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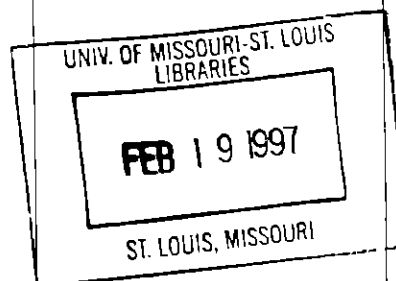
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AAACE — A Learning Organization: Why Not?

A few months ago, *Adult Learning* had a theme issue on the learning organization. For some reason, that concept seems to maintain itself in my thoughts. To some it may look like a nonsense concept or a passing fancy I've observed over a number of years: ideas that came and went with an ebb and flow tide. Many people rode the crest of the wave of hot topics/current jargon in the field, knowing the words but understanding little or none of what the terms meant. Some of the hot topics changing every six months or so were: T-groups, encounter movement, management by objectives, sensitivity training, quality circles, I'm OK/You're OK, value added, values clarification, total quality management, masters of motivation, etc.

On the contrary, the learning organization appears to hold some promise for AAACE and for our field in general. The concept has been around for more than five years and is gaining momentum as time passes. It has been known to aid large corporations to be competitive globally and has helped individuals achieve their potential with support from colleagues. There are a number of reasons I think it has some value to AAACE and to us as professional adult and continuing educators.

First, we as professionals and as participants in AAACE are educators. We are about the business of learning — adult learning, if you will, the kind that knows the

process of learning, possesses a perspective of openness, thinks comprehensively, demonstrates creativity, shows empathy, is effective, and walks the talk. As an association, we mutually support each other for maximum improvement in the quality of life of our constituents. So, we may think of ourselves as a learning organization, involved as people in creating a type of organization we truly like to work within, and that thrives in a world of interdependence and change.

We are about the business of learning — the kind that knows the process of learning, possesses a perspective of openness, thinks comprehensively, demonstrates creativity, shows empathy, is effective, and walks the talk.

Second, there are those who would say the learning organization is about adult educators and others developing a culture for tomorrow's workplace by focusing on guiding ideas, articulating theories/methods/processes,

building an appropriate infrastructure, and identifying important arenas of practice. We are seeking to accomplish this through implementing our recent streamlined restructuring.

Third, the challenges in building a learning organization are both exciting and daunting as we create non-stop learning opportunities, inquire and discuss, collaborate in team learning, empower people toward a collective vision, capture and share learning, connect the organization to its context, and lead in modeling and supporting learning at all levels. We seek to accomplish this by various means including developing a strategic plan.

Fourth, even the numerous steps suggested for becoming a learning organization indicate that the members need to commit to the learning process, connect the process with the product of learning, access our resources, communicate with stakeholders, recognize the importance of systems thinking and action, model our commitment to learning, transform into a learning culture, strategize how, cut and streamline the operation, empower and enable trust and freedom, extend learning to others, capture and release ideas and learning, acquire and apply technology, invigorate learning at all levels, focus on learning, continue to adapt and improve learning in the organization.

In the quarter of a century I've been involved as a member with AAACE and its predecessors I've

seen a progressive commitment to all this. And now that I've been honored and entrusted by my adult and continuing education colleagues to hold the association's highest elected office, I spare no effort toward our becoming the kind of learning organization that will benefit all society.

Fifth, on this journey we certainly need an abundance of working wisdom, which has been called the timeless skill for the learning organization. These skills include being willing and able to travel the road of learning with others, planting ideas that learners and mentors will later harvest, raising awareness by basically challenging the status quo, demonstrating logic, imitative learning in team leadership, dialog and debate, recognizing someone's idea of vision for something new and helping that person to articulate it and applying it in a useful way. Many of us see ourselves in all these as we journey the lanes of AAACE and our field.

Sixth, we focus a lot of energy on "Building Capacity" to become all that is possible for us to become. We continually enhance our capacity to create. We passionately desire to create, expanding and nurturing our patterns of thinking, setting free our collective aspirations, and learning how to learn together. We do all this by publishing research and commentary in the *Adult Education Quarterly* and in *Adult Basic Education*, writing. See *President's Podium*, p. 6.

strictly dealing with adult education. Areas for further research include the promising issue of cognitive psychology. How exactly is information processed within the human mind; what are the differences among individuals? how will this affect the structuring of learning?

Certainly the concerns of recent conferences and articles, such as the concerns of women and other marginalized groups, are of the utmost importance. They have led to what has perhaps become the most important theme within writing on adult education. That is, the question of what and who is adult education for? As a corrective to past research, which was itself more concerned with how-to kinds of issues than with the broader philosophical questions facing adult educators, today's adult education research seems to be moving toward a new stage of questioning. Suddenly, even the very notion that education is a "good thing" is open to question.

Under what circumstances? Who is benefiting the most? Are there unintended or even intended consequences that need to be considered? This has extended into all aspects of adult education. Certainly literacy work is now replete with research suggesting that the notion of literacy is complex and socially constructed and that programs to improve literacy need to take these constructions into account. Also that ignoring participants' life experiences, their socio-cultural worlds in planning programs is done at great peril. Admittedly, much of the current work is a response to the overwhelming failure of social programs to address the problems of illiteracy and economic dependence. Workplace literacy programs, for example, which are aimed only at the work situation are often ineffective, even when the participants are highly motivated. The programs are too narrow and do not provide the range of skills necessary for true literacy. Additionally, educational

programs designed to aid economic development are often failures because they impose a set of values on a different culture.

The recent debate about the efficacy of the GED is a case in point. The argument was that those with the GED did not statistically improve their life circumstances and in fact did no better than those who did not complete high school. While still not completely resolved, the argument did focus attention on exactly what were the purposes of the GED.

Finally, even within the area of instructor/student relations, the research and writing are indecisive. Surely, we can take for granted that adults are different than children and need to have their learning experiences structured differently. Yet little research bears this out. In fact, the evidence seems to show that on the one hand, children are in need of greater flexibility in the structuring of their learning experiences, while conversely, adults can do quite well, indeed, in formats that

involve the simple passing of information. What this means in the long-run is open to question.

In the end, adult education is struggling with its very self-definition and purpose. The research reveals a tension between public and private goals; between the worlds constructed by individuals and how they relate these to broader public goals. What are the connections between adult education and participatory democracy? contemporary cultural issues? continued racism? More importantly, what are the policy dimensions of adult education? How are arguments framed? What are the implications? All of these issues are beginning to be addressed, but their connection to the actual work of programming is unfortunately, quite limited. ▲

— *Amy D. Rose*
Northern Illinois University

President's Podium, continued from p. 4
and reading about theory and practical application in *Adult Learning*, reading about happenings within our field in *Online*, serving on boards and committees of the association, keeping correspondence with our colleagues, and gathering at our annual conference to teach and learn from each other in the various sessions

Seventh, we "Harness the Experience" of each other as learners by capturing and sharing valued accomplishments, stressing the retrieval of the lessons of learning that can be shared throughout our organization in such strategic areas as core processes, technologies, culture, and building a network of information systems. If the minimum average experience of the 3,500

AAACE members is ten years, we then collectively harness 35,000 years of experience as we work together for our mutual learning. "What A Learning Organization!" We do this through our publications and our annual conference, and numerous other connections we have. We gain knowledge, information, skill, value, and become a learning organization through our publications, annual

conference, instruction, study, observation, experience, and the numerous other connections we have. This is an ongoing, continuous, never ending, delightful lifelong process. Join in the fun! ▲

— *John A. Henschke*
President, AAACE