

WHAT'S NEW IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

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The quickest answer to the question, What's new in higher education today? is "non-traditional education." But that quick response is deceptive because it only gives rise to the next question which is, What is non-traditional education? The answer to that question is long and complicated and growing more so. A recent report listed 44 synonyms that had been used in writing or speaking about non-traditional education (Cowlan, 1975). Even the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (1973, p. xv), after groping for a succinct definition, finally concluded that non-traditional study is "more an attitude than a system and thus can never be defined except tangentially" -- which they proceeded to do quite capably for the next 200 pages. Since I want to get beyond the definition and into a discussion of the issues in non-traditional education, perhaps I can attempt a reasonable compromise between a hyphenated word and 200 pages to describe the potentially powerful educational concept that has a good chance of influencing the course of education for the remainder of this century. What started out to be simply the next logical step in the egalitarian thrust to increase the access to college has turned into a movement with considerable philosophical depth and challenge.

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In the beginning, non-traditional education was oriented toward increasing the access to college for adult part-time students by providing educational programs free of the time and place requirements of traditional education. Indeed, one synonym for non-traditional education is time-free, space-free learning. The contention is that what can be learned at 10:00 in the morning in a campus classroom can probably be learned equally well in the evening in the church basement, or at dawn on the commuter train, or at night in one's living room via a newspaper or televised course.

At the surface of the non-traditional movement, educators are accepting that premise and offering an unprecedented variety and number of off-campus courses scheduled at times when working people can participate. A national survey of colleges and universities conducted in 1972 showed that between one-third and one-half of the institutions in the country offered non-traditional programs, most of them designed for adult part-time learners in off-campus locations (Ruyle and Geiselman, 1974). Since the majority of these programs were less than two years old in 1972, which was just the start of the non-traditional movement, it is a safe guess that today most colleges -- perhaps up to 75 percent -- are making some sort of pitch for the adult part-time learner.

There are, of course, many reasons for the explosive growth of non-traditional programs in the education industry, which is supposed to be notoriously slow to change. But two motivations stand out. One is idealistic, the other materialistic. Every self-respecting college these days endorses the ideal of equal opportunity. And among all of the groups previously excluded from higher education, the most academically respectable are bright, highly-motivated adults. Thus, with very little risk, colleges can

serve the social good by opening their doors to a numerically significant number of people previously excluded on grounds of age. The materialistic motive which causes colleges to seek adult learners probably doesn't need much explanation. Colleges, like people, have an instinct for self-survival. It is now quite clear that the potential college students of the 1980s and early 1990s have already been born -- or more to the point, not born. The decline in the national birth rate is expected to have its most depressing impact on enrollments in higher education starting in the mid-1980s, but most colleges are already anticipating or experiencing the retrenchment and budgetary problems associated with limited growth. The potentially unlimited adult learning market looks very attractive to struggling colleges -- and to perfectly healthy colleges with an eye to the future. Whereas the traditional youth market for higher education has a ceiling consisting of the number of 18- to 23-year-olds in the population, the adult market can climb to the number of persons over 18 in the population, and that is steadily rising. In 1970 the number of people between the ages of 18 and 24 was approximately equal to the number between the ages of 25 and 34. By 1980, the number of 24-34 year-olds in the population will increase by 44 percent, whereas 18-23 year-olds will increase by only 8 percent. By 1990, the number of 25-34 year-olds will be more than one and a half times the size of the traditional college age group. By the turn of the century, says the National Center for Educational Statistics, the population of the United States will be "dominated by persons in their middle years (Golladay, 1976, p. 12)."

There was a time when an aging nation would have meant bad news for colleges, but today college students are growing older too. The

State University of New York recently discovered that almost one-half of their students were older than the assumed 23 for four-year institutions or 20 for two-year colleges (ACE, 1976), and the Bureau of the Census (1974) reported that in 1974, one-third of all degree-credit college students were 25 years old or older. The fact that the proportion of adults in college is increasing even faster than the percentage of adults in the population indicates that colleges are successfully attracting older students, largely through providing the new flexibilities and programs that will appeal to these non-traditional learners.

Paralleling the interest of colleges in older students is the interest of older students in colleges. The motivations of adult students for continuing their educations seem as numerous as those of the colleges for wanting them. In the first place, there is the repeated research finding that the more education people have, the more they want. In fact, one of the problems to people who wish to use education to close the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" is how to keep those with the best educations from usurping the available opportunities for further education. After England's great political pitch for a "second chance" for adults who had failed to get their first chance at a college education, the founders of England's now famous Open University were considerably embarrassed to find that they were swamped with applications from teachers, who could hardly be considered sufficiently educationally disadvantaged to substantiate the political promises to serve the poorly educated masses. The experience has been the same in our own country. The rate of participation in all sorts of educational activities rises with the level of educational attainment. Since the median educational attainment of our population

now exceeds 12 years, there are plenty of high school graduates and people who started but failed to complete college who are ready and eager to pursue higher learning.

Aside from the flattering notion that we as educators have whetted an appetite and developed gourmet tastes for culture and learning, why are people so eager to pursue the hard road to further education? I suspect there are two basic reasons. One is that people want the credential; the other is that they need the new and continually changing knowledge that is affecting every worker and every citizen. The reason given by most adults for wanting to continue their education is vocational. They want the credentials that will lead to better jobs and more pay. In a national survey of the learning interests of adults between the ages of 18 and 60, the researchers found that for 43 percent of those interested in further learning, vocational subjects were the first choice. The more academic subjects that make up the bulk of traditional college curricula attracted only 13 percent. At the level of specific courses, for example, approximately nine times as many people were interested in courses in business as were interested in courses in English or the social sciences (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974). Thus, despite the talk among young people about the declining monetary value of college degrees, adults seem to be interested in education for upward job mobility.

It should be said, however, that continued learning for vocational and career purposes is no longer an altogether voluntary choice. The term "compulsory adult education" (Stern, 1972) has been used to reflect the growing tendency of states to legislate continuing education for relicensure. The Minnesota Supreme Court, for example, has ordered lawyers

in the state to return periodically to formal studies or to cease practicing law. In California, public accountants must complete 80 hours of study every two years in order to retain their licenses. Knowledge in almost any field changes so rapidly now that lifelong education has become a necessity in almost all of the professions and in many technical areas as well.

There is not much place in the emerging learning society for a philosophy that perceives education as a static body of knowledge that can be passed on to the youth of the society as preparation for adult responsibilities. That philosophy makes some assumptions that we know now are false. (1) It assumes that there is a body of knowledge that forms the common core of education. (2) It assumes that we in the 1970s know what the citizens of the year 2000 will need to know. (3) It assumes that the human mind is capable of storing and retrieving information efficiently and effectively. Let us look at those assumptions more carefully.

The year 2000 is less than 25 years away, but with the exponential rate of change in human society, it is safe to state flatly that much of what we think we "know" to be true today will be proved false by the end of this century. A famous architect wrote recently, "Almost nothing that we were taught by our betters in or out of the architecture schools of the mid-century has stood the test of time. Nothing--or almost nothing--turns out to have been entirely true (Blake, 1974)." If a pragmatic discipline such as architecture (where one assumes the validity of knowledge by whether structures stand or fall) has no edge on truth, ponder the permanence of knowledge in a field such as psychology. I thank my poor memory that I have forgotten so much of what I was taught about psychology

in graduate school in the 1950s. I would surely be in trouble today if I remembered it as the truth that I thought it was at the time. Indeed, the president of the American Psychological Association recognized the temporary state of knowledge when, during last fall's meeting of the Association, he urged his colleagues to teach so as to remove "any arrogant scientific certainty that psychology's current beliefs are the final truths in these matters (TIME, September 15, 1975, p. 94)."

The human mind is a marvelous thing, but we abuse it when we assume that storage and retrieval of information is its greatest asset. The forgetting curve starts with about 60 percent retention immediately following a lecture, dropping to about 20 percent after eight weeks (McLeish, 1968). In our rapidly changing world, there is no permanent body of knowledge that can be passed along to youth in the hopes that it will last a lifetime. There are only intellectual skills and attitudes and appreciations about learning that will help people use their minds throughout their lifetimes. And active, inquiring minds are as likely to be found among 50-year-olds as among 10-year-olds.

So far I have talked mostly about the growth of non-traditional education and about the motivations on the part of both learners and institutions to expand the opportunities for adult learning. That's the good news for non-traditional education. Now for the bad news.

It looks as though education for adults is going to cost money. Historically, and up to the present time, adults have been assumed to be self-supporting and able to pay for their education. Indeed, their presumed financial independence is one of their attractions in this era of educational austerity. But surveys of adult needs are consistently showing

that the greatest barrier to continuing education for adults is expense. In the past, we didn't worry much about this; whereas education for young people was considered a necessity and a legitimate public expense, education for adults has been considered a luxury to be paid for by those who could afford it. But that policy now flies in the face of our concern for equal opportunity. Education geared to the ability to pay permits the best educated and most fortunate citizens to enhance their personal and job satisfactions through education, while penalizing those whose need for the advantages of education is greatest. Self-supporting adult education is not totally acceptable public policy anymore, and some states are struggling with the question of how far to open the door to those millions of adults between the ages of 18-80 who say they would like to continue their educations if it weren't for the expense.

The governor of California is inclined to close the door -- at least on programs that he defines as non-essential education. He was quoted in the Los Angeles Times (July 20, 1975) complaining about the expense of programs that he feels are outside the educational mainstream. "What is important," Governor Brown said, "are the grammar schools and high schools. What they are teaching there, you can't get along without. When we get to adult education and the extended university and the external degree programs and some of these other activities, we may be offering a service that is interesting, but it is not what I would call a survival service." And so saying, the Governor put a heavy pencil to the budgets of some new degree programs for part-time adult students. Florida recently took a similar stance as they axed state support for non-degree "self-improvement" courses for adults. Increasingly, I suppose, funding

agents will be trying to draw distinctions between essential and non-essential education. But the distinctions are subtle and difficult. California, for example, does support degree programs for adults who can get to the campus. Are those who can't less deserving?

The questions about access and support are important, even crucial, questions for the future of adult education, but they are questions that lie at the surface of the non-traditional movement and knotty as they are, they will be dealt with in the political arena. At the depth of its philosophy, non-traditional education raises some profound questions for educators.

As almost any adult will testify, some of their richest learning experiences occurred after they left school. The advice that we should not let schooling interfere with our learning is the light-hearted side of Ivan Illich's earnest suggestion that the de-schooling of society would do a great deal to improve learning. And there is a lot of sympathy right now in according more recognition to non-school learning. James Coleman has observed that before the schools dominated the lives of young people, our society was rich in experience but poor in information or knowledge. Today, with the knowledge explosion and the enormous growth of the education industry, young people are information rich and experience poor. They know all about space travel, but they have little experience with the practical realities of life and little understanding of how their mothers and fathers spend their working days. Adults, however, come to college experience rich, and frequently information rich as well. There is justifiable irritation when a well-read re-entry woman is assigned to English 101 or when the 10-year veteran of volunteer community activities

is faced with the prospect of starting her major in social work with the introductory course in community problems. John Dewey rides again as "learning-by-doing" is rechristened "experiential learning" and educators struggle with the questions of defining and crediting learning.

The issue of recognizing the prior learning of college students began years ago when colleges started granting credit for advanced work taken in high school and documented through the Advanced Placement Exams. But with the extensive non-institutionalized learning experiences that adults bring to college, Pandora's Box has been opened and the credentialed society faces a crisis. Does the credential represent certification of time served in the formal school system, or does it represent knowledge attained? Unfortunately, the discrepancy between the two measures can be substantial. Since the formal school system has a virtual monopoly on credentialing, the question of what to certify is really quite difficult. The conviction of the non-traditional movement that credentials should be based on learning rather than on schooling highlights the issue. To many traditionalists the willingness of the non-traditionalists to certify education over which they have no control smacks of a lowering of standards. Indeed, some of the major controversies in the non-traditional movement have to do with the certification of the quality of education. A recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education (November 1, 1976) carried a front page article expressing the grave concern of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) over the lack of standards of some of the non-traditional programs.

It is to be expected, I suppose, that anything new is suspect, but the question of academic standards raises its head anew as non-traditionalists

depart from the familiar reference points such as faculty PhD's and publications, committee-certified curricula, and credit-hour measures of learning. As almost any innovator knows, the credibility of a program suffers in direct relationship to the number of familiar reference points tinkered with, and the non-traditionalists are tinkering with everything it seems. Moving the standard course and its professor off campus to accommodate the needs of adult learners will raise few eyebrows these days. In most colleges and universities it will receive the imprimatur of credit without offering any proof of its effectiveness. But introduce a non-familiar course with a teacher lacking standard academic credentials, and eyebrows will go up as fast as the potential for academic credit goes down. How does one determine the quality of an educational experience? This question is as profound for traditional education as it is for non-traditional.

At present, there are three basic models for judging the quality or value of educational programs. Model A, the traditional model, looks at institutional characteristics and environments to determine quality -- the qualifications and recognized productivity of faculty, library holdings, faculty-student ratios, physical facilities, and so forth. The implicit assumption of the traditional model is that student learning is a direct function of institutional characteristics. We know that Harvard students receive a quality education because Harvard is a fine institution.

Non-traditional degree programs have challenged that assumption. They say quite explicitly that they do not care where or when or from whom the student learned. Model B, represented by the non-traditional degree programs, uses student outcomes rather than institutional

characteristics as the measure of learning. Non-traditionalists are likely to speak of the assessment of student learning, of credit for experiential learning, and of competency-based degrees. They literally don't care about the distinction of the faculty or the prestige of the institution. They argue that if those factors contribute significantly to education, they will show up in the students' learning, and if they cannot be seen in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students, then they are not significant educational variables.

The third model, Model C, is best represented by non-credit programs for adults. In crass terms, Model C is a marketing model. In this model it is the student who decides the worth of the program. If the student gives his time and money to participate in the educational offerings, then the education is valued to the extent that it serves the needs of the learner. Model C advocates are inclined to speak of self-determined education and, explicitly or implicitly, they have faith in the student to judge the quality or value of his education.

I have painted Models A, B, and C in stark outline without filling in the complexities of each because I want now to look at the questions that these models raise.

Model A, the traditional model, has remained unquestioned for hundreds of years. But it is charged now that the educational establishment enjoys an unchallenged monopoly on the degree business -- which is, after all, the currency of traditional education. The definition of degrees, who may issue them, and who may receive them, is under the control of the existing academic community, and there are some questions about the incestuous relationships of academe. Higher education trains

the professors who define the institutional programs in their own image and then turn around and reassure the public that all is well since they have accredited the type of institutions which they run. The increasingly strident demands for accountability to the public are part of a broader social picture in which people no longer readily accept the judgments of the so-called "experts" on social issues. The current demands for external watchdogs such as police review boards and consumer protection agencies illustrate the trend. Business, government, and education are all being subjected to external judgments about their activities by a public that seems less in awe of specialists and less trusting of big business, big government, and big education than previous generations.

But Model A has pedagogical, as well as political, problems. Researchers have found it very difficult, and maybe impossible, to demonstrate that institutional characteristics are highly related to student learning. Harvard may have well-educated graduates because they have good selective procedures rather than good educational programs--or, perish the thought, Harvard graduates may not be well educated at all.

Logically, it is hard to refute the position of those who argue for Model B, maintaining that we should look at student learning rather than at institutional offerings if we want to judge the quality of the education. Fair enough. The problem is that we don't know how to measure student learning very well. But the non-traditionalists have taken their challenge to traditional education seriously, and there is an impressive amount of research and thinking going into new measures of learning.

Some of the new measures serve primarily as bridging mechanisms between the unfamiliar and familiar. Credit-by-examination, illustrated

most spectacularly by the CLEP program of the College Board, assumes that if non-classroom learners can score as well as (or usually better than) students who took the course, then they should receive credit for their learning. In 1975, almost 100,000 people showed up at some 900 test centers across the country to take the examinations in the hope of receiving college credit from one of the 1800 American colleges and universities that grant academic credit for satisfactory performance on CLEP examinations. While most people earn rather small amounts of credit by examination, it is now possible to earn a four-year college degree on the basis of examinations alone.

A slightly different approach to the conversion of non-traditional learning to traditional credit is taken by the Office on Educational Credit of the American Council on Education. This office was established to make recommendations to colleges regarding credit for non-college sponsored instruction. The office sends a team of subject matter specialists to visit the site of courses offered by government agencies, industry, unions, voluntary organizations, and the like. The team examines the courses, and the Office of Educational Credit publishes a guide of recommendations regarding the amount and category of credit to be awarded. In its first two years of operation, the ACE project evaluated over 800 courses offered by more than 50 organizations involving some 180,000 students. Notice that the approach of this program is a Model A certification of quality. They look at the quality of the course -- not directly at the learning of the student.

A third, and somewhat different national approach to the measurement and crediting of non-traditional learning, is illustrated by the

CAEL project (Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning) which is a consortium of approximately 250 colleges working with Educational Testing Service to develop and test new measures of non-classroom learning. The goal of CAEL is not so much to convert non-traditional learning to traditional measures as to make more useful assessments of the skills and competencies of non-traditional learners. CAEL is studying the usefulness of measures such as portfolios (student assembled dossiers of evidence of learning), product evaluation (essays, paintings, etc.), and the assessment of occupational and interpersonal competencies via performance tasks. Such measures are of considerable importance to the entire concept of credit for experiential learning, and indeed, to the future of all non-traditional degree programs that maintain that they don't care how or where students do their learning. If their non-traditional degrees are to be credible, then their measures of student learning must be convincing.

Now let us look at Model C, non-credit education, which many adult educators claim is the quietly rising star of the future. Model C is really a radical departure and conceivably a considerable threat to traditional education, but people don't get very excited about it because it carries no academic imprimatur. While there are plenty of people who don't care about degrees or credit, it is also true that a college degree is a valuable piece of paper, exchangeable for higher salaries and better jobs. At present it is sufficiently valuable that people will sit through a boring course that seems completely irrelevant to their needs. While I certainly do not wish to imply that traditional courses are necessarily either boring or irrelevant, there are some that are both, and clearly they would not survive without degree credit.

Non-credit education, on the other hand, must make its own way; it must be inherently useful to the learner. Today's non-credit education has great range and variety. On the one hand, there are the so-called general culture or popularized courses where credit is simply irrelevant. It is hard to visualize credit for the kind of course that Woody Allen satirized a few years ago under the title: "Philosophy 29-B, Introduction to God: Confrontation with the creator of the universe through informal lectures and field trips." On the other hand, some of the most advanced and erudite education offered by highly prestigious universities are also non-credit. These are the institutes and continuing education opportunities in the professions. In these cases, the worth of the experience is so obvious that credit is unnecessary. A lawyer who attends a two-week institute on new tax laws, for example, is not likely to be very concerned about academic credit, or even about a certificate attesting to her attendance at the institute.

In between the courses where credit is irrelevant and those where it is unnecessary lies a host of learning experiences that could be connected to credit either through the traditional pathways of examining the course, or the non-traditional pathways of examining the learner. The further we move in the direction of measuring education as a quality of the learner rather than the institution, the more learners will be free to pursue education wherever they find it. That prospect is scary in its ramifications for institutionalized education. If student outcome measures become available and credible, learning can be converted at any time to useful currency in the form of degrees or the enhancement of employability. Employers could well find it more useful to test for job-relevant knowledge

than to require the time and place credentials of traditional education. And students might find a neighbor, a televised course, or a course offered by an employer more helpful than their friendly local professor.

Human nature being what it is, and human learning being as complex as it is, I don't think the de-credentialed society will arrive soon enough to put any of us out of a job. But the point is that non-traditional education is not just another word for innovation or for off-campus education. It is a concept that is raising some profound educational issues that will affect education and the society in which we live. The non-traditional movement at its surface is an interesting social and political phenomenon, but at its core it is a fascinating and complex challenge that cannot be quieted by tightening traditional academic standards or by withholding funding from adult education. Lifelong education is a new ball game for all of us, and I believe that the non-traditional movement has the potential for changing the course of education by the turn of the century.

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