Designing for Success: Transformational Perspectives in Community College Course Design

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Abstract

The recession and ensuing upheaval in the job market in the United States have created a new urgency to prepare American workers to take their place in the "knowledge economy" of the 21st century. Adults in today's workforce require more than training: they need to continue to grow and adapt to changing situations. Addressing low retention rates, preparing students who have had a long gap in their formal education, and endowing in students something more than basic skills require an innovative approach to course design, one that builds critical thinking into remedial courses. Classes for adults in community colleges should be designed to appeal to students *and* to challenge them. This paper examines the key role community colleges will face in helping the nation achieve college completion rates. The paper also discusses adult learning theories, particularly those of Mezirow, Houle, and Brookfield, that are relevant to the transformational community college classroom. Finally, with adult learning theory as a framework, a proposed alternative to a typical remediation class — employing blended learning — is presented.

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Introduction

Betty C., in her early 50s, worked for nearly 30 years for the State of Maryland before her job was eliminated in the fall of 2010. This past spring she embarked on a long-delayed goal of earning a college degree by enrolling in an online section of English 111, a prerequisite for most degree programs at the college. However, Betty quickly grew frustrated when her essays were returned to her with poor grades. She could not manage online discussions and did not know how to access the course syllabus or learning modules. I followed the interventions that are standard for a course such as this: frequent e-mails, detailed feedback on assignments, urgently worded referrals to the tutoring center (online and at the college), and finally—after repeated attempts to schedule one—a personal conference at the college. By then it was too late to turn the situation around. "I guess it was a mistake to take this class online," she said.

Betty's failure to pass the class was not due entirely to her inability to manage the online environment. She loves to write and has self-published two volumes of devotional poetry. As an administrative professional, she possessed the basic skills to write in clear and correct English. However, she could not embrace the form of an academic essay. Moreover, as a deeply religious woman, she could only relate to the literature in the class from a spiritual point of view; she included an inspirational sermon about morality in each essay. The online discussion forum, with short and underdeveloped responses from most of the students, was not enough to guide her to a new way of thinking.

America's community colleges are poised to serve the millions of adults who are seeking to begin or complete a college degree or to acquire a post-secondary credential. More than getting people back to work or helping them achieve a better quality of life, these colleges have the opportunity to improve American civic life by helping adults gain perspective on unfamiliar issues and problems and to question their own unexamined opinions. As they enroll these students and accept their tuition, colleges must help prepare students for college work.

This paper will explore the best ways to serve adults through courses that are designed to build skills while awakening the critical thinker in adult students. The first part of the paper will discuss the growth in the adult learning population at community colleges and explore the challenges these institutions face, particularly in developmental education. The second part of the paper will discuss theories of adult education that assist the educator in going beyond delivering basic skills to stimulate self-reflection and critical thinking. Finally, a model course in developmental English will be presented that brings together adult learning theories with online learning. Given the reality of the soaring demand for online courses, a hybrid model is suggested, in part because adults can benefit from online course delivery, but also because dialogue is important to achieving transformational learning.

Adults and the College Completion Agenda

In October 2010, President Barack Obama and Jill Biden, wife of the vice president and a community college teacher, hosted the first White House Summit on Community Colleges (Gonzalez 2010). This high-profile event, which spotlighted how private foundations, the federal government, and educational institutions are uniting to support community colleges, identified the community college as key to the nation's goals of building a workforce for the 21st century

economy. The president reiterated his goal that by 2020 America will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world and emphasized that community colleges should sett a goal to produce an additional five million graduates by 2020 (White House 2010).

The summit followed the passage of the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act in March 2010, which earmarks $2 billion over four years to fund the Community College and Career Training Initiative. For community colleges facing critical budget times, the amount of federal support ($12 billion had been proposed by Obama when he first addressed college completion goals in 2009) was disappointing (Lorenzo, 2011). Since the recession began, America's community colleges have been facing tremendous growth, to the point that some strained systems (in California, notably) have had to cap enrollment. Fortunately, private entities such as the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are stepping up to support reform geared to "learn and earn" practices at community colleges. Over the next five years, the Gates Foundation's $35 million "Completion by Design" program will provide grants to innovative colleges in nine states. The Lumina Foundation has committed $15 million to help community colleges meet college completion goals (Gonzalez, 2011, Lumina Foundation, 2010).

Because of the accessibility and lower cost of community college, these local institutions are a natural choice for adults embarking on or continuing their postsecondary study. The average annual tuition for a full-time student in a public, two-year college in 2008-2009 was $2,137, compared to $6,319 for a four-year public university and $30,778 for a private four-year university (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Philippe & Mullin (2011), citing the results of a survey of members of the American Association of Community Colleges, reported that college

enrollments have jumped by more than 20 percent to an estimated total of around 8.2 million

students in the last three years. This growth is in part fueled by millions of adults enrolling in

these institutions. According to U.S. Department of Education Study, 35 percent of community

college students are 30 or older and 61 identify themselves as independent (Horn & Nevill,

2006).

The recession may be over, but some jobs in America have disappeared for good. Thus,

adults are seeking out community colleges for retraining opportunities, to finish degrees, and to

achieve stability as workers in a shifting economy in unsettled times. According to a study by the

U.S. Department of Education, the median annual earnings of full-time year-round workers 25

years old and over in 2009 were: $21,230 for women and $28,020 for men with some high

school but no completion; $50, 300 for men and $32,270 for women with an associate's degree;

and $62,440 for men and $46,830 for women with a bachelor's degree. (Hoachlander, Sikora &

Horn, 2003). Aspiring toward a higher quality of life fuels college ambitions, but many students

don't make it in community college. The same study showed that just 50 to 60 percent of

students who enroll in community college with the intention to earn a credent or transfer to a

four-year institution reach these goals.

Much of this growth in community college enrollment will be accommodated by offering

more online classes. Allen & Seaman (2010) report that 30 percent of American students now

take at least one class online. However, such courses require self-discipline and motivation.

Studies by Xi, Durrington & Yen (2011), Groves & O'Donoghue (2009), and Vonderwell &

Zachariah (2005) report difficulties in attaining consistent and widespread participation in online

discussions and the need for the instructor to monitor discussions closely to help foster an online

learning community. This intrusion takes away the goal of fostering a learner-centered classroom. Parke's study of community college instructors (2009) found that the hybrid solution met students' needs for flexible learning while helping address issues such as motivation, persistence, and time management. Amaral & Shanks (2010) detailed the success of a hybrid course designed to promote more effective teaching of undergraduates in an entry-level chemistry course. Implementing a hybrid design and integrating instructor-led activities with work students completed independently online brought up grades and improved retention. At my institution, just 50 percent of the students who enroll in online gateway classes English 111 and 112 successfully complete the course. (Personal interview, J.R. Keech, 2010). Enrolling students in online classes without proper preparation for the environment (not just a technological orientation) can hinder their chance of success.

The Adult Learner in the Community College Classroom

When students such as Betty arrive in college, what elements should serve as the foundation for designing courses that help these students progress on the path of lifelong learning? Colleges offer tutoring services, advising, special offices for adult learners, and weekend and evening courses designed to support adults. However, inventive course design should also be a part of helping students achieve success. Careful thinking and planning should go into the curriculum design for the adult learner in the community college classroom to ease adults into a different way of thinking.

According to Merriam & Brockett (1997), the goal of transformational learning is independent thinking. Yet many adults do not operate at higher levels of cognitive functioning

and cannot take full advantage of classroom discussions or think abstractly. For example, a short story by an African or Chinese author may seem unapproachable to a student who has rarely ventured outside of his or her community. Here, the interaction between teacher and learner is important. The teacher must think carefully about the questions of how information is delivered and how questions can be framed. Looking to the ideas of transformational learning and to theories that that emphasize the importance of critical thinking provides a good foundation for the community college instructor aiming to be an effective facilitator of adult learning.

Houle (1996) proposed nine assumptions in a very clear and logical system of learning:

1) Any episode of learning occurs in a specific situation and is profoundly influenced by that fact.

2) The analysis or planning of educational activities must be based on the realities of human experience and upon their constant change.

3) Education is a practical art.

4) Education is a cooperative rather than an operative art.

5) The planning or analysis of an educational activity is usually undertaken in terms of some period that the mind abstracts for analytical purposes from complicated reality.

6) The planning or analysis of an educational activity may be undertaken by an educator, a learner, an independent analyst or some combination of all three.

7) Any design of education can best be understood as a complex of interacting elements, not as a sequence of events.

8) A generalized education should be used to strengthen (not replace) the values that arise from profound belief, dedication, or creativeness.

9)   A program design should be based on decision points, not prescriptions. (pp. 41-52)

As the second part of his two-part system, Houle created eleven categories of educational design situations, ranging from the individual engaged in independent learning to an individual group or institution creating an activity for a mass audience. Within category C-9, he offers guidance for developing new programs in established institutions, and here he advocates "a systematic effort be creative" (p. 160), as well as a consideration of the mission of the institution and the social and economic needs of the learners.

Houle's assumptions emphasize respect for the learner and his or her life experiences. They underscore the dynamic between the learner and educator. In terms of curriculum planning, these assumptions encourage the instructor or designer to think not in linear terms, but organically: how will all the elements of a course, online or face to face, work together? For the educator seeking to pursue a transformational approach, Houle reminds us that it is not the educator's role to replace their perspectives with their own; rather, it is guide them in a critical assessment of their own perspectives.

Like Houle, Mezirow warns the educator of adults against indoctrination. For Mezirow (1991) critical self-reflection is central to the role of the adult learner. An educator of adults can help adults achieve significant breakthroughs by shaping instruction so as to address distortions in meaning perspectives. Mezirow identifies three types of distortions in meaning perspectives: epistemic, which limits abstract thinking; sociocultural, which allows for repression based on misassumptions about power; and psychic, generally anxiety-based distortions which impedes full functioning as an adult. Transformational learning frees the individual from meaning perspectives that limit the way one sees world. "While not all adult education involves reflective

or transformative learning, reflective, and hence transformative learning sure should be

considered to be a cardinal objective of adult education" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 111).

 Building on Mezirow's foundation, Vella (2000) emphasizes the teacher's accountability

to the learner. For Vella, "all education is directed toward a transformation" (p. 9). The design of

a program or course is guided by respect for the learner, learning is a partnership between

educator and students, and dialogue should be the primary means of instruction. Fink (2003)

advocates a conscientious approach to developing significant learning experiences in course

design. He lists three values of such an experience: 1) enhancing the individual's life 2) enabling

the individual to participate in communities and 3) preparing individuals for the world of work.

Noting that many theorists stopped short of advising educators how to put these practices

into action, Cranton (1994) cites the work of Freire, Knowles, Brookfield, and others in

suggesting strategies. Exercises such as role-playing, games, writing life histories or biographies,

or writing in journals help stimulate critical thinking and self-awareness. Writes Cranton, "Most

learners are firmly entrenched in various roles—as professionals, as persons, and as learners.

Experiences that encourage learners to take on the roles and hence the perspectives of others can

lead to consciousness-raising" (p. 174). Cranton notes that considering the individual learning

styles of adults is critically important, as is fostering group interaction, encouraging learner

networks, and being genuine as an educator.

Adults have acquired a great deal of practical knowledge through informal learning, and

for the most part, they come to the classroom eager to learn. However, having one's weaknesses

exposed—an inability to write an effective paragraph or respond to an essay question, for

example—is a disorienting and anxiety-provoking situation Granott (1998), Brookfield (1987), and others emphasize the role of self-scaffolding: the ability for adults to build on prior knowledge to achieve greater heights. This happens best, says Granott t, when a learner's creativity and curiosity are aroused. Granott identifies three aspects of developing learning: 1) a growth trend 2) qualitative restructuring 3) self-scaffolding toward knowledge. Her observations of adults who were investigating the nature of Lego robots ("wuggles") demonstrated the collaborative nature of education, the power of setting an engaging task, and the abilities of adults to continue to build on existing knowledge when presented with a motivating situation.

Learning is spontaneous in real life; we learn through rich interactions with others in social settings. In contrast, the tightly controlled, teacher-centered classroom does not foster this type of learning, Granott observes. To allow for developmental learning, ingenuity and creativity are required. For education to "develop," Granott posits, educators should consider these aspects of the learning situation: 1) make sure the duration of the learning activity is designed to allow the learner to develop "an intuitive knowledge"; 2) structure an appealing situation to stimulate interest, involvement and motivation; 3) allow for learner autonomy; and 4) create a challenge for the learner, but provide support (p. 30). Educators should design classes that would be enjoyable for their students and that arouse curiosity.

Brookfield (1987a) discusses the importance of "esthetic triggers" in helping adults toward the discovery of alternate ways of thinking (p. 125). He advocates the use of creative arts: poetry, fantasy, drawing and photography, songwriting, and drama, to guide individuals from the linear thinking that has served them at work to think with their imaginations. "By becoming

involved in activities that we have traditionally avoided or never considered, we can have our powers of imagination released" (p. 131).

Finally, this discussion would seem incomplete without considering some of the many valuable ideas Malcolm Knowles (2005) offers the community college educator. Knowles emphasizes that the educator must prepare adults, who have been dependent on others to teach them, to become self-directed learners. One means of achieving this is through the use of the learning contract (2005, pp. 265-271, 1980). These contracts help learners diagnose their gaps in knowledge, set their objectives, identify the resources available to them, document their accomplishments, and evaluate their own learning. Knowles included an orientation process to help adults learn to become self-directed, noting that individuals who are used to having people lead them in formal education may encounter anxiety when asked to take control of their own learning (1980).

Designing for Success: A Bridge Class for Adult Learners

This proposed course was inspired in part by a widely quoted study on remediation education conducted by the Center for Community College Research (Baily, Jeong & Cho, 2009). Concluding that a high percentage of students either fail to show up for, fail, or drop out of remedial classes, the report closed with recommendation: "As it stands now, developmental education sequences must appear confusing, intimidating, and boring to many students entering community colleges" (p. 28). Remedial programs don't work; yet not all adults returning to college possess the skills to succeed in gateway courses such as English 111. An article in the *Washington Post*, noting that fewer than 25 percent of students who enter developmental education have

completed degrees eight years later, discussed ways in which college are abandoning traditional

remediation courses, providing as an example the Community College of Baltimore's practice of

mainstreaming adults in developmental courses (DeVise, 2011).

At my institution, the same basic course design is in place for ENG 002 that was used in

1996, when I first taught it. In a lecture format, the class covers the basic elements of written English

and the construction of a coherent paragraph. Why not offer beginning English classes that introduce

students to something to wrap their minds around while they adapt to college writing? Most good

colleges have abandoned Expository Writing 101 in favor of rich, content-based courses. Students

should have the option to write about something that interests them. For example, first-year students

at Cornell University take writing seminars rich with content: Among their spring 2011 offerings on

the college's website: "Hip-Hop Culture and Youth Identity", "The Huns", and "Literature and

Sport."

There are practical difficulties with the course. Community colleges in general do not

separate older adults from recent high school graduates for such courses; however, the course

could be offered through a thematic learning community, a practice gaining steam in community

colleges, which could be structured to appeal to adults. Simply offering the seminar on 9 on a

Saturday morning would generally assure a more mature enrollment. As a course developed

primarily for adults, this class would best support mature adults who have simply been out of

school for an extended period and lack the structures required for academic success. As Mezirow

(1991) writes, stretching beyond the boundaries of one's meaning perspectives involves some

discomfort. This course is designed to manage that discomfort while exposing students to

divergent ideas.

"English 002: Book Club" is designed as an alternative to the ordinary second-step remediation class, a bridge class to English 111. Students choose from a list of four books to read over the 15-week span of the class and meet for a 90-minute seminar on campus once a week. In the online portion of the class, they write a public response blog to the readings, making three posts a week. Students work through online grammar exercises in the online course module; additional help from the campus Writing Center is prescribed when needed. The instructor guides students in editing and shaping weekly blog posts so that they become unified, coherent, and well-developed paragraphs. By the end of the course, students choose which responses to present as a multi-media or standard writing portfolio. Groups come together in the final class period to present their ideas.

Dialogue is a powerful tool in transformational education. Using a learning contract advocated by Knowles (2005, 1980), the course requires students to adhere to a reading schedule so that they can contribute in discussions. Students choose from one of four books, for example: *Band of Brothers, In Defense of Food, The Best American Sportswriting 2010*, or *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Not all students get their first choice, as the goal is to structure four groups with five students each. Seminars on assigned portions of the reading are held in a large room where the instructor can visit groups and facilitate conversations if needed.

The following table illustrates how elements of the course reflect ideas of adult education, how learning activities are delivered, and how key course objectives are met.

Adult Learning Theory	Learning Activity and Delivery Method	Course Objectives

Learning needs assessment (Vella), Self-scaffolding (Brookfield) *Students assess their weaknesses and take steps to address them.*	Online: The student takes an online diagnostic test and completes modules to address weaknesses. The student continually assesses his or her own progress in consultation with the instructor. F2F: Students pursue additional one-on-one tutoring if necessary.	Students work to master fundamental grammar, learn to write in clear sentences, form paragraphs, revise.
Choice, autonomy, role in planning (Knowles, Vella, Granot) *Students begin a path to self-directed learning.*	F2F: Student chooses reading materials and develop their own questions on the readings. Online: Students choose form of writing portfolio.	Students read and respond critically to writing.
Students take responsibility for their own learning. (Lindeman, Knowles) *The classroom is learner-centered.*	F2F: Learning groups set the rules for their discussions and respond accordingly to members who do not do the reading or contribute. The instructor does not direct discussions or set expectations for the outcome. In seminar, students choose what to write about and raise their own questions about reading. Online: students diagnose their needs and work independently to acquire skills.	Students learn to work in groups; students take responsibility for their reading.
Discussion (Brookfield, Lindeman, Vella, Mezirow) *Students learn to critically reflect on their own assumptions.*	F2F: In-class discussions allow learners to feel comfortable with voicing their opinions. Synchronous discussion is important for give-and-take. Online portions of the class allow for reflective thinking independent of the group.	Students learn to respond to complex readings and form judgments about them.

Cooperative Learning (Houle) *Learning is an inherently social activity.*	Online. Students read and respond to each others' blog entries, posting comments. Instructor provides constructive feedback to the blogs at week's end.	Peer Review: students learn to critique their own work by responding to the work of others.
Expanding meaning perspectives (Mezirow) *Students test their viewpoints and examine how they acquire knowledge*	F2F: Students read material about unfamiliar worlds and test their assumptions in a group. Online: Throughout the semester, students revisit their responses, shape, and reassess them.	Students transfer careful critical reading to well-reasoned writing and learn documentation skills.

Conclusion

As acknowledged earlier in this discussion, the barriers to the successful implementation of a course such as this are many. Many instructors would be reluctant to give up the control of the classroom to allow students to structure their own conversations to arrive at deeper meanings of a text. The sheer volume of students requiring remediation is so overwhelming that standard lecture courses staffed by adjuncts will most likely continue to be the mode. But the uninspiring form and delivery of most developmental education courses must be especially demeaning to adults, some of whom may come to class with an already battered self-concept due to their life experiences.

In a recent commentary in *Inside Higher Education*, UCLA Professor Mike Rose called for more enlightened thinking about remedial courses. For Rose, the low retention rates were only part of the picture. Echoing Lindeman, he indicated that remedial courses do not nurture aspirations: "[P]eople also go to college to feel their minds working, to remedy a poor education, to redefine who they are. You won't hear any of this in the national talk about postsecondary access and success. For

all the hope and opportunity they represent, our initiatives lack the kind of creativity and heartbeat

that transform institutions and foster the unrealized ability of a full sweep of our citizenry (Rose,

2011, para. 15-16).

In 1944, as World War II was coming to a close, Lindeman (in Brookfield, 1987b) wrote in a

similarly urgent tone as he emphasized how important an educated populace is for maintaining a

robust democracy and fostering a good society:

> Either we possess the intelligence to deal with the problems we have created or we have not.
>
> If we have not, then all education is a kind of hoax. If on the other hand we can make our
>
> intelligence commensurate with our problems, then education becomes again the liveliest of
>
> human engagements (p. 103).

Building a 21st century workforce requires taking the best of adult learning theory and the

promise of new technology to guide adults to become self-directed learners capable of examining

their perspectives, being open to the ideas of others, and re-examining their own potential in society.

"Learn and earn" is an important objective, but it should not be the only one.

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