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Adult Students as Catalysts to Faculty Development: Effective Approaches to Predictable Opportunities

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Twenty-eight years old, male, newly Ph.D.-ed, I faced them. The women, a whole room full of terrified, tough, vulnerable, complex women in their 30s and 40s, sat waiting for me to convene the class.

The time was the late-1970s, and I worked at a small, liberal arts college that had just started to focus on serving adults. Many of these students sitting in my class were divorced, single parents, who were borrowing their way to a degree and a new future. My class cost them today's equivalent of $750. It was expensive. They had married, divorced, raised children, helped parents to die, worked in agencies . . . hospitals . . . businesses, and my task was to teach them $750 worth of psychology. I was supposed to do this—me, the valedictorian, the fellowship winner, the stellar graduate of the prestigious department, the professional student, the sequestered nerd—I was supposed to do this. I knew nothing about these people nor their worlds. But I needed to understand them in order to be a good teacher here. I could see right away that I had to be a learner, too. I had a need to know, but in our small, impoverished school, I had no faculty development professional to help me. *Need but no help.*

Ten years later, I had written a book about what I had learned mainly on my own—appropriately entitled, *Self-Directed Growth* (Robertson, 1988). Following the book's publication, I began to do staff trainings on topics dealing with adult development. As the academic dean of the small, liberal arts college looked on, I would attempt to engage the faculty—most of whom

taught traditional-age students—in issues related to stages, phases, transitions, and gender. These training sessions are not featured in my mental scrapbook of great successes. In fact, I think that I am brave to remember them at all. In these cases, the professors had a faculty development professional available—me—but they saw no need to learn about the topic—adult development. *Help but no need.*

During this same period, I began to teach a graduate course on adult development in the school of education at the local, public university. Typically, I walked into these classes to find the room packed with teachers, managers, and counselors from all kinds of settings—universities, small colleges, community colleges, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, hospitals, agencies, and businesses. The course was elective, and the students came because they had a professional need to understand various aspects of adult development. They needed to understand these topics so that they could effectively teach, manage, and counsel their adult students, staffs, and clients. However, what occurred often was that as they were learning about *them*—their students, staffs, and clients—they were also learning about *themselves*. Motivated to achieve a *professional* objective, some of them accomplished profound *personal* development. In this case, the need to know existed simultaneously with the help. *Need and help together.*

Readiness is critical to development. When I was five years old, my brother and I tried to rush the birth of a pheasant by baking the egg in an oven. The shell's little occupant stood no more chance of survival than the flower bud I once tried to peel open. Timing has a fundamental importance. We need to match our help with the person's perceived need to know. . .their readiness to grow.

The initial objective of this discussion is to articulate several principles for identifying in the upcoming decade concentrations of faculty who will perceive a clear need to learn about adult development. Then, the intent is to examine how faculty development professionals can effectively help these faculty to apply the material to their own lives. The outcome of succeeding at these two endeavors will be to enhance both the faculty's ability to teach a significant new student population—returning adults—as well as their capacity to become more self-directed in their own development.

Faculty with the Need to Know

Faculty who have two particular characteristics are likely to feel a strong need to learn about adult development. First, *they care about their teaching.* Regardless of their productivity in other forms of academic activity—whether they research, write, consult, or serve their institutions and associa-

tions a lot or a little—they want to be good teachers. This caring naturally drives them to want to understand their students. The stronger the caring about their teaching, the stronger is the motivation to know about their students.

This robust motivation brings us to the second characteristic of faculty with high readiness to learn about adult development. *They are just beginning to teach adult students.* They face a profound novelty similar to the one that I described for myself in the beginning of this paper. They care about their teaching and want to know their students. But they recognize that they are ignorant in this regard. These faculty will be hungry to learn about adult development.

The number of faculty who will have these two characteristics in the 1990s will be substantial. While I cannot say what proportion of faculty have the first characteristic—caring about their teaching—I can say that the teaching-oriented institutions in which we are likely to find concentrations of such faculty (i.e., specialized institutions, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive colleges and universities) give every indication they will remain vital and significant educational providers in the 1990s. In 1987, these institutions accounted for 72% of the higher education enrollments in the United States, which was up from 69% in 1970 (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1987).

Also, I can say that the number of faculty members who will teach classes in which adult students constitute the majority will remain sizable in the foreseeable future. The adult learner phenomenon has exploded onto the higher education scene in the last two decades. From 1970 to 1985, students 25 years or older increased from 28% to 42% of U. S. higher education enrollments (Center for Education Statistics, 1987). Although the growth may have leveled off, the huge presence of adult learners on college campuses is clearly with us through to the year 2000 (Brazziel, 1989). Moreover, because social and technological forces will increasingly encourage lifelong learning, no good reason exists for expecting it to diminish significantly even then (Apps, 1988; Cross, 1981).

Where to Find These Faculty

The novelty of teaching adults presents a developmental opportunity for faculty. This fact should not surprise us since a new situation with new demands is often a precipitating factor when development occurs. (For a discussion of novelty and nine other factors that encourage development, see Robertson, 1988.) Novelty that stimulates growth can be either chosen or unchosen. These two situational categories—chosen and unchosen nov-

elty—provide us with a framework with which to group circumstances where we are likely to find concentrations of faculty who have the characteristics identified in the previous section.

First, we begin with unchosen novelty—situations in which faculty find themselves having to adapt to teaching adults whether they like it or not. A good example of this kind of situation is what I call the *urban small college* (Robertson, 1991). These colleges are located in metropolitan areas and in the past have focused on providing liberal arts education to traditional-age, residential students. Often carrying a religious affiliation, the colleges have looked beyond the city to their regional and sometimes national networks to fill their dormitories with 18-year-olds. However, due to demographic shifts in American society, the dorms have not been filling with these young people, and financial crisis has ensued for many institutions. In response, the colleges have turned to their local environments for commuter students. What they have found in the city and its suburbs are adult learners in abundance, and they have entered the competition for these students.

The size of this phenomenon appears worthy of note. For example, in Portland, Oregon, one of twenty consolidated metropolitan statistical areas (CMSAs) in the United States, four out of the seven less-selective liberal art colleges (Carnegie classification: Liberal Arts II) have baccalaureate degree programs targeted for adults (Robertson, 1991). Current research into the postsecondary ecosystems of the remaining 19 CMSAs will provide a more precise indication of just how large a phenomenon it is.

As a result of these dynamics and the concomitant emergence of this new species of institution, in the upcoming decade we can expect to find whole faculties who have the two characteristics that suggest high readiness to learn about adult development. The mission of the small liberal arts college centers on teaching and the holistic development of the individual. Consequently, it tends to attract faculty who have our first characteristic: they sincerely care about their teaching.

Many of these faculty, whether novice or veteran, will be teaching adults for the first time, which is our second characteristic. Like any conscientious teacher—whether or not they would have chosen to teach adults—they will hunger for knowledge about this new student population. Here we have a relatively large group of faculty who have a strong need for help, just the kind of situation for which the faculty development professional should search.

The second category of situations in which we can expect this high readiness are circumstances of chosen novelty, situations in which the faculty choose to teach adults but have no experience at it. For example, faculty—

whether adjunct or full-time—who are new to teaching evening or weekend courses are likely to meet significant numbers of adult learners. And if they care about their teaching they will want to know everything they can about these learners. Again, these faculty constitute a propitious concentration in the eye of the astute faculty development professional. Other examples include faculty who are new to teaching in continuing education, university colleges, weekend colleges, professional schools, developmental education, and community education.

Bridging Professional and Personal Development

In the third story with which I began this paper, I referred to the participants in a graduate class I had taught on adult development. They had come to learn this topic because it related importantly to job tasks they needed to do well. They were managers, counselors, teachers, and staff developers, who worked with adult students, staffs, and clients. They needed to understand change in adult life in order to manage, counsel, teach, and develop these adults. But as we went along, I saw many of them applying the material to personal issues.

For example, female participants often gained immediate and significant insight into their own lives from the material on women's development and gender differences. Participants in their late 30s and 40s often took a pronounced, personal interest in the material on midlife transition. Participants who were undergoing significant transition, regardless of their age or the transition type, were riveted on the material about transition phases. In many ways, the participants were the subject matter. And within the safety of their student roles, many of them applied the material to their own lives, quietly checking with me after class to see what I thought of their personal analyses.

A person's motivation and learning agenda may exist in several layers, with differing degrees of self awareness and public disclosure in each layer. Adults often cite work-related reasons for their participation in learning activities (Apps, 1988; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). However, from 14 years of experience in adult education, I know that much more may be involved. For many adult learners, just beneath the surface of the articulated desire to develop professionally is a powerful, often unvoiced, motivation to work on personal issues. Typically, these issues relate to some facet of adult development.

Many faculty who learn about adult development for professional reasons also will have layers of professional and personal agendas and motivations. As faculty development professionals, we certainly will want to attend

to the professional agenda—to help faculty to improve their ability to serve the new student population of returning adults. But also, where possible, we will want to assist faculty in increasing their awareness of their own life course and their skill at managing that life course. To achieve this second set of objectives, we need to be vigilant for openings to the faculty member's often submerged, personal agenda and have strategies ready for appropriate facilitation.

Discretion is the better part of valor, according to Shakespeare. The valorous—*and effective*—faculty development professional must be discreet in facilitating personal development within the context of professional development activities. We must remember that the official objective of faculty in adult development workshops is to learn about *them*—their adult students, staffs, and clients. The opportunity for personal application of the material is often lost if the participant must publicly reveal a personal agenda. Participants must always be allowed to shield themselves in public with their professional role.

Providing opportunities for—not forcing—this kind of personal development can occur in at least two circumstances: (a) the session itself, and (b) follow-up activities. Strategies should be developed for each context.

For example, during workshops on adult development, after climate-setting activities, I often begin with a guided visualization in which participants recall a growth experience in their own lives. I preface this activity with a brief explanation of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) so that anchoring the material in a personal experience is justified in terms of theory and research on effective learning. Participants can relax in the knowledge that they are not "getting personal" as they relive their own growth episodes. They are simply accomplishing their professional learning agenda.

Immediately following the guided visualization, participants are asked to brainstorm individually, then edit, a list of features that characterize the experience they have just relived. Then participants are organized into small groups with two tasks: (a) to share their individual lists, and (b) to create a group list by identifying common features among the individual lists. Initially, participants were asked to select an experience that they would not mind reliving nor sharing with others. So, disclosing in the group is normally not a problem.

The group lists are then reported out and recorded publicly. The large group attempts to identify commonalities among the small group lists—essentially, to create a theory of growth that is based on the personal experience of the participants. The use of personal experience is justified in terms of

academic interest in theory building. The foundation is then firmly set for a presentation on the major theory and research regarding adult development.

In this way, a bridge is built between the participants' lives and the material. By justifying the elicitation of the participants' own experience in terms of effectively accomplishing the professional development agenda, those faculty who are ready to travel across that bridge and apply the material to personal issues can do so without fanfare or loss of face. Those faculty who feel no strong need to apply the material to personal issues can simply enjoy learning about *them*—their adult students.

Regarding follow-up opportunities for faculty who want to cross this bridge to personal application, we need to employ similar discretion. For example, trying to set up a life planning workshop or, worse yet, a transition support group is probably counter-productive. With good reason, people are shy about disclosing personal issues in the workplace. Anecdotally, I know that individual participation in employee assistance programs is often discouraged by concern for associated stigma, even though the programs routinely promise confidentiality.

A better intervention would be to include in the materials packet for *every* participant a carefully selected list of community resources for working on personal issues common in adult life. No one would have to call attention to himself or herself by having to ask for the list. The directory could be provided under the guise of empowering faculty with good referrals should they need them with their adult students. Of course, they may need them for their adult students, but also they may need them for themselves.

Appropriate interventions in workshop sessions and in follow-up activities will depend on the clients and the context. However, the examples just discussed should make clear the general principle: *opportunities for personal application should be created that allow the individual to choose whether or not to use them and whether or not to disclose that choice.*

Conclusion

The potential outcomes of following the principles described in this paper are exciting. If we target faculty members with high readiness—those who care about their teaching and who are just beginning to teach adults—and if we grasp the opportunity for professional development to become personal, then I can see the nation's professoriate not only becoming better at serving the substantial, new student population of returning adults, but also becoming healthier as human beings. Students, faculty, institutions, and society in general would benefit greatly from these outcomes.

As the saying goes, "Luck is a crossroad where preparation and oppor-

tunity meet." Because of the continuing magnitude of the adult learner phenomenon, we know that the opportunity for significant faculty development will exist in the 1990s. Through insightful targeting and programming, faculty development professionals can focus and be present at these opportunities. And through thoughtful preparation, we can be effective. If we follow the suggestions set forth here, I think that we can get "lucky" in a big way in the 1990s.

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