

Cross-Cultural Learning in Adult Continuing Education

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In an international address by the Rector of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Dr. Juna Ramon de la Fuente stated, “the single-most important skill to acquire in the 21st century is intercultural competence.”

Continuing education offers one of the most convenient and accessible ways to bring people from diverse backgrounds together for the purpose of learning. Ironically, courses that directly address cross-cultural exchange are not easily found among program offerings.

Recent world and local events have made it increasingly important for Canadians to understand cultural difference. Immigration has been steadily rising due, in part, to the global perception of Canada as a model, pluralistic country. As such, Canadians may enjoy the respect of other nations, but they also have a responsibility to ensure that people from different cultures can, in fact, live together and thrive.

What many believe is required now, and what Canada (as a pioneer of modern multiculturalism) is well poised for, is an increase in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue that goes beyond superficially acknowledging cultural difference to encouraging a deeper understanding of different cultural values and traditions. This kind of engagement can occur through various discussions and activities at all levels of education. However, one of the most effective ways to facilitate meaningful cross-cultural exchange is by offering liberal arts and other programs that focus on culture through continuing education.

The liberal arts (subjects such as history, philosophy, literature and language) offer numerous opportunities for students to explore people and societies and reflect upon their own beliefs and values. It is, in many ways, natural for such courses to be delivered through continuing education, where, arguably, the widest range of people from the general public choose to meet and engage in dialogue. While other educational providers either offer compulsory training or cater to specific, demographic groups, continuing education provides relatively low-cost, optional and accessible learning programs that are open to virtually any member of the community. Where liberal arts and other culturally-focused programs are included among course offerings, the potential for continuing education to promote cross-cultural learning is great.



WHY SHOULD CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING BE ENCOURAGED IN CONTINUING EDUCATION?

Current realities in adult continuing education reflect a focus on job-ready skills development. According to the 1998 Adult Education and Training Survey, published by Statistics Canada, 28% of Canadians participated in adult education and training programs in 1997. Of these, three of every four did so for job-related purposes. The highest demand for courses was in applied fields such as business, education, health, engineering and computer science. This data suggests that the “applied” fields listed above are considered to be “job-related”, while other fields such as the liberal arts and cultural studies are not generally considered to be applicable to the workplace.¹

There is much literature, however, suggesting the opposite: that in fact, the liberal arts (which facilitate engagement with questions about culture) are very relevant to our professional lives. For instance, in a 1986 working paper, Dr. William O’Brian, American educator and president of an educational

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L'éducation permanente est l'une des façons les plus accessibles et commodes de rassembler des gens de divers milieux à des fins d'apprentissage. Il est difficile cependant de trouver parmi les programmes offerts des cours qui abordent directement la question des échanges interculturels. L'une des façons les plus efficaces de faciliter les échanges interculturels intéressants entre adultes est d'offrir des programmes d'arts, de sciences humaines et d'autres matières d'ordre culturel. De nombreux programmes de niveaux primaire et secondaire visent à encourager les élèves à se percevoir comme des citoyens d'un monde plus grand. De tels programmes pour les adultes aideraient certainement ces derniers à collaborer à l'élaboration de collectivités plus fortes.

consulting firm, Training/arts, suggests that Corporate America actually demands liberal education for the adult learner. What the liberal arts can provide that mere training programs don't, he says, are the attitudes that employers are looking for: flexibility, sensitivity, tolerance and breadth of understanding.² Not only are these perspectives valued by employers, they are the very attitudes required among individuals in pluralistic societies to foster more meaningful cross-cultural exchange.

Besides its relevance to our professional lives, cross-cultural learning through the liberal arts, specifically at the adult education level, can contribute to social and personal development. Many students and programmers of liberal arts courses in continuing education agree that friendships are formed in such classes. If these courses were not offered, conversations leading to more meaningful relationships among students would occur much less often, and in some cases, never at all.



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Social change occurs when people are well-informed and knowledgeable about issues relevant to their communities. In order to deepen our understanding of world and local events, including economic and scientific developments, we need to examine their ethical, historical and religious underpinnings. Courses in history, philosophy and religion, delivered through continuing education, can provide adults with opportunities they may not otherwise have to understand and interpret these issues more effectively.

Personal development is another benefit of liberal arts and culturally-focused classes for adults. One interesting outcome of engaging in discussions where people are encouraged to

examine their own cultural value systems vis-a-vis others is that we begin to become more comfortable with ambiguity, a valuable skill in our adult lives. While parents and teachers usually try to build stable, predictable environments within which young people can grow, most of us eventually realize that life outside the structures of school, work and home is quite unpredictable. As O'Brian suggests, liberal arts courses can give adult students the time and the context to encourage doubt, stimulate skepticism, postpone closure and change attitudes.³ Ultimately, then, such courses can teach us to be more flexible, open to change, and better prepared for life in an ambiguous, unpredictable and sometimes uncomfortable world where clear-cut solutions are not always available.

HOW TO PROMOTE CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING IN CONTINUING EDUCATION

Continuing education in Canada has the potential to change people's attitudes about the value of courses like the liberal arts, which facilitate more meaningful cross-cultural exchange. What is most needed is a shift in perception about what these studies can do for us in our daily lives. Such a shift requires us to think about and challenge the dominant market paradigm, which places more value on endeavours promising immediate, economic rewards than on those generating gradual social and cultural benefits.

In addition, we need to more clearly articulate the value of cross-cultural understanding itself, particularly in this country. Once Canadians fully appreciate cross-cultural understanding as an ideal, as well as a personal and social goal, opportunities to experience meaningful cross-cultural exchange will multiply.

In order to promote cross-cultural dialogue at the adult education level, continuing education departments need to make such opportunities available. The more school boards, colleges and universities offer liberal arts and other courses that directly address cross-cultural relations, the more individuals are likely to take them. Furthermore, a genuine commitment to, and belief in, the value of the arts as catalysts for personal, professional and community development, is required among educational administration at all levels.⁴

We must also more clearly make the link between courses that specifically address cross-cultural issues and our personal and social responsibilities. As Canadians, we are fortunate to live in a country where people can take pride in their cultural heritage. When we engage in dialogue with people from different communities about culture and values, we enhance not only our own professional and personal development, but also the development of society at large. These courses help us to see ourselves as part of a larger world. Thus, they have the potential to foster social change, social responsibility, and pro-active living.

Promoting these perspectives among young people in schools is a very important way to ensure that they take

hold. There are a number of initiatives across the country working to incorporate social justice into the elementary and secondary curricula, particularly through the arts. One such initiative is the Catalyst Program administered through BC's ArtStarts in Schools, which brings professional artists into classrooms to work with students on art projects that address social concerns such as racism, discrimination and stereotypes.

However, this work need not be limited to young people. As this article shows, adults, too, can participate in building stronger communities, and continuing education can be a vehicle for this kind of community change. Historical societies, reading clubs, museums, libraries, music and theatrical groups are all potential collaborators for continuing education programs. Other groups include civic-minded professional people, businesses, university faculty, alumni, and staff. Sometimes, small companies or local community groups are receptive to sponsoring programs.⁵



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A recently established non-profit society in Vancouver called Open Your Art is one such initiative. The organization utilizes the expertise of educators in the arts, humanities and cross-cultural studies to bring more diverse communities into discussions about cultural values, pluralism and self-expression. By delivering workshops and other learning programs in various local venues, Open Your Art aims to engage people who may not normally participate in this kind of dialogue.

Data from the 1996 census shows that the majority of university graduates from visible minority communities pursue non-arts, non-humanities fields.⁶ As a result, many Canadians, with unique cultural backgrounds, have few opportunities to engage in deeper studies of history, art or philosophy, or to contribute to discussions on culture. Open Your Art is one initiative that aims to address this gap, and to enhance inter-cultural dialogue.

Facilitators of these workshops are graduates of the arts and humanities who currently work as professionals in their fields and who have an interest in speaking to wider audiences. Members of visible minorities are encouraged to get involved as facilitators/presenters, and Open Your Art actively seeks such individuals. Participants are members of the general public, from secondary students to adults in

continuing education, as well as teacher trainees and other educators working within multicultural environments.

An important goal of programs such as these is to dispel old clichés and stereotypes about culture. Canada is already a leader among nations in terms of multicultural policy, and the challenge now is to maintain that position. Continuing education has a role to play in the building and preservation of a truly pluralistic, socially active society. 🌍

- 1 Statistics Canada, Adult Education and Training Survey 1998.
- 2 W. A. O'Brien, "Liberal Education Through Training: Bringing Higher Education to the Workplace," Position paper, 1986.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 M. McIntire, "The Humanities in Texas Continuing Education." *TACSCE Research Annual* 6, no. 1 (1990): 6-26. (Texas Association for Community Service and Continuing Education.)
- 5 Bettina A. Lankard, "The Place of the Humanities in Continuing Higher Education". ERIC Digest No. 145. ERIC Identifier: ED368890. Publication Date: 1994-00-00. Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education Columbus OH.
- 6 "Ethnocultural and Social Characteristics of the Canadian Population," (Statistics Canada, Dimensions Series, 1996 Census).

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