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Innovative Adult General Education: The Detroit Experiment

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INTRODUCTION:

Increasingly, universities have confronted a changing population of undergraduate students. They find themselves under considerable scrutiny, from legislators, taxpayers and potential students. Concurrently, the impetus to re-appraise the mission of undergraduate education, so as to insure its accommodation in our changing society, is in need of refocusing. The issue of who comes to the university, and for what end, stands square in the face of faculties, administrators and elected guardians of higher education, now more than ever before. Again we are charged with providing curricula and format that are relevant enough to retain the attention of today’s new student, that are salutary in the eyes of accrediting associations, conscionable in the minds of the faculty who teach it, and above reproach of the faculties’ peers who are to judge it. This challenge of experimenting in undergraduate education is what the Board of Governors at Wayne State University have accepted in the creation of the College of Lifelong Learning, as its conduit for change, and University Studies and Weekend College (US/WC) as the nexus under which this change is to take place.

The US/WC Program, since 1973, has offered a baccalaureate educational
program which makes use of television, intense weekend conferences, and the well known method of discussion and lecturing as mechanisms for delivering its subject matter. By design, the curriculum seeks as its focus to offer a general education which dignifies the life experiences of a student population who return to formal education after a hiatus and shares the task of expanding their vistas and increasing the quality of their lives through study.

The US/WC Program leads to the Bachelor of General Studies Degree awarded by Wayne State University. Currently the Program has about 2,500 full time students pursuing the degree, and 73 full time faculty, 35 half time faculty, and 50 full time academic staff and clerical employees. Conceived some four-and-one-half years ago, and financed out of tuition revenues, the Program has become the largest worker oriented Program in the Atlantic industrial nations. The primary innovation is conceptual. The working adult lives and functions in a different reality than the just out of high school college entrant, and in addition to there being a generational difference there is a cultural difference in the vast majority of cases. It is also clear that the University is presently structured on the contrary belief that there is a universal student, and that student is the just out of high school college entrant.

If our conceptual innovation is correct, then it follows that the learning environment must be based on the reality and culture of the working adult, and that the achievement of a degree in a reasonable time span is a critical element in today's learning environment. The concept that the working adult student is basically different from what is institutionally assumed to be the universal student led us naturally to our other innovations.

Our second innovation is the conception of a system which could deliver education to the adult working student. By combining 5 existing instructional methods we developed a delivery system suited to the cultural, time, and space realities of the student.

The five existing education forms we use are: seminar/discussion groups; television courses; intensive weekend courses; independent and cooperative education; and non-credit general and special skills tutorials. All of these forms exist across the nation, but we consciously combined them in relation to the student's culture. This allows the working adult to be a full-time student as well. Many part-time students who had a 10-12 year road to a degree, and for whom each course had been an additional activity to family, work, and community responsibilities, now have a reasonable time horizon, and education becomes a cementing rather than a fragmenting agent in their life.

Our third innovation is a curriculum which offers the highest level of university education, meets the students' intellectual and professional needs, and creates a true intellectual environment. In doing this we know that one of the major differences between the institutionally assumed universal student and the adult working student is experiential. The latter has a wealth of life experience waiting to be clarified by ideas, while the former has very little life experience outside of educational institutions.

With this in mind, the curriculum includes the following interdisciplinary focal points:

Social Science: Ethnic Studies; Work and Society; Conflict Studies; and Theory and Method in the Social Sciences.

Urban Humanities: Folk, Classical, and Mass Culture; The Arts of the
Imagination; The Performing Arts; Cultural History and Criticism

Science and Technology: Science and Energy; Life and Ecology; Science, Technology and Values; and Planning the Future.

A second difference, critical for curricular construction, is that the life experience of working class adults leads best to learning through strong, cooperative, peer, and group relations, while the just out of high school student has had a long experience of individual and competitive behavior in relation to learning. In addition, the nature of the extra-educational demands on the student are drastically different.

For group reinforced learning to work, it is necessary to have the time and conditions which allow a group to form. For a true intellectual environment to operate, extra-educational demands, study skills, and content have to be carefully thought through. To deal with the above we use the following educational strategy: the subject matter of each quarter and year is reinforcing, thus related. For the adult learner subject matter must be related to life experience on the one hand and very high level academic ideas on the other.

The curricular structure allows us to look at the student's educational environment as a four or five year span, with each experience and course having a specific role. We can then build in the concepts, theories, methods, and data of the various disciplines throughout the year, and pull them together during the last academic year.

The focal points for each quarter's study are not only interdisciplinary but are of such a nature that we can achieve our educational goals while satisfying the professional degree needs of many different groups.

Before the inception of US/WC, the average adult in the metropolitan Detroit area was virtually excluded from the academic community. Because of their 40-hour-a-week plus working schedules and the fact that most traditional institutions require attendance 3-4 days a week, 3-4 hours per day, most of these working adults found it impossible to work full time and simultaneously attend college full time. The US/WC Program caters to the needs of students in several ways: (1) workshops are scheduled in the morning, afternoon, evening, and on weekends; (2) students attend only 1 workshop a week, for 4 hours; (3) the workshops are located in places near the students' jobs — in union locals, in schools, in community centers, in libraries, and in W.S.U.'s main campus buildings; (4) students watch a television course once a day, for 1/2 hour, either in the morning or evening, Monday through Friday; and (5) students attend weekend conferences on W.S.U.'s main campus, for 2 weekends each quarter.

The Program is conveniently scheduled so that almost any working adult can attend college full time while working full time, whether his schedule be the morning shift, afternoon shift, or midnight shift.

The average profile of the Weekend College student is: male, married, father of 2 to 3 children, 30 to 35 years old, veteran, employed by an automobile or other large industrial firm.

According to a survey of 143 randomly selected students the following major demographic and personal characteristics were obtained:

1. Average age: 32
2. Marital Status: Married — 133 respondants
3. Average Number of Children: 3
4. Average Child's Age: 9
5. Occupation: Industrial position — 100
   Non-Industrial position — 43
6. Have you always wanted to attend college? Yes — 121
7. Reasons for entering: Education — 33
   Convenience of Program — 27
   Get education and better myself — 22
   V.A. benefits — 13

As the response to Question #6 on the survey shows, a large percentage of the students have always wanted to attend college. Some of the reasons why these students have not entered college until now are: (1) marriage at an early age forced many of them to make economic decisions which overshadowed their educational concerns; (2) poor grades in high school lessened the chance for many of them to enter a traditional institution of higher education because of admissions standards; (3) after separation from the armed services many of them wanted to make as much money as possible as fast as they could and the factories offered an easy avenue for this wish; and (4) once they became enmeshed in the demands of factory or office time schedules, many of them found that traditional institutions could not cater to their needs in terms of class schedules and locations.

The Delivery System

As has been mentioned, the delivery of the basic curriculum and services depends upon old methods that have been combined into a new context. In this section, the television, conference, and workshop components are discussed in detail.

The Television Course

Each quarter a student takes an integrated core of courses which revolve around a common interdisciplinary theme. This would be similar to the traditional student who may take an urban geography, history, and sociology course simultaneously. Although each of the courses has a common focus its specific orientation is different. For instance, in one Social Science quarter a student takes a T.V. course, Culture, Community, and Identity: An Ethnic Perspective; a workshop course, Alternative Perspectives on Ethnicity; and a conference course, Urban Ethnic Groups: Problems and Prospects. The rationale for this format is that it provides an integrated, interdisciplinary, focused, and developmental sequence in which a student can struggle with ideas, concepts, and his experience within a singular, and thus less confusing, context.

Forty-five minutes of each 4 hour workshop is used to discuss the preceding week's television offering. This allows the student the opportunity to reflect with his peers on what the significance of the content was and allows for debate and discussion. It also personalizes a medium which can be a very impersonal one.

Because the television course is the basic course we also produce reading material in the form of texts and study guides to accompany the course. The study guide is a necessary companion for the viewer. The texts act to integrate individual shows and to provide exemplary and additional information which is impossible to portray on the television screen.
The Weekend Conference Course

The Conference Course differs essentially from the other delivery methods used by the Program in that it meets on the University campus and is comprised of the total number of students enrolled in a divisional course, which has numbered up to thirteen hundred. This course provides an essential academic connection with the University, and personal and social association with large numbers of fellow students in a psychologically adult situation. It is designed to bring an interdisciplinary topic into contemporary perspective by providing the student contact with local and national experts in a field, exploring current research and thinking, and providing for analysis and discussion of the presented material. The basic format includes large and small lectures, panel discussions, and cultural and media presentations. These represent the conference proper and are presented to the audience as a whole. They are interspaced with small group discussions.

The conference format is especially useful to educational programs involving adults because it creates a situation and environment which is psychologically adult. For the student it is both a social adventure and a learning experience. As attendance is more open than in a smaller classroom it may also become a family experience. Also, it may be effective in reassuring adult students who lack confidence in their academic abilities or are unsure of their commitment to return to the educational environment by providing an opportunity to complete a course of study in a shortened period of time.

The conference format represents an intensification of learning experience which has important implications and influences in regard to the nature of course planning, orientation materials, instructional methods and evaluation procedures.

Intensity is the key concept underlying the Weekend Conference Course. In the planning and practice of the Conference Course intensity allows for an extensive examination of a theme and for repetition available in any traditional classroom situation. Criticisms of the technique generally beg the question of the extent to which all structured learning is intensified learning. Intensification is no more than a matter of the spacing of individual educational experiences closer together than has become traditional. If this concept is carried to the extreme we are forced to see any school experience as intensified learning, and once the value of intensity is admitted we can pursue the more realistic problem of determining what content, instructional methods and evaluation procedures are educationally effective at what degree of intensity.

Today, outside the academic environment, information is transmitted primarily through verbal and symbolic communication; it is fast-paced and depends on one-time exposure. This transmission takes place through the media and other methods that are incorporated into the conference format. In the conference experience these modes of transmission are converted into active learning experiences, that are familiar to the student but now take on a different aspect — a learning aspect.

The Workshop Course

Workshop classes are limited to 10-20 students. The rationale for such small classes goes beyond the common notion that the teacher has greater time for each student. The rationale used here is that we are creating a learning environment that in many ways resembles the kin group. The class is, theoretically,
a closed unit which interacts and is directed by a facilitator who instructs, tutors, and counsels within that setting. It is true that after 4 hours of intense interaction the unit fragments and the students return as individuals to the outside world. Ideally, however, the class is a closed interacting unit for an extended period of time once a week. Classes tend to be relatively homogene-ous although this is not always the case.

The context of the learning experience is especially crucial to the students enrolled in our Program. Institutions are alien to them and they are most “at home” in settings which are reflective of their “intimate world,” i.e., family and neighborhood. Paternalistic as this may appear it is a method by which alienated individuals can begin the process of adapting to a world which they often know very little about. It is then a primary responsibility of the instructor to facilitate a student’s understanding of the institutions of the society which surround him.

This small group enables a student to develop a close network of individuals who then help him to generate new understanding. Only through this close and bounded network can individuals develop the confidence and skills necessary to compete in a complex institutionalized world. This is not to say that our purpose is to develop cocoons for our students and to protect them from the outside world. Instead it is to allow them access to higher education within a context which they understand and are comfortable in.

It is also well to remember that learning is an experiential process which occurs as man interacts within a specified environment and that knowledge extracted from that environment cannot be legitimized by simply institutionalizing it and calling it education. These views are expressed by Dr. Sol Tax. Dr. Tax writes:

When I am asked — as I am — to advise school people on the education of slum children, I do not say that I know nothing about education, children, or slums . . . what I do is to ask questions. What could be the problem? Man evolved from the beginning — and is still there — by successfully passing on information to the young. Why the problem in passing on our culture to the next generation? The answer comes rather quickly. Any people can pass on its culture; our problem is that we are trying to pass on the culture of the establishment to children of an alien (and alienated) culture. The difficulty comes from the assumption that ours is the only culture — theirs is a lack of culture. The consequent attitude destroys an environment in which education can proceed. (1968:15)

Education is a part of a larger general process of socialization whereby persons are prepared to fit into the community of which they are a part and into the larger external community which surround them. However, for the most part, the students whom we are involved with are peripheral to the middle and upper class oriented institutions of the society. They tend toward a suspicious view of the establishment and tend to be alienated from institutionalized ways. Many of them fit the anthropological conception of folk albeit they are urban folk.

In the workshop the student is introduced to subject matter that is relevant to his experience. For instance a discussion of Blues and Bluegrass music is a perfect tool for engendering a discussion of southern blacks and whites, their migration experiences, prejudice, discrimination, etc. The important point is that the reference point for the class must be relevant to the students’ experience and concretely imaginable within that experience. In many ways this workshop philosophy derives from the same pedagogical base as Paulo Freire describes in

Although the participating and experiential nature of the US/WC Program is centered in the workshop experience the other components of the curriculum reflect this philosophy also. By this we mean that we start with the student, and where he is, and expand outward toward abstract and theoretical notions as well as academic areas which are outside the student’s previous experience. Examples of this are: science courses which begin with the student as consumer, humanities courses which begin with the notion that blue grass and country music are “legitimate” modes of cultural expression, and social science courses which begin with discussion of work, community, or household squabbles.

Conclusions:

US/WC has grown from 300 students in 1974 to its current enrollment of 2,500. The students come from many walks of life and from communities scattered throughout the metropolitan area. The Program’s success is dependent upon the integrated and highly structured curriculum in which each part is vital to the whole. That whole culminates in an intensive learning experience during the student’s senior year. Along with its off-campus delivery and its working adult student body, the curriculum is critical to an overall appreciation of the innovative aspects of the Program.

The best of any academic program is its end product. Having amassed sufficient credit hours to graduate, are its students educated? What has that program of study done for the individual involved? If education is thought of as a process rather than merely the acquisition of a body of knowledge, the ideal answer is that it has provided the students with the means to achieve intellectual self-sufficiency — to continue to educate themselves. Self-sufficiency embodies two fundamental elements. First, students should possess those skills — the ability to write and to locate the information — necessary to pursue future intellectual interests on their own. Second, they should have a sufficiently broad background to establish their specific interests within a broader context of knowledge and understanding. There is a third element, more difficult to attain, which is the desire to continue the process after they have completed their formal education. This last cannot be readily programmed, but it is more likely to come about if the students have experienced an educational situation in which something happens to them so that they see a connection and an interaction between themselves and their subject matter. If students are to be thought of as other than units of output, these goals must be maintained, and curriculum, teaching, and administrative support dedicated to their achievement.

Are we, in Marx’s words, making the workers more “fully developed human beings”? This is a difficult question, because of the meaning which might be attached to the phrase. We do know something which is going on, something we did not fully anticipate but which gives validity to our efforts. A new feeling of community is developing among our students, a feeling of solidarity which company loyalty and the union had failed to develop. Men who have worked in close company for years while barely speaking to each other are speaking now — what is more, the conversation is not about bosses or even “huntin’ and fishin’” but about class assignments, about what was discussed in the TV course that morning, about books which they are reading. Both the community
feeling which has been engendered and the fact that knowledge, systematized knowledge is being pursued by the students outside the classroom is, we think, evidence that the Program is a service to the students. For students in the Program, this new intellectual community which they have formed is the most significant aspect; and to the extent that the students are making use of, and enjoying, their intellectual abilities which the job discourages and dulls, we have indeed played a part in their becoming more fully human, which is to say more fully themselves.

The US/WC experiment is not complete. If, however, the potential of such a program is allowed to develop, a continuing analysis of the theory, the method, the techniques, and the cultural groups served must be undertaken. These analyses must not be undertaken for the purpose of standardizing a “learning program” for the “working class.” Rather such analyses should generate flexible learning models which can be adapted to those situations where they are usable and provide a basis for further experiments where they are not.

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