Emerging models for international higher education and collaborative learning through on-line graduate study.

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Abstract

Organizations are operating in diverse, complex, and expedited environments that have recently been plagued by increased external conflict. As such, organizations require human capital that is well educated and understands how to apply theoretical concepts to professional practice, by finding solutions to tough organizational problems, while creatively contributing to innovation. In response to these needs several higher learning institutions have created unique programs geared towards working adults that use non-traditional methods of delivery. Programs seek to provide balance and synergy, by allowing students to gain theoretical understandings that can be applied to professional practice, while also obtaining practical experiences, stories, and case studies at their workplace that can be brought into the classroom and thus improving the learning environment. This paper examines some of the unique educational programs and discusses the implications of universities embracing new forms of pedagogy geared towards adult learners (Andragogy).

Keywords: Adult education, Non-traditional education, Andragogy, Curriculum development

Threats from oil spills, nuclear accidents, earthquakes, tainted food outbreaks, and global religious violence have created a need for professionals and students to expand their knowledge base and develop new skills. Many administrators challenged with having to develop advanced leadership decisions in crisis management are seeing the value of additional education in critical and complex topic areas that are often not offered in the traditional university programs. Leaders challenged with enormous job and family
responsibilities are finding that traditional residential degree and certificate programs are often not attractive or viable.

Today’s public management issues do not always fit into a knowledge framework that is historically provided in traditional Ph.D., Master of Public Policy, Master of Public Administration, Master of Criminal Justice, and Master of Political Affairs programs. The development of new academic programs that create diverse and creative thinking in regard to problem solving and decision making in emerging areas is critical. This is primarily due to progressive shifts in public management and public safety policy studies becoming more interdisciplinary, more ethnically diverse, and driven towards globalized affairs.

Several innovative and regionally accredited universities have responded to the demands and leadership challenges by providing some non-traditional options that allow practitioners to work full time, take care of family obligations, and gain critical knowledge from a graduate certificate, a specialized master’s degree program, or even a doctorate degree program focused on cutting edge areas in crisis management and homeland security (Reeger 2005). The key aspects of these programs is that they use innovative teaching methodologies and technological tools to engage working adult-students with on-line and hybrid programs that feature asynchronous learning with periodic face-to-face residencies (Rahim & Finch, 2011). This educational delivery methodology has resulted in response to practitioner trends and demand.

These programs have the ability to develop learning communities of practice where students can collaborate on problem solving and course assignments. Diverse
global communities have the ability to play an important role in providing access to a pool of expertise required by professionals that often work in environments with limited resources and limited access to a broad range of subject matter experts (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Sandrock (2004) researched a number of CoPs and their efforts revealed that communities added value in several distinct ways by building the knowledge capacity gaps of members, preventing the “reinvention of the wheel” through knowledge sharing, discussing lessons learned in organizational strategy, and collaboration of intellectual capital to generate innovative ideas and build new problem solving knowledge. These programs typically aim to progress beyond individual learning into realms of collective or co-learning, and these methods of teaching and retention seem to be the fastest path to knowledge breakthroughs for adult-learners.

Pedagogical and andragogical assumptions of have implications for what workforce developers do. One basic implication for education and training course designers is the importance of making a clear distinction between a content plan and an instructional process design. When planning an educational or training activity, the pedagogy thinks in terms of drafting a content plan, and he or she has to answer some questions (Knowles, 1988):

1. What content needs to be covered (the assumption being that students will only learn what he or she transmits, and therefore the subject has to be covered in the classroom)?

2. How can the content be organized into manageable units?

3. How can the content units be transmitted in a logical sequence (rather than the sequence in which the learners are ready to learn)?
4. What are the most effective methods for transmitting content?

If the learning unit is heavily loaded with information, the method of choice will probably be lecture and assigned reading. If content involves skill performance, the method of choice will probably be a demonstration by the adult learner.

Creating curriculums from an andragogical perspective, on the other hand, approaches the educational or training task with a framework for facilitating the acquisition of content and knowledge by the learners (Knowles, 1988). The degree names for these programs vary but they provide professional students with exposure to some of the most critical policy issues in emergency response, disaster management, public health preparedness, and counter-terrorism (Bardin 2006).

A.T. Still University has a Doctor of Health Sciences and a Doctor of Health Education program that utilize some of the strategies previously discussed. Both programs utilize software tools like Elluminate to provide live chats and classroom interactions. The programs utilize a unique doctoral capstone approach by allowing students to complete their chapters as part of a class versus the traditional method where a doctoral student finishes their coursework and works on their dissertation in isolation.

The National Graduate School of Quality Management offers a one year, on-line Master’s in Quality Systems Management and a two year hybrid Doctor of Business Administration degree. Both use teaching methods that are focused on working in teams and solving real problems in organizations. The university is focused and committed to developing scholars who engage in applied research. This form of research is critical in health science related disciplines, due to the numerous predicaments and complexities impacting global communities today.
Georgetown University in Washington DC offers an on-line certificate and a residential master’s in Bio-hazardous Threat Agents and Emerging Infectious Diseases. Courses offered include Bio-defense Public Health Countermeasures and Bio-surveillance. Most traditional degree programs do not allow students to fully understand the nature of bioterrorism and its potential impact on public safety. This program provides comprehensive training in some of the most critical areas of public safety as it relates to biological and radiological threats.

Bellevue University has a 3-year hybrid Ph.D. in Human Capital Management where classes are co-taught with professors and industry executives that work in human capital management roles in their organizations. The program is set up in modules where students get certificates of completion as they complete each module.

Mid-Continent University (MCU) takes a very unique approach to their educational programs as well, while offering degrees in business management and human resource management. The university utilizes a cohort model and the groups meet at various locations throughout the state of Kentucky and Southern Illinois. The cohorts remain together throughout the entire program and take one class per module, meeting one night per week, for four hours. MCU takes education to the students by allowing professors to travel to various cities and towns throughout the two states, teaching cohorts at multiple locations. The university has set up corporate contracts with large organizations and partnerships with community colleges, offering advanced degrees to working adult-students, onsite at their employer’s facilities. The programs allow students
to further their education, without leaving their jobs and without having to travel to their nearest universities. MCU also offers degrees fully on-line.

The classroom delivery methods at MCU are based upon seminar style, facilitative, peer-to-peer learning. Students are challenged to think creatively, critically analyze cases and solve problems in groups. Students must provide group presentations each night of class to their peers. The courses focus on professors avoiding lecturing and dominating the classroom discussions and instead instructors are encouraged to assimilate into facilitators, to guide the learning environment and allow the adult learners to engage in peer-to-peer learning, drawing upon their professional experiences to contribute to the learning environment. The methodologies have proven to be highly successful at MCU, as graduates are able to quickly retain and apply the classroom material to professional practice, thus improving the opportunity of advancing their careers and addressing organizational issues in the marketplace.

One of the most innovative new programs is the Executive Doctorate in Law and Policy at Northeastern University. The program is intended for working practitioners from a variety of fields. While the average completion time for most doctorate programs is about seven years, fully employed students complete this program and dissertation in two years by attending class one weekend a month in Boston, Massachusetts. The Executive Doctorate in Law and Policy has an applied curriculum that exposes policy developers, public managers, and other professionals to an advanced conceptual and practical understanding of law and policy and the political connections between the two. The core of the program explores the related impacts among court decisions,
legislation, community activism, and political action in shaping policy. Research methodology is integrated throughout the entire program, instead of being offered as a series of separate courses. This program structure allows students to complete their doctorate in only two years.

**Conclusion**

This paper discussed innovative health science and organizational leadership programs that are tailored to meet the demands of working-adult education. The goals of these new degrees and certificate programs are similar. They are geared towards developing innovative leadership skills for professionals who need specialized knowledge to contribute to their organizations and find better solutions to complex societal problems. These universities offer program delivery methods that are flexible and allow a balance between work, family, and academic study. These programs allow professionals to consider job responsibilities, while continuing to develop new areas of expertise. The programs are constructed to advance the value of professional problem solving skills through a combined academic and professional exploration of systemic relationships between practice, research, practical knowledge, and established theory.

Most of these programs incorporate the use of faculties that have a valuable combination of practical experience and a terminal degree. The teaching methods are applied and relevant to professional practice. Much of the learning in the classes is driven by case studies where students can learn material in courses that can immediately be applied when they return to work. These academic experiences allow students to develop critical thinking leadership skills in policy studies, crisis management, emergency
response, public safety, public health preparedness, conflict management, program
evaluation, and managerial decision making in the context of the uncertainty of threats
and globalization, which make the knowledge provided in these programs so necessary
and valuable.

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