

Chapter 2

Progressive Education at a Distance

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ABSTRACT

Walden University was founded as a for-profit, distance learning institution in 1970. Its mission was to serve the needs of mid-career professionals who were finding access to traditional higher education difficult. It was established on the learner-centered principles of progressive education: the learning should be relevant, individualized, mentor-supported rather than teacher-directed, and experience-based with a view to contributing to the common good. This historical overview traces how progressive education principles as practiced at Walden were impacted by the need to meet accreditation requirements and later an expanded market when corporate interests bought the university and advances in technology opened the way for online learning. With uncertainties about the future of online, for-profit institutions and of Walden in particular, the university may find guidance ahead in reinvigorating its original progressive vision.

INTRODUCTION

Movements in education swing into and out of popularity, with thought leaders urging either a strengthening of traditional methods and aims or progressive reform and their consequent classroom innovations (Mayhew, 305-06; Yob, 1980).

Recent Western education generally, and elementary and even secondary education in the US specifically, with their “back to basics” mantras and emphasis on approved curricula and standardized assessment, have been predominantly

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traditional. It has served the needs of a technological, globally competitive, and neo-industrial world that needed workers with specific skills. Now with pressures from a growing dissatisfaction with highly structured learning especially from well-educated but unemployed young people and more lifelong learners looking for educational opportunities, rapidly diversifying demographics, growing awareness of the working of the human mind from cognitive science, recognition of the rich variety of abilities and potentialities represented in learners of all ethnicities and backgrounds measured against the needs of a democratic society, we may be entering another progressive era. Time will tell, but another review of progressivism may be helpful at this time.

Progressive education characteristically embraces three elements: a student-centered approach to teaching and learning; a deliberate move away from exclusive and elite notions of who should be educated; and an intention to contribute to improving society and contributing to the common good. Here we will focus particularly on progressive learning approaches, although their implications are inextricable from issues around access to education and social change. We will explore how one institution, Walden University, founded in 1970 during a new wave of change in education, committed itself to the principles of progressive education. In this context, the study will address specifically the questions of how one institution working at a distance brought progressive approaches to learning into higher education and how successfully it was able to hold onto those approaches during the subsequent decades.

Walden is unique in two senses. First, where the original progressive education focus was on the child and elementary education with some occasional forays into secondary education, the university was a tertiary institution, and moreover, focused on post-baccalaureate, graduate education rather than undergraduate, putting it even further away from the original center of progressive focus on the young. Second, from its founding, Walden worked at a distance and boasted no campus, classrooms, library, or laboratories and when online learning emerged, moved teaching into the internet world. Its classification as a higher education institution and its distance and later digitally mediated approaches to learning represented distinct challenges that had to be addressed and opportunities that could be seized if progressive ideals were to be realized.

BACKGROUND

Progressive education is a technical term, rather than a general term that might refer to schooling that is politically liberal, broad-minded, or simply reactionary (Lawson & Petersen, 1972, 1-2). It may bear shades of these qualities in some of its forms,

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