

# Transformative Vocational Education: Bridging Transitions of Underserved Urban Adult Learners

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## ABSTRACT

*How our culture thinks about particular events as linear, normal, and expected does not always fit with the experiences of every learner, particularly underserved urban adult learners. As adult educators in this context, are there ways we might improve or change our pedagogy of instruction by developing a better understanding of transitional life moments for vocational learners. What is the role of alternative approaches to transformative learning for these learners? Specifically, what is the role of alternative approaches learning for underserved adult learners transitioning into a vocational education classroom, after years of disengagement with formal learning institutions with the need to update their technology skills? In this article, we discuss the need to use alternative conceptions of transformative learning to understand vocational learners as they make decisions to participate in vocational education programs. We explore the key issues for adult educators including implications for practice and research.*

*Keywords: Adult Education, Adult Learners, Alternative Transformative Learning, Changes, Identity, Technology, Transitions, Vocational Education*

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## INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this article, we are focusing on underserved adult learners entering vocational education programs. Some literature on adult learners as students tends to combine non-traditional and adult learners. However, for our purposes, we believe the two groups have distinct characteristics, particularly within an urban learning context (Martin, 2004). Adult learners residing in urban environments according to Martin (2004) present with different lived experiences and sociodemographic experiences

such as age, income, and work experience, which become important when discussing the ability to access and transition into vocational education programs.

Non-traditional students entering into formal learning environments differ from what we know to be traditional students in that they may be uncertain about the environment (Bamber & Tett, 2000). Traditional students typically are those who transition directly from high school into higher education and integrate more successfully into the formal learning culture (Bamber & Tett, 2000). The definition of

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non-traditional students has evolved over the years to include students who postpone education, are enrolled part time, are financially independent of parents, and do not have a high school diploma (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Furthermore, adult learners, and in particular urban adult learners, differ as students because their emphasis is on obtaining a degree or certificate, have focused goals of developing and improving their work skills, and consider themselves workers versus students (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). However, we would like to define the urban adult learner even further into a category that we are calling underserved urban adult learners. This category includes those learners who because of race, gender, lower socioeconomic status, or disabilities encounter challenges beyond the frequent challenges of being an adult learner in a vocational or higher education environment.

## BACKGROUND

We both work for different educational institutions located in a small urban city in the Midwest. Each of our institutions provide educational programming and courses to underserved adult learners with varying experiences within the educational system as well as from varying backgrounds, which are culturally and economically diverse. Urban settings provide a number of formal and non-formal educational programs where adults may participate. Some examples of programs are community based job readiness programs; sector based vocational education programs, and traditional post-secondary educational courses. The urban setting as the backdrop for both of our programs positions learners in unique ways not fully explored within empirical literature on transformational learning and vocational education. Residing in an urban setting has the potential to inform a learners experience in both positive and negative ways (Martin, 2004). According to Kappel and Daley (2004), "the urban context often acts as a multilayered web of disorienting and intersecting dilemmas" (p. 88). These disorienting

dilemmas often present themselves as challenges to underserved adult learners providing them with both inspiration and obstruction in their learning process. Merriam (2005) points out that such life events or transitions create moments for learning and development in the lives of an adult learner, and these transitions for adult learners are times when an individual goes back and forth between moments of stability and change.

What happens when the educational institutions and program attempts to address an adult's transitional life moments from a perspective that does not fit with the reality of the learner? Educational institutions and programs historically operate from a Eurocentric framework of learning, which is ingrained with the cultural values of individuality, autonomy, and independence (Merriam, 2007). Within the larger context of an educational institution, programs and coursework may also be counter to the ways of learning and knowing for many of the underserved adult learners entering into classes. Adult educators working with these underserved learners need to understand that they may operate from a cultural orientation that may differ from the expectation of the educational institution. Because of the different cultural values and lack of experience with education underserved adult learners may struggle and find it hard to manage a transition into a formal learning environment (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), let alone continue to successfully manage other transitions happening in their lives.

Schlossberg (1989) defines transitions as back and forth moments in an individual's life, which occur as anticipated events, unanticipated events, nonevents, or sleeper events. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) later add to these transitional events personal nonevents; ripple events, and resultant nonevents. According to Schlossberg, anticipated events are those transitional moments that occur in the life of many adults such as marriage, starting a career, finishing school, or the birth of a child. However, for both nontraditional students and underserved urban adults, what Schlossberg (1989) considers as anticipated events might in

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