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In this final chapter, we highlight recurring themes from the preceding chapters and discuss the potential impact these themes have on program planning and instructional practice in adult education.

Themes and Issues in Programming for Young Adults

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When Darkenwald and Knox (1984) drew upon Knowles's work to ask the question, "Are *young adults* a neglected species?" (p. 100)—and subsequently answered in the affirmative—we believe they were on to something. However, for 30 years young adults received little attention in the adult education literature. In this volume, we have aspired to reorient adult educators to young adults and update the discussion among adult educators regarding younger learners and their educational needs as they transition to adulthood. The previous chapters in this volume present a collage of approaches and issues to consider regarding the transitional needs of young adult learners. Despite the diversity of topics covered, a few recurrent themes are worth noting. In this final chapter, we will discuss those themes and the potential impact they have on program planning and instructional practice in adult education. We begin with the ambiguity of *transition*, followed by the complexity of contemporary society, young adults' need for belonging and community, and finally, the need for future research regarding young adults.

Ambiguity of Transition

Throughout this volume, the word *transition* has been conceptualized and constructed in multiple ways, demonstrating how the meaning it takes on is based on the social and cultural context in which it is used. There is ambiguity in the lexical choice of *transition*, and as Wyn illustrates in Chapter 1 through a historical account of youth transitions, there is ambiguity in the traditional metaphor of transition from youth to adult.

In traditional psychology, the term transition is used to refer to changes in behavior or cognition, whereas in developmental psychology, transition most often refers to movement from one stage of development to another. Sociologists attend to sociocultural relationships and define a transition as it relates to

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shifts in identities, roles, and statuses. Considering more specifically the move from youth to adulthood, transition is often defined as a trajectory from dependence to independence. Osgood, Foster, and Courtney (2010) described the time between high school and the twenties as "a time of semi-autonomy during which youth typically remain dependent on their parents in many ways" (p. 210). It is a complex process in which youths, who have been dependents their entire lives, begin to move toward social independence and take on what are constructed as adult roles: citizen, spouse, parent, and worker (Waters, Carr, & Kefalas, 2011). However, how youths fare during their transition to adulthood can have long-term effects.

As Xie, Sen, and Foster point out in Chapter 3 of this volume, transitions are generally considered smooth for college-bound, middle-class youths, but research is limited for youths from other backgrounds. These groups of youth are referred to as marginalized, vulnerable, and disconnected (Osgood et al., 2010). Despite what little is known about these groups, it seems that they struggle to navigate the transition to adulthood due to systemic inequities and access to resources. When considering the transition from youth to adult, Wyn notes in Chapter 1 of this volume that there are gaps in our understanding related to the experiences of young people and the policies that inform program design and institutional planning.

Using the term *transition* implies that there is a simple and synchronous move from "youth" to "adult," an assumption that often minimizes the complexities and multiple transitions involved. Wyn reminds us in Chapter 1 that the traditional metaphor, "transition to adulthood," connotes that adulthood is a clearly defined status at which one arrives, drawing upon the idea that there is but one transition to a universally experienced adulthood. As the various chapters in this volume note, the life course is culturally and socially scripted, whether for young adults labeled with dis/abilities (Lester, Chapter 4), young adults seeking to make sense of their own cultural identity (Drayton, Chapter 2), young adults coming to understand themselves in a community of faith (Frye, Chapter 5), young adults taking nontraditional education routes (Davis, Chapter 6), young adults with earlier life histories that leave them vulnerable in some way (Xie et al., Chapter 3), or young adults setting out into the workplace for the first time (Olson, Chapter 7), illustrating that transitions are ambiguous and structured by economic and social resources.

This ambiguity of transition should be noted and acknowledged when working with young adults in adult education programs. Program planners and practitioners need to understand this ambiguity in order to connect with students in multiple ways in a variety of contexts when serving younger adult learners. In addition, the ambiguity of the transition to adulthood calls for practitioners to be reflexive and consider their own understanding of transition and their own understanding of adulthood. It is through this lens that they view and serve their young adult students. Acknowledging their own position can provide practitioners with the opportunity to open up to new

understandings that may facilitate a more inclusive learning environment for young adult students.

Complexity of Contemporary Society

It is easy to resort to cliché, when talking about the pace of current society or the rapidly changing world that today's young adults encounter. Terms like "globalization" or "digital native" or even "Millennial" have been overused, perhaps to the detriment of deep understanding of these societal phenomena. However, the prevalence of these ideas in both popular and academic venues does highlight the reality that adult educators are preparing today's young adults for an unknown future in a complex society. The authors in this volume have highlighted various aspects of this complexity.

Clichés aside, the society we inhabit as adults, which young adults are learning to navigate, shapes much of our experience of adulthood. As Drayton suggests in Chapter 2 of this volume, though individuals in monocultural societies may not need to focus on or explore ethnic identity, making one's way in multicultural societies requires coming to terms with the racial, ethnic, cultural, and subcultural forces that have formed and will continue to form the young adult's sense of self. In Chapter 7 of this volume, Olson highlights that the notion of what it means to be "ready for the workplace" is shifting, as employers grow in their understanding of what it takes for an organization to be successful in the current economic environment.

In light of this, the authors here also challenge us to examine the terminology and labels that we use, to reflect more accurately the variations of experience made possible in contemporary society. Lester (Chapter 4 of this volume) seeks to add complexity and nuance to our understanding of the experience of young adults with dis/ability labels, even questioning the very nature of such labels. In Chapter 1 of this volume, Wyn goes so far as to challenge our use of the word *transition*, suggesting that it may be a relic of an earlier understanding of human experience and development, bound in a rhetoric of trajectories that no longer represent contemporary society or experience.

The experiential and educational pathways to adulthood are increasingly varied, as well. Xie et al. (Chapter 3 of this volume) highlight the challenges facing vulnerable youth, suggesting that not only is "the system" that exists for supporting these youth inefficient when these individuals are young, but also these supports are often removed abruptly, resulting in a jarring encounter with uncertainty and complexity. In adult education, our students often bring a complex set of experiences and expectations to their learning as well, as Davis (Chapter 6 of this volume) reminds us. Frye suggests, in Chapter 5 of this volume, that faith communities are also grappling with the ramifications of an increasingly multicultural and pluralistic society; those that fail will find their congregations aging and their numbers dwindling.

Considering the complexity of contemporary society, what role can adult educators play as young adult learners navigate their way toward adulthood?

First, we can strive to create learning environments that foster the development of young adult learners by cultivating awareness of the issues and challenges they face. Second, we can model ongoing exploration and investigation, igniting curiosity in students as Lang (2014) suggests and helping them formulate a natural interest for what is to come. Finally, we can demonstrate support and provide guidance. A little encouragement can go a long way. When adult educators work with young adults to become leaders of their own life journey, we have the potential to begin to meet their transitional needs in today's complex world.

Belonging and Community

In many cases, young adult learners are either currently experiencing or anticipating a time of significant change. As the authors here have sought ways to more effectively serve young adult learners, many have highlighted the importance of relationships as young adults navigate this transition. This idea of belonging and community runs through several of the chapters in this volume.

In Chapter 1, Wyn presents a research-driven challenge to how we conceptualize young adulthood and the transition to adulthood, suggesting that young adults actively seek meaningful connections to the various environments and relationships in their lives. She suggests that this work of "belonging" is perhaps the work of understanding and inhabiting adulthood. Furthermore, Drayton (Chapter 2) highlights young adulthood as a time of deciding and determining the extent to which one's culture and racial/ethnic identity of origin will be incorporated into one's own identity—in other words, where does the young adult belong, in relation to the groups and identities and relationships that were significant and formational from an early age?

In addition to the internally driven sense of belonging or community as described above, the authors also highlight other aspects of belonging and community. Externally ascribed labels or communities can significantly affect the experience of young adults, as highlighted in Lester's discussion of young adults with dis/ability labels (Chapter 4) or the experiences of "vulnerable youth" described by Xie et al. in Chapter 3. In Chapter 5, Frye discusses the double-sided nature of belonging: not only is the young adult seeking to belong, the community must be willing to accept and incorporate for that belonging to happen. Perhaps at the core of Olson's suggestions (Chapter 7) is the sense that many new entrants to the workforce find it challenging to adjust to the workplace when they have not yet learned what it takes to "belong" in the new setting.

Granted, *belonging* and *community* are slippery words, difficult to define. It is also likely that these are not things that can be directly taught. For adult educators seeking to meet the needs of young adult learners, these ideas can provide a helpful lens for understanding the varied experiences of those students.

The Need for Future Research

The chapters in this volume bring together an interdisciplinary perspective on meeting the transitional needs of young adult learners. While this volume provides a good starting point for considering what it means to conceptualize transitions in a new way and to reconsider the ways in which adult educators work with young adults, it is by no means comprehensive and indicates the direct need for more research in the areas of young adults and their transitions to adulthood, particularly as related to adult education.

This volume reveals the needs for future research that will promote deeper understanding of the lived experiences of adult education students, marginalized youths, and their transitions to adult education and then to higher education and the workforce. For example, Lester notes in Chapter 4 that within the field of adult education dis/ability is not positioned as socially or culturally bound, indicating a gap that adult educators may want to consider filling by collaborating with scholars in the field of dis/ability studies. Similarly, Davis suggests in Chapter 6 that there is a need for more research regarding the transition from high school to adult education. Research that captures this transition from the student perspective is important for program administrators who want to learn more about what works with enrollment and retention.

As Xie et al. delineate in Chapter 3, recent neoliberal agendas and globalization necessitate a call for more critical studies of marginalized adult education student populations that focus on the impact of cultural institutions to legitimize certain ideologies, productions of knowledge, and social formations such as low-skilled labor. Drayton reminds us in Chapter 2 that it is important to question whether these political and cultural agendas have the potential to impact adult student development because they are built to maintain the existing class, race, and gender structures of society.

Like Olson's chapter (Chapter 7), many of the more recent discussions in adult education have focused on transitioning adult learners to the workforce or, less often, into higher education. The discussions about adult education have also focused on systemic and institutional practices of adult transitions rather than on the social practices of transitioning to adulthood. The next step is to initiate more interdisciplinary collaboration around the topics of transitions to adulthood. Collaboration can be a powerful tool in disseminating information to the largest audience. Though each field mentioned above may take a different approach to research, they have common interests and overlapping stakes in the potential findings of such efforts.

Summary

It will be no surprise to adult educators that the authors in this volume have highlighted the importance of presenting relevant content in an engaging, responsible, and reflective way. Every student brings his or her story to every learning setting; those stories are rich, they are messy, and they are important.

Adult educators in this complex society must reckon with those stories—for the benefit of the student.

Before 1998, the word "googol" was known by only those familiar with advanced mathematics; in our contemporary lexicon, "Google" has become ubiquitous—practically synonymous with "search"—to the extent that the word from which it was derived now looks like a misspelling. We inhabit a complex and ever-changing society, as this simple example demonstrates and as the contributors to this volume have described. Therefore, to Wyn's suggestion that we move from a metaphor of transition to a metaphor of belonging, we would add a challenge. Are we adequately equipping young adult learners for what they will need to become to meet the challenges that we cannot even imagine? This is an important conversation, and it should be ongoing. Let us not wait another 30 years to continue this discussion.

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