

Articles

Shopping for Knowledge: An Alternative Environment for Learning

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ABSTRACT

Educators who provide only traditional environments for post-secondary adult education often overlook the fact that a diverse mature student population requires a variety of formats and environments in which to learn effectively. Moreover, although universities and colleges continue to emphasize their mandates to serve the community, the definition of "community" itself is undergoing radical change. This paper suggests that the shopping mall has become an environment in which many North American adults seek out and find a strong sense of community. Furthermore, because people perceive the mall as a pleasant place to be, it is potentially an ideal milieu in which to facilitate adult learning, particularly via the Internet. As private agencies increasingly move to set up and tap the commercial value of such ventures, it is becoming increasingly important for universities and colleges to provide leadership.

RÉSUMÉ

Les éducateurs qui n'offrent qu'un environnement traditionnel pour l'éducation post-secondaire aux adultes oublient facilement qu'une population très diverse d'étudiants adultes requiert une gamme de formats et d'environnements dans lesquels elle peut apprendre efficacement. De plus, bien que les universités et les collèges continuent à souligner qu'ils ont pour mandat, de servir la communauté, la définition du terme-même de « communauté » est en train de changer radicalement. Cet article suggère que le centre commercial est devenu un environnement dans lequel de nombreux adultes nord-américains recherchent et trouvent un sens très développé de la communauté. Étant donné que les gens perçoivent souvent le centre commercial comme un endroit agréable, il est potentiellement un milieu idéal pour faciliter l'éducation des adultes, surtout grâce à Internet. Comme les organismes privés ont de plus en plus tendance à établir ce genre d'entreprises et à en exploiter la valeur commerciale, il est de plus en plus important que les universités et les collèges fassent preuve de leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In order to be effective facilitators of adult learning, educators need to keep in mind the vast diversity of a mature student population. Culture, socio-economic status, extensive life experience, and even the physiological process of aging itself can combine to define the unique strategies required to facilitate learning for adults (Charness, 1995; Rose, 1994). The work of learning theorists such as B. F. Skinner and Carl Rogers lends support to the idea that many methods, styles, formats, and environments are necessary to help mature students learn (Cole, 1980). Yet, despite the variety of teaching formats and milieu needed to accommodate the diversity of older students, universities and colleges have traditionally passed on their knowledge to all students in the same way: via lecture format in an institutional setting. However, this method has provided little opportunity or reward for learning through eclectic means. Studies show that the more heterogeneous the student audience, the more difficulty a traditional lecture method has of adequately passing on knowledge effectively (Cole, 1980).

Today, in the face of rapid social and technological change, many academic institutions are broadening the scope of their continuing education curricula to include more applied, vocation-specific courses. Such courses complement, and are indeed fundamentally fed by, the existing academic programs that have always provided a broad-based foundation of knowledge. Nevertheless, although more and more adults are seeking to acquire new technological skills, and the “infrastructure” knowledge that is required to support these skills, there are many adults who are unable to participate in formal, institutionally based programs. The reasons for this have always been complex; however, it has been suggested that adulthood itself provides a context that profoundly affects any decision to participate in a formal institutional program (Hoskins, 1993; Lussier & Wister, in press; Phillips & Phillips, 1993; Sterns, Barrett, Czaja, & Barr, 1994). This context is seen as a combination of circumstances that accompany the transition into adulthood, and may include such factors as the necessity to work during class time, the need for adequate day care for children or for the elderly, or simply a lack of confidence to engage in classroom activity after a prolonged absence from doing so.

Dowd (1975) asserts that when it comes to learning new skills, the difference between old and young lies not in ability, but in the “. . . tremendous modal differences in the cohort-defining experiences of

educational level, socioeconomic status of the family of origin and occupational aspirations" (p. 588). Yet many contemporary theorists maintain that learning is a lifelong process. If both of these statements are true, then how can the restrictive contextual circumstances of adulthood be mitigated or overcome so that mature students can take advantage of educational opportunities?

This paper asserts that environment is a key factor in overcoming many of the barriers that prevent adults from engaging in further education. Specifically, it suggests that although there are continuing education programs offered in other "off campus" locations, a community-based teaching environment located at the suburban shopping mall is an ideal location for learning, and an equally favourable and important milieu in which formal institutions can operate remotely.

The paper is organized into three main sections. The first section shows how the traditional definition of "community" is changing. This has important ramifications not only in defining those for whom the institution strives to serve, but also for identifying an optimum environment where members will be most familiar and comfortable and thereby better able to learn effectively. The second section underscores the benefits of providing courses in suburban malls, while the third section describes some mall-based adult education programs that have already been tested and discussed in the literature. Finally, because futurists assert that "... soon the difference between the haves and the have nots will be the ability to access and use information successfully", the fourth section proposes a means of optimizing the mall classroom for mature students through an institutionally designed, mall-based, academic credit and applied technological training combination, administered through the Internet (Whitson & Day, 1994, p. 27). As post-secondary institutions strive to serve their communities better, it is first paramount, however, that we understand what those "communities" really are.

DEFINING WHO AND WHERE TO SERVE

The challenge to provide "relevant" education is often hindered by dramatic changes in the spheres of life outside of the campus setting. These changes often reflect ideologies that give a new spin to traditional definitions of curriculum development and the students to whom it should be targeted. In particular, ideological change has created new definitions of "community" and "culture" that are, rightly or wrongly, fundamentally

interrelated with modern economic concepts. Furthermore, these new definitions of community are forcing educators to see their potential students, and their role in educating them, in a new light (Kraig, 1994).

Americans, and no doubt Canadians too, spend more time in shopping malls than anywhere else outside of their own homes and jobs (*U.S. News & World Report*, as cited in East & Strahl, 1982). Marketing research shows that it is women who do the most mall shopping for family members (Grossbart, Carlson, & Walsh, 1991). However, although malls have always been considered as central locations for economic exchange, there is growing evidence to suggest that they may also provide an environment that is equally important for social exchange as well (Fowler & MacLean, 1991; Hopkins, 1991; Sijpkes, Brown, & MacLean, 1983; Thompson & Hickey, 1989).

Leisure studies indicate that in North American malls, social networking has been particularly noteworthy for two main groups, namely, adolescents and seniors (Hopkins, 1991; Jackson, 1991; Sijpkes, Brown, & MacLean, 1983). From mall-walking exercise clubs to coffee or card groups, many seniors are spending significant leisure time in malls, often participating in routine social / community interactions throughout the day (Fowler & MacLean, 1991; Hopkins, 1991; Joseph, 1993). Teenagers also set up elaborate social groups in malls. For example, high school drop-outs have been known to "live" in larger malls, forming exclusive family-type groupings with other young mall patrons (Jackson, 1991; Lewis, 1989). Adolescents who engage in intensive mall-based activities have been typically labeled as mall "rats" (males) or mall "bunnies" (females) by their peers (Lewis, 1989). However, the rising popularity of malls as centres of social interaction has not been restricted to just the young and the old. Hopkins (1991) found that in Edmonton, the larger malls often attracted a variety of people solely for the pursuit of leisure and social interaction. Visits to larger malls tended to be for a significantly longer duration than the quick and purposeful visits made to smaller malls, and respondents stated that they went to the larger malls to "... mingle and see what is happening" in the social sense (Hopkins, 1991, p. 273). Moreover, three-quarters of respondents considered the mall to be public rather than private property, indicative of a more general sense of shared community within the individualistic, economically focused environment.

In the context of suburban "mega" malls such as the West Edmonton Mall in Canada or the Mall of America in the United States, the sheer number of employees itself lies within the parameters of a "community"

with needs and goals of its own. For example, depending upon the time of year, the Mall of America has over 10,000 employees, easily exceeding the populations of most rural towns. Kevin Byrne, the Coordinator of Adult Learning at the Mall of America, notes that a proposal to offer a mall-located school (kindergarten to grade 12) was made primarily to accommodate the children of those employed at the mall (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995). Thus by addressing both the needs of consumers and those of employees, the mall has become a new community where people of diverse backgrounds may seek comfort, pleasure, and familiarity with their surroundings and with each other. What better place to promote formal learning?

THE MALL AS AN ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

In the mall environment, the potential for solving the contextual problems that often restrict participation in adult education programs is considerable. In the geographic sense, suburban shopping malls are most often located near major commuter highways, within housing developments on established transportation routes. This provides convenient and easy access to facilities and grants ample and free parking for student patrons (East & Strahl, 1982). Libraries and book stores are often located in malls, furnishing a valuable and easily accessible on-site resource in support of the educational experience. In Guelph, Ontario, for example, a city with a population of approximately 93,400, there are library branches at two local malls and a Mobile Library bus that moves between three smaller malls routinely every week.

In many cases, larger malls are often open late during the week, providing flexible hours for those who work either unusual hours or shifts. Since security initiatives are already in place at the mall, not only is the institution's hardware investment secured without further costly outlay, but it also means that adults can feel safe participating at any time during the night or day according to the demands of their schedules. In fact, Pittaway (1995) suggests that the introduction of educational programs in some malls has resulted in a reduction in their violent crime rates. Many malls also offer day care facilities with services that can be purchased on an hourly or daily basis. This is particularly useful for women who may be prevented from learning new skills because of family demands.

By locating classrooms in malls, not only can employment opportunities and business liaisons be more easily facilitated between students and

entrepreneurs, but the economic exchange environment itself can be a useful educational resource. For example, at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, the on-site adult education facility administered by the local school boards ran a store for a local company that sold entirely recycled items (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995). Students involved in the project gained a wealth of knowledge and experience from exposure to the low-level store management and clerical training derived from the project. Furthermore, with the success of this particular corporate/educational link, the recycling company is expanding its commitment to project-based learning to the benefit of both the institution and the industry (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995). Byrne asserts that it is important to move the idea of "mall as a favourable site for offering adult education programs" beyond the simple location/environment issue and into the equally valuable realm of "mall as an educational resource" as well.

From industrial and post-secondary institutional viewpoints, there are other benefits to be gained by engaging in mall-based program planning. People like going to the mall. Therefore, the potential for mall-located courses to be filled, and investment in the resource realized, may be much greater for mall-based programs than for those same courses offered at institutional sites (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995). Moreover, the potential market for mall-based programs reaches far beyond that possible at traditional institutional sites. For example, program planners at the Mall of America have proposed that tourists visiting the mall may be interested in participating in on-line programs, providing a service for those who would prefer to use their time learning while friends or family shop (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995). As a marketing strategy, this surely ranks alongside child care services in its potential for reducing the stress that consumers may feel when shopping with friends or family who lose interest. By reducing this stress, an educationally focused "adult care" service might potentially increase the time that a consumer may shop at the mall while his/her friend or partner is well occupied at an educational site elsewhere in the mall. Certainly, the rising popularity of publicly accessed Internet facilities, now available in several restaurants and bars in Canada and the U.S., lends support to the potential success of such a venture.

However, offering courses in a facility primarily created for economic exchange sets off warning lights for many educators. Despite the success of many privately operated mall-based classrooms, East and Strahl (1982) suggest that, "It is a great service to the community to provide educational

opportunities through shopping centers. It is a great disservice to the university and community to allow shopping centers to present themselves as centers of learning" (p. 274). This suggests that by providing leadership for mall-based learning initiatives, universities and colleges can serve communities better than the private sector, perhaps through their ability to maintain standards of curriculum excellence. Moreover, by sustaining control over the program planning in mall locations, institutions can continue to realize the fundamental goal of many educators, namely, to empower students to think objectively and to seek the truth about the world around them. Such an endeavour may be questionable when courses are provided by those who operate solely out of a desire for financial gain (McCullough & McCullough, 1994). Nevertheless, the emphasis on securing finances has also crept into recent post-secondary curriculum planning agendas. As decisions based on declining research dollars and dwindling government support question the utility of certain post-secondary programs, the time is now ripe for universities and colleges to review their respective primary objectives and to ensure that they are reaching those they strive to serve. The University of Guelph (1985) has expressed what may be the key to the survival of formal post-secondary institutions in the near future:

Universities have to serve society as an end, not simply welcome their contribution to the good of society as a side effect. (p. 4)

By shaking up the traditional understanding of the environment necessary for adult learning, institutions can better realize their mandate to provide quality education and assist the community to "... educate for change" (University of Guelph, 1985, p. 5).

TESTED APPLICATIONS

To gain an insight into the utility of mall-based learning for both students and educators, it is necessary to look at some of the programs that have already been tested. While this paper is concerned primarily with courses offered by universities and colleges, mall-based high school projects can also provide some valuable insights. Although there may be other institutions successfully engaged in providing continuing education in malls, this section provides a brief overview of some secondary and post-secondary, institutionally supported, mall-based programs that have been previously highlighted in the literature, as well as several programs that

have become known to the author through her own adult education teaching experience.

The St. Laurent Shopping Centre in Ottawa houses a "storefront school," which was the first of its kind in North America (Ionides, 1992). Patti Ellis, who started the school, states that the program began because the school system was "... failing some students," and the mall was a natural environment in which to find the drop-out students who needed to be reached (Ionides, 1992, p. D1).

Jasper Place High School offers a storefront school at the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta. Supported by a rent-free location and volunteer teachers and counsellors from the high school, this successful program provides drop-in job skill counselling and academic support to members of the community (Ionides, 1992).

Barb Forrest, who supervises the adult education high school computer courses offered through Continuing Education at the Wellington County Board of Education in Guelph, emphasizes that it is convenience, security, and economic efficiency that lies behind their decision to offer credit courses in a mall environment. Forrest (personal communication, 1995) states that the mall-based computer courses offered by her board are very popular and always full. She also asserts that students often remark on the convenient location and the free parking facilities available to them at the mall location. Moreover, in an atmosphere removed from the stressful academic institution, mature students often express how much more than ever anticipated they learn in this environment.

At the post-secondary level, the University of Saskatchewan offers a "University to the People" general interest program at a low maintenance cost. Peter Jonker (personal communication, 1995), the coordinator of the program, describes how the collaborative efforts of the mall, the newspaper, and the local cable station come together to bring the university to the community in Saskatoon. There may well be other programs of this nature offered throughout Canada, however, the majority of studies concerning mall-based learning have been carried out in the United States. In fact, when the author contacted several large university and college Continuing Education departments across Canada, there were few who had even considered providing courses anywhere but in a traditional institutional setting. Nevertheless, documentation on American experiments with mall-based post-secondary education dates back to the 1960s.

The University of St. Thomas offers a variety of credit courses at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995).

The National Federation of State Humanities Council of Minnesota endorses the "Energy and Lifestyle" lecture series as a good example of a successful and creative mall program (Cole, 1980). Combining telecommunications conferencing, lectures, exhibits, and debate, the project director provided a learning experience that incorporated active participation in a mall-based learning experience that was an "... excellent atmosphere to learn and share ideas" (Cole, 1980, p. 68).

In 1987 a country-wide, community-based Adult Basic Education Program (ABE) offered through Rio Salado Community College in Arizona had student enrolments of more than 5,700. Offering services in malls and in many other nontraditional locations, programs included computer-assisted literacy courses and even in-service workshops for instructors themselves (Vanis & Mills, 1987). Vanis and Mills (1987) assert that the success of this mall-based program lies in its ability to address the multi-levelled, multicultural adult student diversity in a comfortable and familiar location.

Dr. James R. East, Associate Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, and Dr. Ronald Strahl, director of the Composition Program, analyzed the "Learn & Shop" program that brings traditional university credit courses to leading department stores in Indianapolis (East & Strahl, 1982). They suggest that the neutral territory of the mall fosters a much healthier environment in which many people can learn. Moreover, East and Strahl report program results that show mall-based students as having less writing anxiety, more academic motivation, and higher test scores than their on-campus counterparts.

In 1989 the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States (1989) made a policy statement in favour of offering university graduate courses in nontraditional campus settings such as shopping malls. A publication guide was produced that sets out the role of graduate deans, faculty resources, and finances as a guide to providing academic programs in nontraditional environments.

Of those contacted by telephone in Canada, Wilfrid Laurier University was the only post-secondary institution to have offered first- to third-year university credit courses in a mall, specifically in a mall-located library in Waterloo, Ontario. The Department of Continuing Education spokesperson

(personal communication, 1995) stated that the programs were extremely popular, and better facilitated the aims of the University, which are to provide quality service in response to community needs. So in what ways might the mall environment excel in meeting the educational needs of mature students?

OPTIMIZING THE MALL ENVIRONMENT

With the rapid development and popularity of the information highway, a familiar, low-stress mall environment would be an ideal setting in which faculty-assisted courses via the Internet could combine education with skill. Given the Internet's potential for information relay, multi-tasking, and remote interpersonal communication, such a mall-based resource could provide a low-cost, multi-resource medium that would enable students to combine academic credits with technological skill (McCullough & McCullough, 1994). Moreover, the benefits of a mall environment could be maximized where such courses could be taken at a student's own pace and during flexible hours that may better suit his/her needs. This would provide a self-directed, self-paced, and interactive opportunity for adults to upgrade both formal academic "infrastructure" and technological skills simultaneously within a supportive, familiar environment.

In Canada, the Provincial Government of New Brunswick has just formed an "alliance" with Microsoft to provide the first Canadian on-line high school diploma program in the country (Gernon, 1995). The premier, Frank McKenna, has suggested that "New Brunswick will shortly be exporting Canadian courses from local schools and universities to other countries around the world" (Gernon, 1995). The potential that this initiative opens up for generating much needed educational revenue, while at the same time providing cost effective sharing of resources, makes the Internet an invaluable tool whose time has come. However, again, Canadians lag behind the foresight of their American counterparts. Educators at the Mall of America in the U.S. have already launched the first complete on-line public school diploma program in the United States via the Internet (K. Byrne, personal E-mail communication, 1995).

It is becoming more and more important for universities and colleges to take a leadership role in shaping the curricula in the new environments for adult education. The future of quality education, and perhaps of post-secondary institutions themselves, may profoundly depend upon the long

term vision of those who desire to identify the need and to serve the community well.

If one of the goals of education is to open the minds of our students, then we as educators should open our own minds to look beyond the traditional. This is particularly important if we remember that those adults we teach and train go on to use those same skills in government, business, and community settings that ultimately return to impact upon our own lives. As our mature students look to post-secondary educational institutions to help them learn the skills necessary to face a new technological era, let us also rise to the challenge by paving the roads that can get them there.

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BIOGRAPHY

Gillian M. Joseph is a M. Sc. candidate in Family Relations and Human Development Specializing in Social Gerontology. Her research focuses on the social factors that prevent older workers from participating in retraining and continuing education. She has taught computer software to adults in both the private and public sectors for over a decade. Her academic accomplishments include four graduate scholarships for academic achievement and professional potential, and numerous papers/posters at professional gerontology meetings and post-secondary educational conferences.

Gillian M. Joseph est candidate à la maîtrise ès sciences (gérontologie sociale). Ses recherches portent sur les facteurs sociaux qui empêchent les travailleurs plus âgés de participer à des programmes de recyclage et d'éducation permanente. Depuis plus de dix ans, elle donne des cours sur les logiciels à des adultes dans le privé et le public. Parmi ses réussites universitaires, on peut compter ses quatre bourses d'étude récompensant son mérite académique et son potentiel professionnel, ainsi que les nombreuses communications affichées qu'elle a présentées lors de réunions professionnelles sur la gérontologie et de conférences sur l'éducation post-secondaire.