

# Chapter LX

## Evolution of Adult Education: Is our Future in E-Learning?

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores first the evolution of adult learning primarily in a Western context and particularly in terms of career and technical education. The discussion includes not only lifelong and self-directed learning, but also the various contexts and venues in which career and technical education occurs. The chapter concludes with both the challenge and promise of e-learning in the field of adult and continuing education, asking what the impact of e-learning specifically may be for learners, stake-holders, instructors, and the field itself.*

### INTRODUCTION

The existence of adult and continuing education in any context dates back to the dawn of humankind and throughout recorded history. For as long as adults have lived, we have needed, sought out, and been rewarded by learning – learning for leisure, to guide our human development, for problem-solving and meaning-making, and for vocational and career needs. The hallmark concepts of lifelong and self-directed learning are central to understanding the nature of learning in adulthood. Adult and continuing education

includes not only pre-professional education and training, but on-the-job training and continuing professional education both mandated and voluntary undertaken in virtually every occupational field. The contexts and venues in which adult and continuing education takes place vary widely as well. Adult and continuing education continues to evolve to reflect national and economic priorities, public needs, and social movements. In particular, advances in technology, quickening knowledge obsolescence, increased global competition, and economic and demographic shifts have all significantly impacted the nature and

scope of learning and have brought us now into the electronic learning age.

This chapter explores these concepts – from the evolution of adult and continuing education, to explanations of lifelong and self-directed learning and the many varied contexts in which learning occurs. Relatively recent developments in electronic learning particularly in career and technical education are reviewed, along with future trends that offer both promise and challenge for adult and continuing education. The three case studies of one family of adult learners are included to exemplify the points regarding lifelong and self-directed learning, the variety of venues in which career and technical education can occur, and the prevalence of electronic learning in today's learning environments. The focal point of the chapter is the question "is e-learning the future of adult and continuing education, particularly learning in career and technical contexts?"

## BACKGROUND: EVOLUTION OF ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION IN THE USA

The absolute beginnings of adult and continuing education activities are impossible to establish with any certainty. Before written history, cave paintings told of the young in many cultures watching and learning the ways of their communities and elders. Henschke (1998) and Savicevic (1999) both noted, for instance, the later mention of learning in adulthood in ancient Chinese doctrine, by Hebrew prophets, and in the prose and teachings of both Greek and Roman philosophers. Integral to the founding of the new United States (as in other western societies), laborers trained as apprentices, collaborated in craft guilds, and learned from skilled masters, often leaving their families for years at a time to learn a trade. The earliest schools in the new American nation offered civic and religious education, literacy development, and workplace training to help strengthen

the citizenship and budding economy of the country. Thus, as a socially construed, highly political, value-laden and episodic venture, adult and continuing education continues to evolve to reflect and serve our needs as learning humans, needs that are significantly affected by the social milieu, dominant culture, and structures of our daily lives (Mott, 2000a; 2006).

The origins and philosophical shifts of the field of study are well chronicled in numerous adult and continuing education texts – from the beginnings of the field of practice and founding of the American Association of Adult Education in the 1920s, the establishment of formal programs of study in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growing prominence of the training and development focus of mid-century, and the rise of e-learning at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concept of andragogy was first introduced to the United States by Malcolm Knowles, when in 1968, he proposed the term as a *new label* that explained the nature and scope of adult education, as well as defining assumptions about adult learners. With the shift toward human psychology and organizational effectiveness mid-century, the field strove to professionalize and emphasize a more instrumental focus, thus adding a new direction for a field previously focused on fostering democratic participation and social action. Iconic social, political, and economic events occurring as the field evolved and developed – events such as World War II, the GI Bill, Civil Rights Movement, and Title IX – all served to change the face of adult and continuing education. And, today, barely into a new century, the field is at once more complex, dynamic, and still evolving.

Because adult and continuing education includes instruction across the lifespan and in varied contexts, there are many purposes associated with it. Ours is a "practical field, an applied discipline that seeks to meet the needs of professionals with a variety of expertise ... [and] a commitment to contribute to the productivity emphasis of the mid-twentieth century" (Mott, 2006, p. 97). One of the

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