



The Distinguishing Features of Adult Education: Why Positioning Matters

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“Adult Education is a critical piece of a strong public education system”
(Wynne, 2005, p. 2)

How is effective Adult Education (AE) positioned to respond to the diversity of prior life and academic experiences of students through personalized counseling, differentiated programming, and connections with community supports?

Displaced workers, adults seeking new jobs or career paths, newcomers in Canada trying to navigate new school systems, youths seeking to complete high school credentialing, and young people attending alternative education, represent the diversity of learners participating in AE programs. AE is typically thought of as providing a second chance for individuals to complete high school, develop new or existing skills, and pursue different post-secondary destinations or career pathways. Undeniably, these are worthy goals for any educational system, but effective AE differs from mainstream public education in how it meets the diverse needs of all adult learners. In fact, the second chance perspective of AE is a narrow perspective, as AE transforms the lives of many adults. Indeed, an environmental scan of Adult Education in the eastern Ontario region highlighted that AE is transformational in two complementary ways, (a) through programming, and (b) through support (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017).



Why Positioning Matters

What is Adult Education?

The Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators (CESBA) defines AE as, “flexible” programs that “include different support for adult learners.” CESBA emphasises that “the supports enable adult learners to achieve their learning and or employment goals” (“FAQ,” 2016). AE typically serves adult learners in credit and non-credit programs, and adolescents in alternative programs. An environmental scan undertaken in Eastern Ontario (across eight school boards) found that learners in adult programs were; displaced workers, seekers of career advancement or change, newcomers, early school leavers, and those in alternative education programs (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017).

The environmental scan confirmed that AE delivered through Eastern Ontario school boards includes all or some of the following;

- credit courses leading to a high school diploma,
- academic upgrading to transition to post-secondary institutions,
- language support programs such as ESL/FSL (English as Second Language/French as a Second Language), LINC/CLIC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada/Cours de Langue pour les Immigrants au Canada),
- literacy classes to help people transition to credit programs, employment, and or independence, and
- vocational training, for example Personal Support Worker (PSW) programs.

These examples highlight the differentiated range of programs available in AE, which are vital if AE is to meet the diverse range of individual learner needs.

Why Does Adult Education Matter?

AE is often referred to as a “second chance,” and conveys an assumption that students have wasted their first opportunity to gain a high school credential (Deloitte, 2010). However, as research has shown, students have a number of reasons to participate in AE, and often as they make significant sacrifices to continue their education, they become the most motivated learners (Ansief, Brown, Robson, & Newton, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Pinsent-Johnson, Howell, & King, 2013; Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017). Lives are transformed through the differentiated support AE provides. For example, in the environmental scan previously mentioned (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017), one student shared “I always felt like I was kind of useless, like I was never really valued...[with PSW work] people are thankful, they’re happy. I feel like I make a difference that way. I guess that is what I was looking for.”

What are the Distinguishing Features of Transformational Adult Education Programs?

Distinguishing what AE is and does in comparison to mainstream educational programming is important if we are to understand the nuances of how AE can offer learners more than just a “*second chance*.” In terms of the unique features and positioning of AE in Eastern Ontario, research has identified three overarching themes (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017):

- (1) **how it is delivered**
- (2) **what it does, and**
- (3) **how it works and could optimally work.**

These three areas are all crucial, and should be amplified to provide a safe and inspiring environment for adult learners to experience optimal personal growth and academic success. Within the theme of how AE is delivered, provision of programming (e.g., whether a program is available face-to-face, online, or blended learning formats), and funding (e.g., securing and managing funding to support quality AE provision) is important. In spite of some of the challenges in delivering AE that were identified by Youmans et al (2017), AE programs and experiences do have the potential to transform adult learners lives through providing both programs for credentialing and supports to improve lives. In the report by Youmans, Godden, and Hummell, one AE reported “*it’s opened up doors now that I’ve graduated because now there’s jobs I can apply for that I actually qualify for.*” In terms of how AE works, the practices employed for improvement (e.g., adult-centered curriculum, authentic experiences) are most effective when rooted in providing programming that serves the diverse needs of adult learners. As an AE learner highlighted “*without AE, I wouldn’t be where I am today, and for that I am pretty grateful.*”

Recommendations for Optimizing the Transformational Features of AE

The following observations and recommendations from the environmental scan of AE in the Eastern Ontario region (Youmans, Godden, & Hummell, 2017) demonstrate how the distinguishing features of AE can be elevated.

- In AE, strong relationships with external stakeholders benefit adult learners (e.g., Ontario Works, Community Colleges, Addiction Services). In the study undertaken by Youmans et al., (2017), one member of staff asserted, “*success in the program may not necessarily mean a diploma, sometimes it’s a referral,*”
- Adult learners require flexibility of AE program delivery, but if there is too much flexibility with little accountability it is unlikely that they will be successful,
- Offering programs online provides flexibility, however structured support (e.g., a combination of online provision and face-to-face tutoring), results in greater success,
- To meet diverse life circumstances, AE programs should include flexibility in:
 - the method of delivery (e.g., in-class, eLearning, correspondence),
 - the duration of the course (e.g., 6-week, 9-week, 12-week), and
 - the structure of the course (e.g., fast-track programs where students can earn certification and a high school diploma simultaneously, and dual-credit programs that earn secondary and post-secondary credits),
- AE programs should incorporate adult-centered and differentiated curriculum (i.e., real-life applications, authentic tasks, and experiential learning),
- PLAR could be optimized by having experienced PLAR professionals who actively recruit adult learners for PLAR,
- Training around best practices in AE should be provided for all staff (e.g., digital and eLearning, opportunities to collaborate with other AE staff and share best practices, and Labour Market Information),
- Developing online courses to make them more user friendly, and support instructors to develop their online presence,
- The purposeful bundling of expectations to create authentic and relevant learning experiences, and
- Exploring collaboration between credit and non-credit programs, to provide personalization and differentiation that supports adult learners’ transition from one program to another.

In Summary Adult learners often lead complicated and challenging lives, yet their “learning success” has been cited as “integral to the health of our communities and our economy” (Wynne, 2005, p. 1). Therefore, there is a lot riding on this “learning success,” for individual learners, AE providers, and for the broader community. Thus, it is imperative to position AE to cultivate learning success for all adult learners. Research has supported that AE does indeed provide a “second chance” (Ansief, Brown, Robson, & Newton, 2013; McGregor, Mills, te Riele, & Hayes, 2015; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Pinsent-Johnson, Howell, & King, 2013). However, thoughtful positioning has demonstrated that AE does much more than this. As Youmans, Godden, and Hummell (2017) have shown, positioning AE to recognize adult learners prior experience, existing knowledge and skills, and current challenges, and to facilitate both the personal and the academic development of adult learners, opens new possibilities that often result in adult learners’ lives being transformed.

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