

Spring 1997

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### Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Carroy Ugene (1997) "A New Paradigm of Learning for Urban Adult Learners: Challenges for Educators and Policymakers Regarding Education and Community Service," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol1/iss1/5>

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# A New Paradigm of Learning for Urban Adult Learners: Challenges for Educators and Policymakers Regarding Education and Community Service\*

Carroy Ugene Ferguson

## **Introduction**

Ferguson and Kamara (1993) in *Innovative Approaches to Education and Community Service* argue that during the coming decades, educators and policymakers will be presented with many challenges that will require nothing less than the creation and implementation of a new paradigm of learning. Innovative approaches to education and community services outlined in that book focus on the urban adult learner and are reflective of aspects of the type of new paradigm of learning that policymakers, both within and beyond the academy must concern themselves with now and in the future. At issue is a commitment on the part of state and federal governments and on the part of higher education to urban communities, to urban adult learners, and to an urban mission. In this context, state and federal governments both must view higher education as a vehicle for constructive social change and empowerment and appropriate the necessary resources to higher education. In turn, higher education must view itself as a partner with urban communities to co-create and carry out opportunities and programs to empower people and to help bring about urban change. What follows is a discussion of a new paradigm of learning for urban adult learners and a summary of some of the challenges that educators and policymakers face.

## **Toward a New Paradigm of Education for Urban Adult Learners**

In *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Marilyn Ferguson (1980) presented an outline of what she considered the assumptions of both the old and a new paradigm of education and learning: "The old assumptions generate questions about how to achieve norms, obedience, and correct answers. The new assumptions lead to questions about how to motivate for lifelong learning, how to strengthen self-discipline, how to awaken curiosity, and how to encourage creative risk in people of all ages" (p. 291). They also create a context for various kinds of innovations for higher education and community service activities in the future. Ferguson and Kamara (1993) adapted and modified the aforementioned outline "to serve as a possible new paradigm for urban adult learners" (p.

158). In the adaptation, sixteen old and new paradigm assumptions are listed, respectively, along with educational outcomes for an urban mission of higher education (Ferguson & Kamara, 1993, p. 159162). What follows are summaries of these lists.

Assumptions of the old paradigm of education include: (1) an emphasis on "content" and acquiring a body of "right" information, once and for all; (2) learning as a product, a destination;

(3) a hierarchical and authoritarian structure that rewards conformity and discourages dissent; (4) a relatively rigid structure with a prescribed curriculum; (5) a focus on performance; (6) an emphasis on the external world; inner experience is often considered inappropriate in educational settings; (7) guessing and divergent thinking are discouraged; (8) an emphasis on analytical linear thinking, left-brain thinking; (9) the use of labeling, which often contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy; (10) a concern with norms; (11) a primary reliance on theoretical, abstract "book knowledge"; (12) classrooms are designed for efficiency and convenience; (13) a system that is bureaucratically determined and resistant to community input; (14) education is seen as a social necessity for a certain period of time, an approach which inculcates minimal skills and trains people to a specific role; (15) an increasing reliance on technology, which can result in dehumanization; (16) a one-way street where a teacher imparts knowledge to the students.

Assumptions of the new paradigm of education for urban adult learners include: (1) an emphasis on context and learning how to learn, ask questions, how to pay attention to the right things, how to be open to and evaluate new concepts, and how to achieve access to information; (2) learning as a "process," a journey (both prior and new learning are legitimate); (3) an egalitarian structure where candor and dissent are permitted and autonomy is encouraged; (4) a relatively flexible structure with a belief that there are many ways to teach a given subject (e.g., classroom; workshops; field-based; independent learning); (5) a focus on self-image as the generator of performance; (6) inner experience is seen as a context for learning and exploration of feelings is encouraged; (7) guessing and divergent thinking are encouraged as a part of the creative process;

(8) a striving for whole-brain education, which augments and fuses rationality with holistic, nonlinear, and intuitive strategies; (9) labeling is used only in a minor prescriptive role and not as a fixed evaluation of the other; (10) a concern with the individual's performance in terms of potential and an interest in testing outer limits and transcending perceived limitations; (11) theoretical and abstract knowledge is heavily complemented by experiments and experiences, both in and out of the classroom (e.g., field trips, apprenticeships, demonstrations, visiting experts); (12) classrooms are designed with a concern for the environment of learning, varied and multi-leveled for the urban adult learner; (13) the encouragement of community input and even community control; (14) education is seen as a life-long process that may only be tangentially related

to traditional educational settings; (15) the use of appropriate technology, with human relationships between teachers and learners being of primary importance; (16) an environment where the teacher is also a learner who learns from students.

Although elements of a new paradigm for education have been evident in the overall culture for some time, they have yet to take full root. Fear of such a paradigm shift and the consequent conservative response in this country has led, in some instances, to a retreat to the more familiar and hence a retreat to the old paradigm and its assumptions. Educators and policymakers, however, must embrace a larger vision and this larger vision must include a commitment to an urban mission for higher education where public and community service activities are legitimized and appropriately credited. The assumptions of the new paradigm of education for urban adult learners, along with educational outcomes for an urban mission for higher education can serve as helpful guidelines to educators and policymakers in formulating strategies and structures and in establishing present and future priorities.

While innovations and reforms in education have taken form since the early 1940s, many have emerged out of the old paradigm, and hence, have simply tended to re-arrange old norms. In this context, the connection between education and community service has been tangential at best. An intent of the present discussion is to suggest that the connection must be given higher priority in the consciousness of educators and policymakers, particularly in the higher education arena. Higher education must take its place as a partner in helping to solve the many urban problems that it studies.

The new paradigm of learning implies a shift in consciousness, a new way of viewing the world and of carrying out education in that world. This new view or new consciousness seeks to transcend limits and to unleash new creative energy for innovative activities intended to bring about constructive individual change and empowerment, as well as social change and community empowerment.

Paradigms act like hypnotic suggestions that impact how one views the world or constructs reality. The old paradigm thus hypnotically generates suggestions about how to achieve norms, obedience, and correct answers. In the same way, the new paradigm can generate suggestions about the processes of lifelong learning, self-discipline, curiosity, and creative risk. The implication here for educators and policymakers is that they must create policies and educational arenas that support and motivate people toward the realization of their full human potential.

Educators and policymakers who focus primarily on limitations (i.e., focus on what cannot be done because of the perception of limited resources or limited options) to formulate policies and learning environments are acting out of fear and are reactive rather than proactive. The current conservative climate, for instance, has created some less than positive reactions to affirmative action policies. These kinds of reactions stem from fear, from a focus on limitations and the perception of scarcity, and from a retreat to old ways

of thinking about the world. The eventual result of such reactions is the creation of policies that stifle creativity and human potential that could assist in the resolution of perceived difficulties. The true intent of affirmative action policies is to support the realization of human potential. There may come a time when affirmative action policies regarding race relations in this country will not be required. However, within the current context of fear, reactivity, and perceived scarcity, doing away with affirmative actions or retreating to old ways of thinking under the guise of color blindness would be ill-advised. Doing so would indeed be acting blindly. Educators and policymakers, therefore, must transcend these kinds of reactive tendencies and focus instead on the larger purpose of affirmative action. Embracing the assumptions of the new paradigm of learning can help in this regard.

## **Challenges for the Next Decades:**

### **Making Education and Community Service Priorities for Change and Empowerment**

Education is an organizing phenomenon for a society, whereby arenas are created for self and societal examination, self and societal exploration, and personal and societal growth and change. It is from this kind of activity that a society revives itself and survives. Community service is an expressive phenomenon for a society, whereby arenas are created for value development and value fulfillment; that is, to provide service to and for that which is perceived to be valuable and important. It is from this kind of activity that a society discovers its needs, develops strategies to address them, and thus nurtures itself. Empowerment is a synthesizing and integrative phenomenon and process for a society, whereby individual and/or collective visions and actions become energized as valid and meaningful in creating the conditions for personal and social change. It is from this kind of activity that a society moves itself toward its ideals and challenges itself to take action. Social change is the ongoing process and phenomenon for a society that reflects the dynamic tensions of individual and/or collective visions and actions about what is to be valued.

One of the foremost and ongoing challenges for policymakers in the decades ahead is to create, implement, and maintain policies that reflect an understanding of the connective importance and interdependence of the societal functions of the four phenomena identified above. That is, education (particularly higher education for adult learners), community service, empowerment, and social change must be viewed as an interdependent gestalt for a society. This means that policies that promote in deed the value of education (and not policies that reflect a belief in limitation and scarcity of resources and thus merely focus on and channel all creative institutional energy on survival dynamics for its own sake) and the value of community service (and not policies that merely value the concept of publish or perish as the primary service of universities or

policies that, in general, view community service as low status societal work as reflected by wages and salaries for such work) must be priority issues for policymakers in the academy and at the local, state, and federal levels of government. It also means that appropriate resources must be directed in such a way as to reflect these priorities. Policymakers must both remain open to new and bold visions that may emerge from empowered persons about how to actualize "the best" in society and avoid the temptation to fear all social change and retreat to a conservative stance. If policymakers heed this advice, they will help society to revive itself, to nurture itself, to challenge itself in realizing its ideals, and to constructively change itself for the better.

As we move into the latter half of the 1990s, society has taken on an increasingly conservative tone. This is symptomatic of a society filled with fear and lacking a sense of idealism. In a new millennium, new visions are required. The overall challenge for policymakers, then, is to overcome fear and to recapture a sense of what might be called practical idealism. As fears increase, people tend to look for easy, prescriptive answers and perhaps unconsciously want to be told what and how to think. It becomes easy to begin to think in terms of we-they, either-or, right-wrong, or good-bad and to accept prescribed answers as the only answers. It also becomes easy to look for and acquiesce to quick, easy, and simplistic answers. Perhaps the 1996 re-election of the Clinton administration signals a cry or a hope for moving beyond retreatism and categorical thinking, but that world has yet to materialize or be actualized.

The danger of a regressive and fearful mood is that free will and choice and unique individual human needs as significant and paramount aspects of the human experience are undermined. Ferguson and Kamara (1993) argue for innovative approaches to education and community service that nurture practical idealism. Adult learners are encouraged to be critical thinkers and problem-solvers in regard to public and community service issues and to use self-directed learning plans to focus and to actualize their efforts. The desired outcome is an empowered person who is competent in addressing and bringing about social change for the public and community concerns that they encounter or with which they are currently engaged.

There are other challenges and policy implications for the future. Some relate specifically to the academy. Taylor and Buchanan (1993), for example, suggest that the continuing challenge for the academy is to resist falling prey to the societal mood described. More specifically, they argue that the challenge for universities is to: develop or create a cohesive urban mission and/or maintain a commitment to an urban mission; relate sufficient university resources to deal with the complexities of urban communities and urban needs; and develop and/or maintain access to higher education for indigenous, low-income city residents. The policy implication is that, via resource allocations, urban universities must nurture their relationships with urban communities. To fail to do so would be extremely shortsighted and, ultimately, dangerous. There are numerous

historical examples that cry out for this kind of nurturance (e.g., The Rodney King incident and the subsequent 1992 Los Angeles riots are testimonies to this observation). Finally, state and federal governments must also reflect this priority in their respective budgets.

In this light it becomes obvious that community service must no longer be viewed as an afterthought in the academy. The College of Public and Community Service (CPCS) at the University of Massachusetts-Boston is a model for what can be done in the academy. As Taylor and Buchanan imply, CPCS via its competency-based system and community service activities, is itself a model of change and empowerment. And yet, there continues to be a need to push for more legitimacy of the concept of community service at the university level. Regarding such matters as tenure reviews, faculty reports, promotions, and so on, university polices must reflect the value of community service activities, for it is these very activities that enhance the statue of the university in the public eye.

The question of how institutions address the issues of diversity and cultural awareness constitutes another important challenge for policymakers. These issues are becoming increasingly important as the population of the United States continues to change and become even more diverse. The challenge for today and for the future will be how societal institutions can vigorously prepare for institutionalizing cultural awareness without reinforcing old stereotypes about groups of people. As indicated above, when there is the perception of scarcity of resources fear often sets in and institutions, like individuals, have a tendency to become less sensitive to the interdependent nature of events and people and to use shortsighted thinking and biases to cope with the perceived reality. Often the result is the victimization of self and the other.

Another way of stating the challenge for institutions, then, is to note that they must remain inclusive and responsive in the delivery of services to an increasingly diverse population with diverse needs. Again, in the academy this means, for example, that universities must implement policies that will ensure the maintenance of a commitment to an urban mission, access for the urban learner who aspires to higher education, and proper attention to the issue of diversity. Ferguson (1993) presents a holistic model and principles for addressing cultural awareness and argues for an institutional change approach in supporting and empowering individual efforts to develop cultural awareness at universities and other institutions. The policy implication here is that institutions must assess what kind of cultural awareness training might be required by the institution and how such training may be incorporated into the fabric of the way things are done without making objects out of people and their cultures.

The new paradigm of education for urban adult learners presents a creative challenge for educators and policy-makers. One challenge is how to create and use various contexts for learning. Kennedy and Mead (1993) outline a community service model from the perspective of field-based teaching. This form of teaching challenges traditional thought

about the essence of the teaching and learning process. It involves both faculty and students in change and empowerment efforts through innovative educational field-based projects. Such efforts must be valued in the academy as much, if not more in some instances, than some other activities. Beyond the academy, community service activities such as field-based teaching and projects help in the healing process of some of the ills of society.

The policy issues that are raised in this area pertain to how universities perceive and value such teaching. Advocates of the field-based teaching model argue that such teaching often involves more work and thus should be credited for more than one course, that it should be valued as professional activity and evaluated as such in tenure and promotional cases, and that it often involves a special kind of research which must be valued.

A fundamental challenge for urban universities is how to play significant social change roles. Ferguson and Souris (1993) discuss community policing and an interactive model for neighborhood security and development. They provide a specific example of how CPCS has played a role in addressing an important societal issue—the safety and development of communities. The interactive model they outlined argues by implication that universities can and must play creative roles in helping to resolve important societal issues. In this instance, the issue was the dynamic tensions between the community and the police. The challenge was to create the opportunity for dialogue and creative problem-solving that would lead to secure neighborhoods and community development. Again, the policy implications for the academy and policymakers involve legitimizing such community service activities by lending university resources and supports. By doing so, universities and other relevant entities become part of the solution of problems and not merely bystanders and observers of the problems.

The new paradigm of education for urban adult learners creates a context for the emergence of many strategies at all levels of interaction. Colon (1993) has outlined six interrelated policies, activities, and functions that can serve as a framework for an educational strategy that links the urban university to community development. The challenge for the urban university and policymakers here is to recognize and embrace an interrelation of policies, activities, and functions in making a statement about its willingness to participate in the community development movement. The benefit is an enhanced university educational experience for faculty and students and an improved community and society.

How does a new paradigm lend itself to creative and applied research and intervention strategies? Arnold (1993) suggested new intervention strategies to solve old problems by innovatively reframing the use of specific techniques and technologies to deal more effectively with health care concerns—more specifically, infant mortality. A community-based case management model and the use of computers to better manage health care in a

cost-effective manner reflects how the author's research on these issues could be used to solve community and societal concerns. The policy implication for the academy is how to make the various research projects be more alive and applicable in the service of the community. Much too often the publish or perish posture that drives the university results in stale documents that simply sit on the shelves of libraries or in storage, rather than impacting on the community. This shortcoming suggests that action research would be a useful kind of research for universities to more fully support. Indeed, Freeman and Upshur (1993) discussed the utility of applied, action-oriented research and how it was used to create an interactive planning process with a community organization. These kinds of activities must be supported by the university, for contained in such activities are the seeds of real solutions to real urban problems.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the strategies and models discussed above support the notions of constructive social change and empowerment for urban adult learners. Educators and policymakers must begin to think about the importance of innovative approaches to education and community service in the context of a new paradigm of learning for urban adult learners. At a much broader level, the ultimate challenge is to reframe issues in the context of a new paradigm for learning and then to apply that understanding to various societal arenas. In other words, while the paradigm discussed in this article has been framed to specifically address the urban adult learner and an urban mission for higher education, the assumptions contained in the new paradigm can be reframed for many different arenas. It is important for educators and policymakers to have larger, inclusive visions that seek to empower and unleash the creative potential of individuals. Solutions to difficult social problems often come from inspiration. A paradigm that fosters fear and limitation cannot produce inspired solutions. Too often this has been the function of the assumptions of the old paradigm. It is time to look anew at the world and to tap the creative potential that is inherent within each individual.

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