicated, that there is a dilemma in studying social capital due to the absence of natural frontiers that require researchers to define boundaries. Almost counter-intuitively, the Model of Community Expectancy breaks down the notion of boundaries and suggests that all elements are inter-related, and the strength of a community to define or change a group behavior, such as valuing education, must surge in multiple construct areas to a level of dominance to create change. Research on social capital has mostly focused on defining post hoc relationships and has been silent to the issues that generate or enhance social capital (Jordan, Anil, & Munasib, 2010). The Model of Community Expectancy is intended to recognize and understand the relationships that affect the formation of social capital for adult educators, researchers, and public policymakers.
Critical Actions for the Adult Educator

The settings where adult learning occurs are as varied as the adults who are served by the many types and offerings of adult education programs. Cross' (1981) model of The Learning Society illustrates some of the various settings where adult education practice occurs, including churches, political environments, and neighborhood associations. Identification of a model to account for education practice and across these settings has proven to be difficult for adult educators and some researchers. Conceptualization of community norms and behaviors through community expectancy provides adult educators with a mechanism for understanding the intricate composition of various community constructs. Nesbit (2006) argued that "educators of adults have a responsibility to raise important and challenging questions and to build upon their students' lived experiences about how inequalities play out in communities, lives, and workplaces," (p. 184). As previously stated, Putnam (2000) argued that norms and network structures within communities can negate the formation of social capital as "the haves engage in more civic activity than the have-nots" (p. 258). The following actions are offered to assist in applying the Model of Community Expectancy in order to challenge and counteract the inequalities that exist within communities. These critical actions are intended to prompt adult educators to action in an attempt to bridge the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots." These critical actions are intended to counteract the role and influence of external forces that negate the formation of social capital as those forces often create barriers to learning for adults.

Value Diversity, Learning Opportunities, and Openness

Adult educators in a variety of settings have a professional and social responsibility to create learning environments that value a broad spectrum of ideas and opinions. By advocating and designing such learning opportunities, adult educators assume a pivotal role in influencing the values which define communities, especially those which promote individual identity development and life choices. A community where the citizens value education should recognize the equal worth in the hallmarks of educational attainment such as secondary or postsecondary completion as well as a desire for engagement in lifelong learning.

Create Organizations That Support Local Learning Interests and Needs

The responsibility to provide educational opportunities within communities rests with a myriad of organizations from school systems, postsecondary institutions, other government, community, and nonprofit agencies. Business and industry organizations also have responsibility for supporting learning interests among their employees as partners in community development. Therefore, all organizations should share collective responsibility for promoting a culture in which education is valued. Systems which support individual and community learning interests and needs should be visible to all citizens within a community. Organizations should also share responsibilities for promoting community-wide initiatives which perpetuate the value of learning through the various methods of social interaction.

Convey Messages That Reflect Prolonged Engaged Citizenship

The responsibility to create and disseminate messages which promote the value of education rests with virtually all members of communities from educators, civic leaders, family, and peers. However, differences in the value placed on education by various members of a community can yield varying levels of appreciation and need for education in an adult's life. Adult educators have a responsibility to model how other members of communities should promote messages which emphasize the value of education on individual identity development and life choice.

Ensure Educational Opportunities for All Citizens

America's adult education system is predicated upon the idea that educational opportunities should exist for all citizens. Educational opportunities for adults are specifically designed to address shortcomings of enrollment in other education systems. Adult literacy, GED, ESL, community education, and other forms of non-credit learning are examples of efforts to promote education among all citizens while fulfilling the shortcomings of other systems. Adult educators have a responsibility to create learning environments where access to education is universal without regard to an individual's previous level of educational attainment or lack thereof. These learning environments must acknowledge the influence of community constructs not associated with the education provider.

Reach Beyond Formal Education Students

The educator must consider the context of the lives of students and consider how education and its accompanying messages are transferred by the learner after leaving the learning space. These messages are both in the form of gained knowledge and impressions which are
conveyed through formal and informal methods to those in home settings, in neighborhoods, and with peers. The tendency of students to convey these messages indicates the value the learner places on the experience. Educators must realize that their students' efforts to convey these messages are a direct reflection of the degree to which the educator has promoted the value of learning as well as the importance of individual identity development and power to exercise control over life choices.

**Promote Career Training that Creates Passion for Learning**

A great deal of attention in adult education programming efforts is given to job and workforce development activities, both in terms of formal job training activities as well as the literacy and skill level of a potential workforce. These activities, whether coordinated and offered through state agencies or private economic development groups, must lead to the strengthening of communities. Career training efforts must create a desire among learners to not only learn the content and meet the objectives of the formal learning activity required for gainful employment, but also create a desire to learn throughout the stages of development of the career. Likewise, career training initiatives for adults within communities must convey and prepare learners for the importance of engaging in continuous learning activities throughout life in different adult, community, and continuing education settings.

**The Adult Educator as Change Agent**

Considering the vast learning needs among adults in relation to the process of developing social capital within communities can be daunting. Thankfully adult education programs exist to fulfill these needs from basic skills education, postsecondary education, continuing professional education for careers, to leisure learning. On the surface it may appear that these programs might be somewhat disjointed or perhaps unrelated especially to those not familiar with the various systems for adult education. It is arguable that all types of adult education programs have a common core mission - the enhancement of communities through the education of individuals through positively influencing identity development and power over life choices. The adult educator, acting an agent of any given type of learning organization, must advocate learning across all types of adult education systems. Quintessentially contributing to the value of education among all individual citizens in any given community is the job of all adult educators.

Efforts to add to the value of education as perceived by citizens should consider the five general constructs of the *Model of Community Expectancy* and the potential of each to influence the individual learner. Isolation of the construct(s) that have negated educational attainment and social capital formation can assist the adult educator in developing educational experiences which include counteractive messages which promote the value of education for the individual citizen as well as groups within communities. Adult educators must recognize that overcoming the messages which have negated educational attainment will necessitate individual change before systemic change can be achieved. The process of reversing the longstanding effect of entrenched expectations that have negated educational attainment by stifling personal identity development and career choices begins with the promotion of social capital available to individual learners.

Adult educators must employ new paradigms if they are to be successful in positively influencing the amount and value of social capital available to the citizens of communities. Efforts should be grounded in an understanding and acceptance of how social capital is both a means and byproduct of the educational process. The basis for such efforts can arguably be the social interactions of individuals across and within the five constructs of the *Model of Community Expectancy*. Adult educators should carefully consider the impact of all actions intended to develop and educate individuals as well efforts to expand capital among individual citizens within communities.

**References**


