Chapter 50
Evaluating Teaching in Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

Teaching is the bedrock of the learning environment; however, few instructors receive formal instruction on how to teach. While the quality of teaching adults can be assessed in numerous ways, these authors used their experience of creating faculty development programs at small, liberal arts universities to discuss instructor selection, student ratings, mentorship, and peer review. Looking through the lens of formative assessment (evaluation for improvement rather than judgment) and faculty development, this chapter looks at creating a faculty evaluation system which will grow instructors. While many of the items discussed in this chapter could be used with full-time faculty, the focus for these authors is the adjunct community who teach in many adult education programs.

INTRODUCTION

While the focus of adult education has now turned to the quality of student learning, and rightfully so, one of the key considerations in the creation of strong student learning is high quality teaching. Teaching adults is quite different from teaching traditional age students and this difference has been captured by a number of authors. Understanding these differences and allowing for them in the choice of classroom teaching methods and the management of the adult classroom increases the adult students' opportunity to make meaning in ways that are most helpful to them. One of the best ways to promote high quality teaching in adult classrooms is by the creation of good faculty development programs which provide focus on the uniqueness of adult learners and map out teaching strategies by which faculty can be more effective in adult classrooms. A key component of such a faculty development program is that of evaluation. As will be discussed below, the evaluation of teaching is a touchy topic in the faculty world. Few of us enjoy being under a microscope, as it

makes us uncomfortable and in many instances in the past has produced no positive outcomes. This chapter lays out the evaluation component of a faculty development program and suggests ways that organizations can evaluate faculty and aid them in becoming better teachers of adults.

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

The largest initial problem most institutions have in creating a quality faculty evaluation program, particularly one focused on teaching, is the sins of the past. How many of us have seen an institution which talked a lot about teaching and had a structured program for evaluation, yet it did nothing worthwhile to improve teaching? These programs often have neatly laid out comment sheets with little circles for administrators to pencil, showing that they have been in the faculty member's classroom and evaluated them. The problem in adult programs is often just like that experienced by one high school teacher who writes about having no one visit for months and being unsure of his ability to teach. With no one to provide feedback he just drifted along in the direction which seemed right to him, only to get a visit from his principal in the waning weeks of the school year. Called to the principal's officer for a discussion of his evaluation, he found one of those neatly laid out forms with all of the blocks marked "satisfactory". There were no comments, there was no discussion, he was handed the form and asked if he had any questions. The whole thing took a grand total of about five minutes and produced absolutely no improvement in him as a teacher and, in truth, provided his administrator nothing of substance that could really be used to evaluate him (Wagner, 2008).

Have any of you ever had such an experience or heard of one from a colleague? Far too often this is what happens in faculty evaluation, if any evaluation occurs at all. It is the belief of this author that the main focus of evaluating faculty should not be about compliance or performance reviews, but about improving the ability of faculty to teach in the classroom. For faculty in adult programs this is even more important, because of the unique ways in which adults make meaning in and out of the classroom. A large component of the faculty at traditional universities has long perceived evaluation of their teaching as an imposition on their time and potentially an infringement upon their academic freedom. This is often because their experiences or the experiences of those who mentored them have been negative when it comes to being evaluated. They had one or more of those experiences described by Wagner (2008) above and rather than try to correct the system or search for ways to find someone to help them become better teachers, they comfortably placed themselves in a sealed box into which very few people would dare to come.

Those who teach in adult programs span a large spectrum of professions. At major universities, they are most often tenured or tenure-track faculty members who are discipline experts and spend their working life in the classroom or writing. This is also true to some extent in smaller universities or colleges, if for no other reason than the requirements of accrediting organizations for full-time faculty in adult programs as well as traditional programs. There is, however, a much greater tendency in adult programs to utilize the talents of adjunct faculty to teach accelerated or intensively scheduled courses (Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003). These faculty tend to be subject matter experts in the discipline they instruct, but do not teach full-time for their living. An obvious example would be the use of a senior accountant at a large corporation to teach a course in accounting as part of an adult education business program. The method works quite well, as adults learn not only from the classroom environment but also from the experiential side of life. A professional who can contribute not only the knowledge that is available in the textbook but experience in the real

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