

## Chapter 78

# Critical and Transformational Perspectives on Career and Technical Education in the Twenty–First Century for Urban Adult Learners

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Critical theory points out that cultural norms do not reflect the experiences of a large portion of adult learners, particularly urban adult learners. As adult educators in this context, are there ways we might improve or change our instruction by developing a critical understanding of the transitional and transformational events in the lives of adult learners entering into career and technical education program? What is the role of alternative approaches to transformative learning for these learners? Specifically, what is the role of alternative approaches to learning for urban adult learners transitioning into a career and technical education classroom, after years of disengagement with formal learning institutions and the need to update their technology skills? In this chapter, the authors discuss the need to use alternative conceptions of transformative learning and critical theory to understand this population of learners as they make the decisions to participate in more formal education programs. They also explore the key issues for adult education practitioner including implications for practice.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

For the purposes of this chapter, we are focusing on underserved urban adult learners entering career and technical education programs. Adult learners in an urban environment have distinct characteristics from other segments of adult learners (Martin, 2004). These learners, according to Martin (2004) present with different lived experiences and socio-demographic experiences such as age, income, and work experience, which become important when discussing their ability to access and transition into career and technical education programs. We will use the term urban adult learners to indicate learners who are underserved with different lived experiences that results in their marginalization from society.

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 (O’Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016). Traditional students typically are those who transition directly from high school into higher education and integrate more successfully into the formal learning culture (O’ Shea et al., 2016). The definition of 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 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 systemic barriers in addition to frequent challenges of being an adult learner in a career and technical or higher education environment.

## **CONTEXT**

As adult education practitioners, we both work for different educational institutions located in a small urban city in the Midwest. Each of our institutions provide educational programing and courses to urban 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 career and technical 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 critical theory, transformational learning, and career and technical 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 urban 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.

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