

Continuing Education: A History and Future of Innovation

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EDU 7204 Global and Historical Perspectives in Higher Education

June 15, 2018

Abstract

This literature review examines the evolution and contemporary role of continuing higher education units that are managed by entrepreneurial leaders with content designed for adults who have competing priorities. Dating back to Antiquity when adults would gather to pontificate about life while teaching and learning through to the first iteration of a formal continuing education unit in the late 19th century at the University of Chicago to the technological advancements leveraged today to deliver education in the modern age, continuing education has a history and future of innovation. As competition expands and adults demand more opportunities to continue their education, it's crucial that continuing education units within the higher education landscape demonstrate ingenuity in order to remain relevant and produce revenue for their institutions. Using mostly peer-reviewed journal articles and some labor data, this literature review showcases a common thread woven throughout continuing education: innovation. Findings show that innovation is a key component for continuing education units in developing and delivering curriculum, leading units, forming community partnerships, and creating new revenue streams.

Keywords: continuing education, innovation, adult education, post-traditional learners

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As higher education becomes more market-driven and non-traditional learners take over as the majority of students (Westervelt, 2016), continuing education persists as one of the most cutting-edge modes of higher education. Continuing education leaders, systems, delivery modes, and curriculum have a history of being innovative, and must continue to be in order to remain relevant and competitive in the future. Agility and responsiveness to market demands are what set continuing education units apart from the more traditional forms of higher education. Consumers demand more practical skills at affordable costs (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009) and it will be continuing education units and colleges that can fill these needs through innovative approaches. As someone dedicated to serving adult learners through a continuing education administration position, I'm particularly drawn to this subject as we see more institutions investing in continuing education and professional development to meet the needs of the growing non-traditional student population (Cervero, 2000; Cruce & Hillman, 2011). Understanding how innovation is a significant component of continuing education throughout history, today, and into the future will help prepare practitioners for the evolving demands of institutions that rely on continuing education units to connect with the community, deliver market-relevant content, and generate revenue.

This literature review will examine the history and future of continuing education and the role innovation plays in every facet of this form of higher learning. First, I evaluate the introduction and history of continuing education along with its evolving position within the American higher education landscape up until its current state. Then I assess the role of individuals who make up continuing education units: the leaders and the learners. The role of innovation and impact of continuing education in the United States and globally will be

analyzed, in addition to the implications practitioners will need to consider in the future. A summation will culminate, connecting all three themes established in this literature review and exploring ideas for future research. Sources were gathered primarily from Education Research Complete and ERIC databases with a focus on peer-reviewed journals dedicated to continuing higher education.

Continuing Education throughout U.S. History

Continuing education, generally a division or unit of a larger traditional institution of higher education, offers credit and non-credit programs to adult learners (Stephenson, 2010). Continuing education can also be delivered through professional organizations and associations (Cervero, 2000), but for the purposes of this literature review, continuing education will be defined as the mode of education offered to adult learners through a higher education institution. Often used interchangeably, continuing education and adult education are parallel in that both promote lifelong learning for adults either through professional development or personal enrichment (McLean, 2007). While in recent years the role of continuing education has significantly broadened to accommodate market and consumer needs, there is an extensive history of continuing education. This strand of the literature review will assess the progression of continuing education, primarily in a U.S. context, with a projection for future trends that are facing this mode of higher education.

The Introduction and Evolution of Continuing Education

Iterations of adult education can be found as early as Antiquity, when community members would gather to discuss life and its philosophical implications (Franzenburg, 2017). This concept of adult education evolved to be more career-focused during the Industrial Revolution, when efforts were made to provide education to the working class through

organizations and universities as a way to stay current with progressing industries (Shannon, 2009). Continuing education for the purpose of worker advancement and social progress has its roots in the latter part of the 19th century when adult education flourished across Europe (Franzenburg, 2017). When assessing the formation of continuing education in the United States, Shannon (2009) gives partial credit to the Morrill Act of 1862, which set forth a mission of service to the community through the creation of land-grant universities. By the late 19th century, the Chautauqua movement, in which year-round lectures were delivered to adults who yearned to learn, swept the nation and instigated the creation of university extension (Shannon, 2009). The University of Chicago was one of the first institutions to recognize the educational needs of adults and conceptualize what would soon become more formalized continuing education departments that were part of larger higher education institutions (Shannon, 2009).

The rapid professionalization of the American workforce throughout the 20th century solidified the value of continuing education (Cervero, 2000). The GI bill, which offered funding to veterans of World War II for higher education, was one of the first national policies to encourage adult education (Kasworm, 2012). The 1960s saw the dawn of continuing education as an organized system (Cervero, 2000), with continuing education units emerging in order to help the population improve their chances of employability (Einsiedel, 1999). By the 1970s, terms like “non-traditional student” to describe older, part-time students entered the vernacular of admission departments (Thelin, 2011). The next two decades focused on the broadening of programs across disciplines and by the 1990s, continuing education had established itself within higher education institutions, as well as professional organizations, as the leading way for adults to advance professionally (Cervero, 2000).

In order to appeal to the adult market and stay aligned with technological advancements, continuing education started to be delivered at a distance in the 1990s (Cervero, 2000), a trend that continues today through the use of online education (Shannon, 2015). At the beginning of the millennium, continuing education was seen as a means to deliver knowledge to adult learners that would increase their professional opportunities and enhance the economy (Morgan, 2011). Of course, while continuing education has consistently sought out to enhance the economy, it did not prevent the economic collapse of 2008. That being said, the years immediately following the economic crisis proved to be a prosperous time period for continuing education units, which saw an increase in enrollments as more adults than ever before went back to school to retool their skills (Jones, 2011). The explosion of demand for professional development and continuing education that followed the economic collapse leads us to the current state of adult and continuing higher education today.

The Current State of Continuing Education

In an analysis of how university continuing education units expressed their purpose, McLean (2007) found that the majority of units deemed their role to be assisting adult learners learn new knowledge for professional growth. This has been the trend throughout the history of continuing education and remains the current state of affairs. Providing access to education, supporting the community, and promoting innovation are three themes identified by McLean (2007), who claims continuing education units add value to institutions by promoting access and generating revenue.

The contemporary continuing education unit is expected to generate revenue for the university (Einsiedel, 1999), perhaps a far cry from the initial intent of its creation: stimulating local economies and helping professionals secure better futures (Cervero, 2000). Today, these

units are expected to secure better futures for their parent institutions by supporting themselves independently while also generating a surplus in revenue (Einsiedel, 1999). Unfortunately, most succeed at this endeavor while being under-funded and often ignored by their parent institution (Stephenson, 2010). Besides generating revenue, the mission of continuing education units are steadfast across the country: offer market-relevant programs that impact the surrounding economy and community (Hou & Rogers, 2017; McLean 2007).

The Future of Continuing Education

The future of continuing education is centered on flexibility (Schmidt, 2013). Not only flexibility in the way education is delivered to adult learners, but also in relation to the content, partnerships, and solutions for sustainability (Schmidt, 2013). With shifting demographics comes the need for institutions to quickly adapt to market trends and fulfill the educational desires of varying demographic groups. Consider the Baby Boomers, who have reached retirement age and require more outlets for lifelong learning (Cruce & Hillman, 2011). This “silver tsunami” as referenced throughout the literature has reached its peak with people over the age of 55 increasing 28% through the end of this decade; contrast this with those under 55 only increasing 10% (Cruce & Hillman, 2011) and there is a clear recognition of the need for enhancing continuing education opportunities. The literature shows that these changing demographics result in institutions needing to be strategic in their approach to delivering appealing continuing education to the changing segments of the population (Cruce & Hillman, 2011; Kasworm, 2012). More than ever before, adult learners are seeking higher education to impact their work, community, and own personal growth (Kasworm, 2012).

Turning toward a more global perspective, in a review of the economic, social, and cultural perspectives of adult continuing education in the United Kingdom, Morgan (2011)

projects the future of continuing education will cater more toward individual needs rather to that of society's needs. For example, with the rise of online education, there's a possibility that local needs are no longer being met, moving away from one of the original aims of continuing education: to improve local economies (Morgan, 2011). To combat this, Morgan (2011) recommends a restructure of continuing education to be a local provider of professional development to help improve the local workforce. Alternatively, Castillo's (2013) research articulates the positive repercussions of online education as a way to increase access around the world to adult learners who need flexibility to achieve educational goals.

As continuing education progresses, another future challenge to contend with will be the inevitable turf war as more providers come onto the scene and compete with universities (Cervero, 2000). While there is massive potential for collaboration with community and corporate partners, continuing education units will need to be wary that they avoid relying too much on their cache as a point of differentiation and are thereby rendered obsolete by other corporate continuing education providers. The literature consistently refers to professional development offered through corporate organizations as a growing trend (Coady, 2016), with boot camps and badges on the rise. If continuing education exists simply to prepare the population for professional advancement, what will prevent other competitors from entering the space and offering quality education perhaps at a more affordable rate? These are the future concerns continuing education practitioners need to consider.

Conclusion: A History of Innovation

From Antiquity through to online courses, continuing education has catered to adults and has been at the forefront of innovation from the very beginning of formal education. Whether responding to the needs of the market during the Industrial Revolution, or serving as a way to

retool during an economic downturn, continuing education has a history of providing adults a space to grow professionally. In order to be sustainable in the future, continuing education will need to maintain its commitment to innovation and offer market-relevant content to adult learners.

The People in Continuing Education

There is an extensive list of stakeholders who comprise a continuing education unit, including students, faculty, and staff. While each stakeholder is indispensable to maintain the operation of a continuing education unit, two roles stand out as increasingly innovative: the learner and the leader. In this strand of the literature review, I will analyze the roles of the continuing education learner and leader using sources that highlight the shifting demographics of the adult learner population and the leadership trends within the continuing education space.

The Evolving Learner

The needs of adult learners have become increasingly complex and continuing education seeks to be the conduit for professional advancement through learning (Coady, 2016). The barriers to entry are many, as adult students face challenges in terms of balancing time and securing funding to pursue continuing education. Continuing education exists to meet the needs of adult learners—at one time considered non-traditional, but recently the tide has turned and non-traditional is the new normal. Today, 75% of undergraduates are considered non-traditional due to the fact they embody at least one qualifying factor to make them non-traditional: they have one or more dependents, are a single caregiver, are financially independent, lack a traditional high school diploma, delayed post-secondary enrollment, attend college on a part-time status, or are employed full-time (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). Most adult learners take on multiple roles: worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, community member, and not to

mention student (Ross-Gordon, 2011), which requires continuing education to be innovative in the way they support adult learners who have competing responsibilities.

Continuing education units consistently demonstrate their innovation by finding ways to attract and retain learners from the aforementioned shifting demographics (Braverman, 2013). Take for instance the agile adoption of online education, pioneered by continuing education units (Braverman, 2013). Appealing to busy adults with competing obligations on their time, online instruction offers the same level of learning as traditional instruction, according to research by Donavant (2009) on adult learners engaging in professional development in both online and traditional settings. While initially most adults who were part of the study opted for traditional instruction due to negative perceptions about the online delivery mode, those who participated in online learning conceded it was ideal (Donavant, 2009). The use of online education has increased adult learner access and participation and is considered a key component of continuing education units (Kasworm, 2012). To effectively execute high-quality online education and provide access to education, leaders must stay at the bleeding-edge of technological advancements and trends, requiring them to be innovative in their approach.

The Innovative Leader

For continuing education leaders to succeed, they need to exhibit vision, embody an entrepreneurial spirit, and be willing to take risks (Coates, 2013). In addition, Einsidel (1999) makes several points related to the innovative leader. First, leaders of continuing education units are expected to have a refined business acumen, particularly since their units are the revenue generators for their institutions (Einsiedel, 1999). Second, strategic thinking and innovative vision are key characteristics of continuing education leaders today, as they must find ways to increase enrollments and deliver on revenue goals often in slow-moving, traditional higher

education environments (Einsiedel, 1999). Lastly, the more adaptable a continuing education leader (and thereby unit) can be, the better chances of surviving and perhaps thriving (Einsiedel, 1999).

In a study featuring eight interviews with continuing education leaders, Miller (2014) found innovation as a commonality among all of the leaders, who demonstrated entrepreneurial spirit in their approach to leading their units. Innovation is a core value of continuing education according to Miller (2014), and from developing programming to forming partnerships, continuing education leaders must commit to innovation in order to grow. Often through the creation of new business models that buck the traditions of post-secondary education, continuing education leaders are constantly seeking new ideas to generate revenue and stay afloat (Miller, 2014). Leaders of continuing education units must work to galvanize their more traditional colleagues in post-secondary institutions to be at the forefront of the new economy (Coates, 2013).

Conclusion: Evolving Demographics Require Innovation from the Top

Today's adult learner requires multiple points of access and up-to-date curriculum that can help them professionally advance on their own terms. As demographics shift and demand grows for continuing education opportunities, leaders of continuing higher education units are tasked with growing their units through innovative programming, delivery, and revenue streams.

The Role of Continuing Education

The literature (Braverman, 2013; Coates, 2013; Einsiedel 1999; Vallett, 2010) offers two common themes when describing continuing education units: the need for innovation and the connection to the local community. Several factors contribute to continuing education units being poised to meet the demands of the market while fostering a commitment to innovation and

serving as a convener of the community. Continuing education units and colleges are on a mission to provide access to education and must find ways to deliver on this vision by taking bold action and engaging with the public. Historically, continuing education has enjoyed autonomy within institutions which gives ample opportunity to innovate (Horn, 2016). Today, continuing education units are being asked by their more traditional counterparts to leverage their expertise and help the post-secondary institution modernize and grow (Braverman, 2013). In this strand, the role of the continuing higher education unit is examined in the context of innovation and community involvement. I leverage peer-reviewed sources that consider the broad role and trends of continuing education as well as an analysis from Hou and Rogers (2017) of an individual continuing education unit's 25-year history.

Continuing Education as the Innovator

Continuing education units exist in a constant state of change and institutions are now turning to these units for insights about new revenue streams, delivery of online education, and outreach into the community—tactics continuing education units have been engaging in for years (Braverman, 2013; Coates, 2013). Since its inception, continuing education units have sought to provide access to education through innovative means, though have often been marginalized by the larger institution under which they are housed (Coates, 2013). Braverman (2013) concludes that continuing education units must lead the innovation of higher education institutions and Vallett (2010) corroborates this logic, discussing how institutions use continuing education units as both a “tool and a medium” (p. 139) in an effort to build revenue and experiment with new programming or delivery methods. As universities seek out new ways to appeal to the market, they are relying more heavily on their extension and continuing education units to guide them toward fulfilling these goals.

Einsiedel (1999) makes a compelling case that continuing education units are at the forefront of innovation, citing their need to stay current with technology, globalization, population trends, and work environments. Throughout its history, continuing education has been innovative in its approach to engaging with the community, going global, and leveraging disruptive technology (Shannon, 2009). It demonstrates innovation in the development of programming to meet market needs and the strategies to increase adult access and participation (Kasworm, 2012).

In a case study offered by Hou and Rogers (2017), the authors hone in on an individual institution of continuing education and assess trends over the course of the previous 25 years. Their conclusions indicate a common theme throughout the timeframe: innovation. In order to meet the needs of changing internal and external environments, while also growing enrollment, the University of California, Santa Cruz, Silicon Valley Extension engaged in strategic thinking and employed innovative tactics to survive (Hou & Rogers, 2017). For example, the institution ramped up curriculum development to offer more courses more frequently to keep up with market demand, created strategic academic plans to manage diversification of programming, and implemented a compensation plan that paid instructors per enrollment (Hou & Rogers, 2017). More so than traditional post-secondary institutions, continuing education units are tasked with being responsive to the dynamic nature of the professional community while conjuring up new financial models to remain relevant and viable (Hou & Rogers, 2017).

Continuing Education as the Community Convener

The literature shows that throughout its history, continuing education has played a vital role in the improvement of community through education of the workforce (Shannon, 2009; Hou & Rogers, 2017). As Shannon and Wang (2010) articulate, continuing education units are the

convener between traditional academic institutions and the communities in which they reside. Whether engaging with the community through corporate advisory boards to better understand employer needs (Pappas & Eckart, 1997) or implementing experiential learning opportunities to address local challenges (Shannon & Wang, 2010), continuing education units are intrinsically integrated with communities. No other unit at an institution provides direct access to education like a continuing education unit, and this pathway to education is what strengthens community bonds (Shannon & Wang, 2010).

A trend within continuing education throughout the past three decades is the emergence of community and corporate partnerships to help meet the needs of the evolving marketplace (Cervero, 2000). Continuing education units within universities are expected to contribute to the economic vitality of the surrounding area, more so than the traditional units (Cervero, 2000; Morgan, 2011), and this requires a unique sense of innovation not only to identify the opportunities but to establish the partnerships. More so than traditional units, continuing education units are the first to recognize employer needs and make connections within the corporate community to design programs that meet these needs (Coates, 2013). Continuing education was created to educate the workforce and help them maintain a competitive edge (Cervero, 2000; Einsiedel, 1999), and continuing education units create connections with industry to achieve this (Coates, 2013). Ironically, continuing education units themselves are expected to stay competitive along with their graduates by delivering the latest content via the latest technologies led by instructors employing the latest teaching practices.

Conclusion: Innovation's Role in Continuing Education

At every turn, continuing higher education units are expected to lead through innovation compared to their more traditional colleagues in post-secondary institutions. Whether forging

community partnerships, embarking on globalization efforts, or implementing new business models, continuing education units must have a streak of innovation to survive.

Summation

With an extensive history, continuing education has been at the leading-edge of providing adults access to education since its inception. As demographics shift, technology advances, and competition grows, continuing higher education units will be tasked with tapping into their ingenuity in the future. Leaders of continuing education units need to demonstrate an entrepreneurial spirit as they attempt to generate revenue for their institutions while also serving as a community convener. In the future, I plan to tie my research interest in branding together with continuing education, seeking out how continuing education units can remain innovative in their marketing and communication efforts to attract and retain students.

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