## Special Report*

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# Lifelong Learning and Adult Educators' Beliefs: Implications for Theory and Practice

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### Introduction

Learning is seen as the answer to many of today's crucial issues. It is essential that a global learning society be created to address and rectify such problems as unemployment, world peace, and poverty. Adult educators have the tools necessary to build a society that embraces the beliefs and practices of lifelong learning. Adult educators of today are in a position to lay the foundation for a global learning society. Since adult educators are in this influential position to create a lifelong learning society, it is imperative that adult educators incorporate the concepts of lifelong learning into their belief system of adult education. It is equally important that adult educators are able also to utilize those beliefs in practice. If the belief is prevalent but the practice is negligent, our lifelong learning society is unattainable. The study reported in this article is based on a thesis conducted with members of the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (Cresson, 1996).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify the degree to which adult educators believe in lifelong learning, the degree to which adult educators believe they can implement lifelong learning in their work, and

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the relationship between these two sets of beliefs. Based on a review of the literature, the concept of lifelong learning was conceptualized as consisting of twelve distinct but interrelated concepts. Lifelong learning consists of the following concepts:

1. The whole person, including social, emotional, and spiritual aspects, should grow from the learning experience.
2. All life roles of adult learners, including roles of friend, citizen, economic provider, and parent, should benefit from participation in adult education.
3. Adult educators should help individuals become self-directed learners.
4. All institutions, including government, economic, social, and educational, should offer coordinated educational opportunities for adult learners.
5. Adult learners should utilize processes other than formal adult education to become lifelong learners.
6. Adult educators are responsible to assist adult learners to prepare for, accept, and adapt to changes throughout their lives.
7. As people age, their ability to learn can actually improve.
8. Learning experiences should be flexible.
9. Adult educators should promote the growth of society.
10. Learning opportunities should be open equally to all members of society.
11. Learning should be individualized.
12. The welfare of the adult learners should be placed before that of the institution.

For each of the above twelve concepts four questions were explored:

1. To what degree do adult educators believe in these concepts?
2. To what degree do adult educators perceive they can implement these concepts in their work?
3. What is the difference between the adult educators' beliefs in these concepts and their perception of what they can implement in their jobs?
4. If there is a difference between beliefs and ability to act upon their beliefs, to what do adult educators attribute the discrepancy?

## Review of the Literature

A review of the literature was undertaken to identify the underlying concepts which comprise lifelong learning. The results of the review of

the literature are the 12 concepts identified in the research questions and which serve as the basis for this research study. Much of the literature regarding lifelong learning comes from Europe where the term is used more commonly than in the United States (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines lifelong learning as denoting an overall scheme aimed both at restructuring the existing educational system and at developing the entire educational potential outside the educational system. Lifelong learning "should extend throughout life, include all skills and branches of knowledge, use all possible means, and give the opportunity to all people for full development of their personality" (UNESCO, 1976).

Advocates of lifelong learning assert that education is a process that continues in one form or another throughout life and that its purposes and forms must be adapted to the needs of individuals at different stages in their development (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Wirtz (1977) notes that lifelong learning is taken as meaning the distribution of educational opportunity over the entire life experience so as to maximize both the individual and the system interests with particular recognition of the potentially reciprocal value of education and other human experiences. Brodbelt (1983) underscores this notion, stating that learning should take place throughout the life span, literally from cradle to grave. In addition, learning should be flexible and should provide for maximum individualization (DiPaula, 1981; Griffin, 1983; Vettickal, 1980). Lifelong learning means self-directed growth. It focuses on fostering the development of inquiry skills and self-direction with emphasis on the total personal, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual areas and the integration among them (Faure, 1972).

The concept of lifelong learning also includes delivery methods, processes, and techniques that should be used in to accomplish the learning process. Lifelong learning is formal, informal, and nonformal and should occur in a variety of settings (Boucouvalas, 1981; Jarvis, 1986; Vettickal, 1980). Formal adult education is carried out through educational institutions. Nonformal adult education is conducted by noneducational organizations and institutions such as businesses, unions, and community-based organizations. Informal adult education is education pursued by individuals or groups and includes individual learning projects as well as informal groups of adults such as citizen's action groups and community groups.

Lifelong learning should have the goal to uphold and improve the quality of life (Dave, 1973). There is no such thing as a separate, perma-

nent part of education which is not lifelong learning. In other words, lifelong learning is not an educational system, but it is the principle on which the overall organization of a system is founded and which should, accordingly, underlie the development of each of its component parts (Faure, 1972). Lifelong learning calls for a cooperative network of a broad range of educational and other organizational, governmental, and private institutions (Vettickal, 1980). A learning society is one in which education is interwoven with the social, political, and economic fabric such that education is not a system in itself; rather, it is a responsibility of the entire society (Boucouvalas, 1981).

## Methodology

Participants in the study (n = 300) were selected randomly from the 1993 Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education membership directory (n = 902) utilizing the Table of Ten Thousand Random Numbers (Gay, 1992). The 300 PAACE members selected were sent a survey packet including a cover letter and survey questionnaire. The response rate for the first mailing was 131. A second letter and survey that were sent to non-respondents yielded 69 additional responses for a total of 200 responses. Forty-six responses were deemed unusable due to incomplete and/or inappropriate responses or to the fact that the current employment of the respondent was not in the field of adult education. Deleting these reponses resulted in a total of 154 (51.3%) usable surveys for the study. Data collection took place during the spring and summer of 1993.

The questionnaire was formulated from the twelve major characteristics of lifelong learning discussed previously under the research questions. For each concept presented, the respondents were asked to do three things. First, they were asked to record, on a scale, the degree to which they believed personally in the concept described: 1 = do not believe, 2 = somewhat believe, 3 = not sure, 4 = believe, and 5 = strongly believe. Second, respondents were then asked how often they could act upon their belief in their work. Again, a scale was utilized with values of 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = always. Third, if a discrepancy was present, respondents were asked to record reasons for the discrepancy between beliefs and ability to act upon those beliefs in their work.

Data were analyzed utilizing SPSS computer software for descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics utilized were mean,

standard deviation, range, maximum, minimum, frequency, and valid per-
cent; *t*-tests were utilized to analyze the differences between adult edu-
cators' beliefs and their ability to implement their beliefs in their work.

## Findings

First the demographic characteristics of the participants in the study
are presented. Then the findings from the study are presented in order of
the twelve research questions, each section describing one of the con-
cepts of lifelong learning. The findings from the twelve research ques-
tions are summarized in Table 1. For each question the data related to
adult educators' beliefs and their ability to implement the beliefs in their
job are presented, and, finally the *t*-tests comparing their bliefs and their
ability to implement their beleifs are presented.

### *Demographics*
Age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 77 years of age, mean age
of the respondents was 45.418 years of age, and the standard deviation
was 10.189 years. Forty-four (29.3%) of the respondents were male and
109 (70.8%) female. One respondent did not complete the gender item.
Years of education ranged from high school to doctoral level. One (.6%)
respondent had high school level education, 4 (2.6%) had associate's
degrees, 54 (35.1%) respondents held a bachelor's degree, 75 (48.7%)
held a master's degree, and 19 (12.3%) respondents held doctorates. One
respondent did not complete the education item.

The types of institutions where the respondents were employed var-
ied greatly. Examples of institutional types in which the respondents
worked include social services, business and industry, ABE/GED pro-
viders, higher education, health care, government, community-based or-
ganizations, the military, and public schools. Job titles were as varied as
the institution of employment and represented all areas of adult educa-
tion. For example, some of the job titles listed included teachers, counse-
lors, librarians, program assistants, trainers, and administrators. The mean
number of years the 154 respondents worked in adult education was
10.704. The number of years that the respondents have been practicing
in adult education ranged from 1 to 40 years.

### *Growth of the Whole Person*
Question 1 of the survey addressed the concept that lifelong learning
constitutes the education of the whole person, including social, emotional,

and spiritual aspects of the learner. The average response for personal
beliefs of adult educators regarding this concept was 4.493, which is be-
tween believe and strongly believe on the scale. The average response to
being able to utilize this concept in the adult educators' current work was
4.046. The statistically significant difference between these two responses
was .447. Primary reasons given for the difference between beliefs and
ability to act upon beliefs were lack of funding, lack of adequate person-
nel, and lack of time.

Table 1: Comparisons of Adult Educators' Beliefs and Implementation
of Lifelong Learning Concepts

|    | Concept | $n$ | Mean Belief | Mean Implem. | $t$-value | $df$ | $p$ |
|----|---------|-----|-------------|--------------|-----------|------|-----|
| 1. | Whole person | 152 | 4.493 | 4.046 | 6.25 | 151 | .000 |
| 2. | All life roles | 151 | 4.264 | 3.774 | 7.11 | 150 | .000 |
| 3. | Self-directed learners | 151 | 4.331 | 3.927 | 6.01 | 150 | .000 |
| 4. | Coordinated programming | 148 | 4.263 | 3.601 | 9.35 | 147 | .000 |
| 5. | Informal and nonformal education | 149 | 4.355 | 3.838 | 7.70 | 148 | .000 |
| 6. | Adapt to change | 152 | 4.039 | 3.723 | 4.46 | 151 | .000 |
| 7. | Aging | 150 | 4.306 | 4.000 | 4.68 | 149 | .000 |
| 8. | Flexibility | 151 | 4.483 | 3.973 | 8.29 | 150 | .000 |
| 9. | Growth of society | 152 | 4.552 | 4.065 | 8.35 | 151 | .000 |
| 10. | Equal Oportunity | 150 | 4.720 | 3.953 | 9.27 | 149 | .000 |
| 11. | Individualized learning | 149 | 4.127 | 3.859 | 3.53 | 148 | .001 |
| 12. | Learners vs. institutions | 138 | 3.210 | 2.876 | 3.92 | 137 | .000 |

### *Life Roles of the Adult Learner*

The second question in the survey addressed the concept that all of the learners' life roles, including those of worker, citizen, parent, and leasurite, should benefit from participation in adult education. The adult educators' beliefs in this concept were somewhere between believe and strongly believe on the scale, with a mean response of 4.264. Adult educators were sometimes to frequently able to act upon this belief, with a mean of 3.774. The statistically significant difference between beliefs and action was .490. Reasons for the inability to act upon beliefs in the work place included lack of funding, lack of time, and poor administrative/leadership.

### *Self-Directed Learners*

The third question on the survey stated that adult educators should help learners become more self-directed. There was a statistically significant difference between adult educators' beliefs and their ability to act upon those beliefs for this survey question. Adult educators believed in this concept, with a mean response of 4.331. They were able to act upon this concept frequently in their work, with a mean response of 3.927. The statistically significant difference between the two means was .404. The primary reasons for the difference was the lack of funding, lack of time, and poor administrative/leadership.

### *Coordinated Education*

Item four on the survey addressed the issue of coordination of services. The concept at issue here is that government, economic, social, and educational services should offer coordinated educational opportunities for adult learners. Adult educators were shown to believe in this concept with a mean response of 4.263. They are able to act upon this belief sometimes to frequently (mean = 3.601). The difference between these means, .662, was statistically significant. The primary reasons given for inability to act more consistently on beliefs related to this concept included lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, lack of time, and poor leadership. Other reasons given were "competition" for clients, lack of coordinated leadership among agencies, and lack of responsiveness/accountability of government agencies and businesses.

### *Variety of Learning Processes*

The fifth question addressed the issue that a variety of modes of learning, including formal, nonformal, and informal, should be used in

lifelong learning. Adult educators believe in the concept (mean 4.355) and were able to act upon their beliefs between sometimes and frequently (mean 3.838), with a statistically significant difference between the means of .517. Primary reasons for adult educators being unable to act upon their belief in utilizing a variety of learning processes were lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, and lack of time. Other responses included lack of student time, lack of available resources and lack of student motivation.

### Adapting to Change

Question six addressed the concept that adult educators should help learners prepare for, accept, and adapt to changes throughout their lives. The mean response regarding their belief in this concept was 4.039. They were able to act upon their beliefs between sometimes and frequently, with a mean response of 3.723. The difference between these two means was .316, which was statistically significant. Reasons given for not being able to act upon their beliefs all of the time were lack of funding, adequate personnel, and time. Other reasons given were students' acceptability, politics and economics, and lack of student interest.

### Enhancing Ability to Learn

Question seven stated that as people age their ability to learn may actually improve. The average response for belief in this concept was 4.306, which was between believe and strongly believe on the scale. The average response to being able to act upon this concept in current work was 4.000, or frequently on the scale. The statistically significant difference between these mean responses was .306. Primary reasons for inability to act were lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, and lack of time. Other reasons given were lack of ability to assess, lack of awareness of importance, and lack of learner motivation.

### Flexible Learning

Question eight on the survey stated that learning experiences should be flexible. The adult educators' belief in this concept were between believe and strongly believe with a mean score of 4.483. Adult educators were frequently able to act on this belief with a mean response of 3.973. The statistically significant difference between beliefs and action was .510. Reasons for inability to act upon beliefs was lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, and lack of time. Other reasons noted were task

dictates format, funding policies inhibit activities, and the ease of using only textbook exercises.

### Growth of Society

Question nine stated that adult educators and adult education should promote the growth of society as well as that of individuals. There was a statistically significant difference for this survey question between adult educators' beliefs and their ability to act upon those beliefs. Adult educators believed very strongly in this concept, with a mean response of 4.552. They were able to act upon their beliefs frequently in their work, with a mean response of 4.065. The difference between these means was .487. The primary reasons for the differences were lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, and lack of time. Other reasons stated included philosophical differences, the concept not being a dominant one in this culture, and lack of resources.

### Equal Opportunity

Question ten addressed the issue that learning opportunities should be open to and equally accessible by all members of society. Adult educators believed very strongly in this lifelong learning concept, with a mean response of 4.720. They were able to act frequently upon this belief in their work, with a mean response of 3.953. The difference between these means, .766, was statistically significant. Reasons given for the inability to act upon these beliefs included lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, and lack of time. Other reasons given were lack of accessibility, prejudice of workers in social service agencies, and the concept being unrealistic.

### Individualized Learning

Item eleven stated that learning should be individualized. Adult educators believe in this concept (mean response = 4.127) and were able to act upon their beliefs frequently (mean response = 3.859). The statistically significant difference between these means was .268. Primary reasons for adult educators being unable to act upon their beliefs in individualizing learning were lack of funding, lack of adequate personnel, and lack of time. Other reasons noted were lack of space, purposes of learning which worked against individualization, and the idea that this was too idealistic a concept.

*Welfare of Learners vs. Welfare of Institutions*

Question twelve stated that the welfare of the adult learner should come before that of the institution providing the learning services. The adult educators surveyed were unsure about their belief in this concept (mean response = 3.210). They rarely to sometimes were able to act upon this belief in their jobs (mean response = 2.876). The difference between the two means, .334, was statistically significant. Reasons for inability to act upon belief in this concept were lack of funding, adequate personnel, and time. Other reasons noted were institution's priorities, regulatory requirements, and a lack of institutional willingness.

## Discussion

There were three questions raised by this study: To what extent do adult educators endorse the concepts of lifelong learning? To what extent can adult educators implement those concepts in their jobs? What factors inhibit adult educators from implementing lifelong learning in their work?

Regarding the first question, it is clear, based on the findings of this study, that adult educators endorse the concepts of lifelong learning. All beliefs, except that which states that the welfare of the learner should be placed above that of the institution, were rated at 4.000 (believe) or greater. The average belief across the twelve concepts was 4.5256. With this strong endorsement, it seems clear that adult educators support, at least verbally, the concepts of lifelong learning.

It is interesting to note that the belief that the welfare of the learner should be placed above that of the institution was rated lowest at 3.208 (not sure). The sample for this study was drawn from the membership directory of PAACE. It may be concluded from this data that adult educators are ambivalent regarding the relative power of learners versus institutions. Many, it would seem, feel that institutional integrity is as viable as learner integrity.

Adult educators indicated that they are able to act upon their beliefs from rarely to frequently. The average rating of the ability of adult educators to implement the twelve concepts in their work was 3.805. This clearly indicates that the perceptions of the respondents regarding their ability to implement lifelong learning factors in their jobs was less strong than their beliefs in those concepts. In every case the rating for implementation was lower than the rating for belief. The conclusion that can

be drawn is that doing lifelong learning is more problematic than advocating for lifelong learning.

The disparity between personal beliefs and the ability to act upon those beliefs was greatest concerning equal opportunity to participate in adult education, with a difference of .766. The least amount of discrepancy between beliefs and ability to act upon beliefs was found to be the concept of individualized learning, with a discrepancy of .268. The reasons adult educators gave for their inability to act upon beliefs can be reduced into four areas: limitations based on program practices, limitations stemming from institutional policy, limitations of the adult learners, and limitations of the adult educators.

Limitations based on program practices and institutional policies were most often given as reasons for the discrepancies in what adult educators say they believe and what they say they do. Examples of these types of limitations are not enough time, staff, and money. Limitations of adult learners is the respondents' (adult educators') perceptions of the limitations which adult learners place on themselves. These are the dispositional barriers described by Cross (1981). Adult educators' limitations refer to the lack of belief in some concepts of lifelong learning and/or their unwillingness to carry out beliefs on the job.

Enthusiastic adult educators who are subdued by their inability to act upon their beliefs have several options open to them. They can lose their enthusiasm and succumb to just earning a living, or they can continue in their effort to make something positive of the learning experience. This is the situation faced in the field of adult education and the lifelong learning society. We, as adult educators, can discontinue our endeavor toward a lifelong learning society and justify our abandonment by defining our goal as unattainable or unrealistic, or we can continue our efforts, learn from our failures, and keep the dream alive.

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