Forum / Tribune

An Identity for Canadian University Education

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Abstract

A distinct lack of clarity regarding the identity of university-based continuing education seems commonplace. Continuing educators have tended to focus on the institutional structure of continuing education, linking its identity to its degree of centralization, size of budget, and whether it houses its own faculty members. This paper suggests starting with the function of continuing education, regardless of how and by whom it is carried out. It then proceeds to identify some key values that might guide the practice of continuing education, arguing that in some cases, these values must be in tension with the impulses of the broader institution.

Universities today, by necessity, are large bureaucratic institutions with little flexibility. This situation

Résumé

De façon usuelle, il semble que l'identité de l'éducation permanente universitaire manque de clarté. Ses éducateurs ont tendance de cibler sa structure institutionnelle tout en liant son identité à son taux de centralisation, à l'étendue de son budget, et aux membres du corps professoral qu'elle reçoit ou non. Dans cet article, l'auteur suggère commencer avec la fonction de l'éducation permanente sans se soucier des gens et des façons par lesquels elle est exécutée. Ensuite, il identifie quelques valeurs-clés qui pourraient diriger la pratique de l'éducation permanente tout en soulignant, que dans quelques cas, ces valeurs sont en tension avec les impulsions de l'institution-mère.

Les universités d'aujourd'hui, par nécessité, sont de grandes institutions bureaucratiques

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provides continuing education with the opportunity to address the gaps or tensions in the system by offering programs that are more responsive to participants' needs and that allow for a deeper exploration of the values of specific interest groups. UCE programs can also provide alternative entry points to those who want to further their education but have little access to mainstream university programs. Finally, continuing educators can help communities of interest connect with relevant university departments and thereby contribute to the university's mission.

avec peu de flexibilité. Pour les individus en éducation permanente, une telle situation leur offre une occasion pour adresser les manques ou les tensions dans le système tout en offrant des programmes plus sensibles aux besoins des participants et qui permettent une exploration plus profonde des valeurs de groupes d'intérêts spécifiques. Les programmes ÉPU peuvent aussi offrir à toute personne voulant continuer son éducation mais ayant très peu d'accès aux programmes réguliers des universités, des points d'entrée alternatifs. Finalement, les éducateurs en éducation permanente peuvent aider à unir les communautés d'intérêt aux départements universitaires appropriés, et donc contribuer à la mission de l'université.

It must be obvious to the most casual observer of Canadian universities that continuing education units are not well understood. Whenever a new dean is to be sought or any other kind of issue prompts senior administrators to turn their attention to continuing education, there is a fluttering about and many expressions of the sentiment that, although continuing education and lifelong learning are clearly good, there must be a better way to organize it all. This seems to be true whether continuing education exists as a large and independent unit or whether it has been decentralized, with its functions spread across the institution.

For most people involved in the practice of continuing education, it seems to be an article of faith that continuing education is best managed through a centralized unit and that being a Faculty, having faculty members, and having specialized graduate programs are signs of recognition of the value of this university function. These institutional structures seem to provide a sense of identity, a relatively secure home within an institution that only

partly understands what it wants from continuing education and so is not likely to assign it a high priority among its various functions. In an important sense, this allows the standards and values of the larger institution to define success in continuing education. In this article, I argue that there are other, more distinctive values that should guide our practice as continuing educators, values that will necessarily place us in tension with some of the natural impulses of large bureaucratic institutions. Further, I argue that cultivating these distinctive values provides continuing education with a clearer identity and, in the long run, is more likely to serve the interests of both universities and the public that they are intended to serve.[1]

Identity

The notion of identity is often raised in the form of a question, such as: What is university continuing education, anyway? This makes it sound like an inquiry, a call for facts on the size, shape, constitutive parts, and role of the entity. In this particular case, we tend to try to describe what the office or faculty or department of Continuing Studies looks like, consists of, or does. But that is not my primary focus in this paper. My concern is directed more at the function of continuing education as carried out by universities. Rather than trying to make sense of the hodgepodge of different configurations of units charged with carrying out continuing education, I focus on other ways of addressing the question of identity. In particular, I focus on where we, as continuing educators, came from, that is, the historical development of university continuing education, and what we are striving for, that is, what we are trying to accomplish through the function of continuing education. In this latter task, I am guided by the remarks of Charles Taylor, who, in his book *Sources of the Self*, said that to have an identity is to have "a particular orientation to the good" (p. 34). The link to values is clear. But having an orientation to the good also means knowing something about what you should aim at, or strive for, and how you should be approaching your future.

So, in order to develop a clearer sense of identity for the field of university continuing education, I reflect on our past and on those values that might orient us as we seek out a better-defined path to the future. I begin with a rather tight focus on the history of Canadian university continuing education (UCE), before looking at changes in the broader context that affect its role.

Roots of Continuing Education Practice

Looking back over the time during which Canadians have had universities and have carried out what would now be called continuing education activities, there are three discernible periods, or movements, of some significance.

Elements of all three are present, I believe, in our current notions of what continuing education is all about.

The first is the social movement of continuing education, a period characterized by:

- a sense of social purpose;
- a distinctly modernist sense of progress;
- an equality-seeking form of liberalism; and
- a lingering sense of missionary zeal.

One thinks of John Dewey and his optimistic and pragmatic confidence in progress through improved science and democracy, as well as the evangelistic tendencies that sought to banish ignorance and replace it with knowledge and freedom, although often with more specific content related to political, social, or religious beliefs.

In Canada, this approach was exemplified in two main movements: the Antigonish Movement with Atlantic fishermen, where Father Moses Coady sought to win people's souls by starting with their economic circumstances and problems, and the Extension Movement on the prairies, which aimed primarily at providing farmers with access to knowledge of agricultural techniques.

The social movement is associated with the period between the 1920s and the beginning of the 1960s.

The second phase of UCE historical development in Canada is characterized by professionalization and institutionalization. This phase is associated with the development of:

- professional organizations;
- specialized degrees;
- growth in institutional budgets; and
- a distinctive institutional mandate.

Temporally, this phase is most associated with the 1960s and 1970s. During these years, Canadian universities began to offer graduate degrees in adult education and university-based continuing education units experienced rapid growth. At the same time, a second wave of universities developed, often with continuing education as an institutionalized part of their thinking and planning.

The third and most recent phase of UCE is one of commercialization and competition. This phase is associated with:

- cost-recovery programs;
- elimination of "subsidized" programs;

- a renewed focus on vocationally oriented programs; and
- an increased focus on credentialism, partnerships, and other means to enhance value or capture markets.

This phase encompasses the period from the 1980s to the present, although in my view there are signs that demands for corporate social responsibility, which have become commonplace in relation to business, are beginning to have an impact on other institutions, including universities.[2] This renewed focus on the social responsibilities of universities may lead to a revitalization of continuing education activity that is aimed at those who are not part of attractive "market segments."

Certainly, anyone familiar with UCE culture will recognize these phases as also representing different "philosophies" of continuing education. Some might put it more strongly, suggesting that they are competing ideologies. However, I suggest that we are not well served by thinking of them as competing alternatives for continuing education. Instead, we should regard them as three elements to be combined in our vision of what UCE should be—three elements that we would expect to see in play throughout our practice. In this view, university continuing education would combine a sense of social purpose with distinctive areas of professional competence and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Changes Affecting the Role of Universities

Space precludes any in-depth analysis of the changes in society that shape the role of the university and that are central to any serious understanding of the role of continuing education. Fortunately, a fairly comprehensive analysis is provided by George Fallis in his 2004 essay "The Mission of the University." A few key trends, however, are worthy of mention here.

As Fallis has documented, universities have become institutions of mass education, which has made them necessarily bureaucratic. A bureaucracy is needed to process the numbers of students, to operate processes of selection, and the like. At the same time, society has become increasingly pluralist, operating without a master narrative or any particular set of cultural values that hold sway across the entire society. Charles Taylor (1989, 1991) traced how this kind of pluralism has brought about a demand for recognition,[3] that is, a demand by individuals to be treated not only as holders of universal rights, but also as members of communities with particular cultures, languages, and sets of values. Nonetheless, functions such as university admission processes must necessarily ignore such differences on the basis of efficiency and the need to treat everyone the same. In contrast, continuing education programs are often intended for particular audiences, audiences

that share a specific interest or even a cultural background, especially in the case of what might be termed community programs or community outreach.

This tension between the mass audience of the university and the more particular audiences of many continuing education programs seems to point to two distinct values that can be exemplified by university-based continuing educators. One is the opportunity to operate with what might be called "a light touch." By light touch, I mean the opposite of the heavy hand of bureaucracy; more positively, I mean meeting people halfway, working with them to shape curriculum and schedules, being prepared to adjust arrangements to suit the needs of program participants, and a host of other ways of doing things that are familiar to adult and continuing educators.

This "light touch" is a value related to process, to how people are treated. A consequence, however, of maintaining a light touch in conducting programs with participants who share particular preoccupations and values is more substantive. It allows a deeper exploration of the values that guide decisions and actions in specific kinds of situations than is possible in classes intended for "everyone." A few examples of this second, distinct value drawn from personal experience are First Nations leaders studying decisions regarding land use and real estate development in light of their history of relations with banks and the Crown; a group of Salvation Army officers exploring the connections between their faith and principles of good decision-making in a leadership program; and managers in an industrial plant exploring whether their company's commitment to safety really does put safety ahead of profit and, if so, what that means. I believe that discussions like these create a kind of learning opportunity that is difficult if not impossible to achieve in programs intended for a more general audience. Although many university people think that programs with a restricted audience will be educationally impoverished because they lack the range of points of view found in more open programs, giving people the opportunity to explore issues that consider their particular context, history, culture, and values can be as valuable in its own way.

A related role for continuing education is strongly connected to the university's role as gatekeeper. Although the university is not always willing to admit the significance of this particular role, the institution is deeply implicated in creating and denying career opportunities for individuals. It is a primary reason why universities have so many people on their doorstep. But the means for determining who gets educational opportunities, and therefore who gets subsequent career opportunities, is far from perfect. Cumulative grade-point averages, standardized tests, and all the other methods intended to gauge objectively people's capacity and potential to succeed are part of a system that works in favour of some people and against others. In addition, the culture of the university is comfortable for some and difficult

for others. The net result is that people from some communities get little access to university resources, whereas people from others are overrepresented. Even if admitted to university, people from some communities find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunity. This is perhaps most obvious in Canada in the case of Aboriginal students, especially those from more remote communities.

Naturally, universities try to mitigate this inequity by putting in place support programs for members of communities who are disadvantaged by these systems. One of the roles that continuing education can play is to develop programs that provide an alternative entry point for those who did not enter university programs through the main door, as it were, but still want access to further education. The "light touch," mentioned above, and the disposition to respond to the differences required by the demand for recognition are strengths that continuing educators can incorporate into transitional programs intended to help people who do not feel part of the mainstream.

Finally, I note that universities are places where excellence has been strongly connected to specialization. For the most part, research and graduate programs flourish by focusing on very specialized issues, and rewards within the institution reinforce these tendencies. But some societal issues, including those on which society looks to universities for direction, demand a more synthetic approach. To mention but one example, concerns about more sustainable businesses, communities, and ways of life are current. The university has much to offer in this regard, yet it is poorly equipped to respond in a variety of ways. Some are practical, such as the fact that, in most universities, no single point of contact could produce a comprehensive list of those people and/or units that could address such a question; others are deeper, in that the variety of ways in which different disciplines approach such an issue may or may not be easily integrated. Continuing educators, however, are well positioned to mitigate these challenges and to help both the disparate parts of the university and the communities of interest that evolve around a particular issue to connect in useful ways. Once again, this suggests that continuing education can fulfill a possible part of its mandate by operating in a way that places it in tension with key impulses of the institution. By doing so, it can contribute to the university's mission.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to draw on the historical antecedents of continuing education in Canada to develop an identity that does justice to each of its major periods, that is, its social purpose, its aspirations as a field of professional practice, and its capacity for entrepreneurship and innovation. In addition, I have argued that certain attributes of universities create gaps or tensions that continuing education may be well equipped to address, espe-

cially if it could define more clearly how its capacities might serve that role. More specifically, I have argued that continuing education can mitigate the bureaucratic impulses of institutions, especially in areas where bureaucracy and the universalizing tendencies of large institutions undermine their responsibility to distribute resources fairly. However, my task is far from finished. The real intention of this paper was simply to stimulate discussion to clarify the identity of continuing education and to frame the issues in ways that might provoke further contributions to this task. If a clearer sense of identity could be articulated, continuing educators would be far better equipped to make arguments about the kinds of structure that would serve those purposes and would be better able to assert how distinctive values should be used in evaluating their performance.

End Notes

1. A version of the following paper was presented as a speech to the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its founding. The author would like to thank the conference organizers for inviting him to reflect on the practice of continuing education, where it came from, and where it might usefully be going.
2. The relatively strong interest I have witnessed toward David Maurasse's *Beyond the Campus* is one piece of evidence. Elements of this theme are also found in Bob Rae's review of post-secondary education in Ontario. (http://www.raereview.on.ca/en/report/letter.asp?loc1=report&loc2=letter)
3. Both in *Sources of the Self* and in his Massey lectures, *The Malaise of Modernity*.

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Biography

Mark Selman is the executive director of the Learning Strategies Group in the Faculty of Business at Simon Fraser University. Before that, he held several senior positions in Continuing Studies at the same university. In both settings, Selman has been involved in developing innovative educational programs with many different organizations, from multinational corporations to grassroots community projects, and from small high-tech firms to national voluntary organizations. He is co-author of *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada* and has published a number of articles about philosophical and social issues in adult and continuing education.

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