

Articles

The Prairie Symposium for Research on University Continuing Education: A Report

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary report of The Prairie Symposium for Research on University Continuing Education (PSRUCE) held in Winnipeg, Manitoba on June 3 and 4, 1999. The SSHRC-funded symposium was attended by the Deans and faculty from four prairie universities (Alberta, Calgary, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan). The Symposium was designed to provide a forum for the four universities to assess the current state, future directions, and challenges facing research on university continuing education in Canada; and to strengthen continuing education research networks and collaboration across these universities. This report

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente un rapport sommaire du Symposium des Prairies sur l'éducation permanente universitaire qui a eu lieu à Winnipeg au Manitoba le 3 et le 4 juin 1999. Des doyens et corps professorals venant de quatre universités des prairies (Alberta, Calgary, Manitoba et Saskatchewan) ont assisté au symposium subventionné par le CRSH. Le symposium fut conçu pour offrir un forum où les quatre universités pouvaient d'abord évaluer l'état actuel, les directions futures et les défis auxquels s'affronte la recherche sur l'éducation permanente universitaire au Canada; et ensuite, pour resserrer les réseaux et la collaboration entre

summarizes the discussion including the definition and prioritization of research issues, recommendations made for strengthening research, and concrete plans for action.

ces universités sur la recherche sur l'éducation permanente. Ce rapport fait le résumé des discussions et y comprend la définition et la priorité des questions de recherche, les recommandations faites pour fortifier la recherche ainsi que les plans d'actions.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SYMPOSIUM

The Prairie Symposium on Research for University Continuing Education (PSRUCÉ) was held in Winnipeg, Manitoba on June 3 and 4, 1999, immediately preceding the annual conference of the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education. The symposium was supported by a Research Development Initiative grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and resulted from a proposal made by the Deans of Continuing Education/Extension of four prairie universities (Alberta, Calgary, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan). The continuing education/extension units in these universities have a keen interest in the state of research in university continuing education: all four units have academic mandates with research and scholarly work included in the responsibilities of faculty members in each of the units.

The objectives of PSRUCÉ were two-fold: to provide a forum for the four universities to assess the current state, future directions, and challenges facing research on university continuing education in Canada; and to strengthen continuing education research networks and collaboration across these universities by identifying realistic opportunities for research development and inter- and intra-institutional cooperation.

PSRUCÉ brought together the Deans of Extension or Continuing Education and faculty members active in research—a total of four persons from each of the four universities. Four invited resource persons provided a broadened perspective: Dr. Leslie Degner, Faculty of Nursing, the University of Manitoba and St. Boniface General Hospital Research Center; Dr. Kjell Rubenson, Department of Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, the University of British Columbia; Dr. Mark Selman, Faculty of Continuing

Education, Simon Fraser University; and Dr. Joanne Levesque, SSHRC.

This article provides a summary report of the Symposium. It describes the nature of the discussions and the recommendations for action that resulted. A detailed report of the Symposium discussions is available on the Symposium web site: www.atl.ualberta.ca/prs/ or in hard copy from Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, 8303-112 St., Edmonton, AB T6G 2T4.

The Symposium was structured into three sessions of roughly equal blocks of time. The first session highlighted key points of three commissioned papers, summarized the writers' responses to the feedback received from colleagues via the web and generated a list of issues or challenges facing research on university continuing education. The second session defined and prioritized these issues, and the third and final session formulated specific recommendations and action plans for the future.

REVIEW AND RESPONSE TO THE THREE COMMISSIONED PAPERS

Three papers commissioned for the Symposium were authored by faculty members from three of the four universities. Papers were posted on the Symposium's web site and participants were expected to read the papers in advance. An opportunity to comment on the papers was also provided on the web site. At the Symposium the authors were invited to speak briefly to their papers, and to comment on the input they had received from colleagues.

The first paper, *Thinking about Research in Continuing Education: A Meta-theoretical Primer* written by Dr. Scott McLean, University of Saskatchewan reviewed the philosophical, methodological, and ethical implications of three research paradigms. The paper entitled *Research on University Continuing Education: Barriers and Future Possibilities* by Dr. Anne Percival and Dr. Bill Kops, the University of Manitoba, dealt with barriers and deterrents to research, building research capacity in University Continuing Education (UCE), and future prospects for research. The final paper by Dr. Walter Archer and Kirby Wright, the University of Alberta, entitled *Back to the Future: Adjusting University Continuing Education Research to an Emerging Trend in UCE* provided a historical perspective of research on UCE, and called for a reframing of the definition of research on UCE, a rethinking of its purposes, and using the case study method to support UCE research efforts.

The reviews and comments by the authors were followed by comments from the invited resource people. Dr. Kjell Rubenson encouraged the group to take a broad perspective on research on UCE, and challenged members to think of it in terms of multi-disciplinary approaches. Again, some fundamental and pragmatic questions about the nature of research were raised: identifying valid areas for study; noting the relationship between UCE and the social context; and defining who does the research, how, and for what purposes. It was reiterated that research on UCE needs to be less egocentric and more inclusive, and that competing paradigms ought to be encouraged to improve the quality of research. The need for clarity around the purposes and nature of the research was identified. That is, is research on UCE by, about, and for those who work in the field? Is the psychological orientation of the field driving the nature of the research? Other items stressed included the need for well-funded research and the development of a network of researchers (both in/outside the field) to work in partnerships.

Dr. Leslie Degner took a pragmatic approach and provided some "lessons to be learned" from her experiences in nursing research. She concurred that while debate on the paradigms is worthwhile, questions and problems rather than the paradigms should guide and define the work to be done in the field. In her experience, a qualified critical mass of committed people and long-term funding and grants were essential for moving forward on a nursing research agenda. A shift in thinking about research was also required: research had to become the "day job," not what was done when the "real work" was completed. Effective management (through a project manager and full time research staff) can be more important than consensus on a research agenda in developing the research enterprise. Other practical suggestions included an awards program, a funding pool, protected time to conduct research, and leadership from the top. These elements provided some necessary conditions for creating a research culture in the nursing faculty.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES RELATED TO RESEARCH ON UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION

Using a brainstorming technique, in a large group setting, members generated a long list of issues and challenges pertinent to research on UCE. A focusing and funneling technique was used to narrow this list. The large

group then continued to clarify some of the issues, which are listed (in no particular order) below.

1) Legitimacy

Legitimacy was seen as a complex and multifaceted concept; it dealt with the internal/institutional and external political capital that gave UCE the ability to operate with respect, recognition, and latitude in the university. Issues explored in this area included the professionalization of the field; the need for a critical mass of researchers who are seen as good scientists which raises questions regarding the staffing complement of continuing education units; and the role of graduate programs.

2) Target for Knowledge Generation

Group members identified areas for research which were particularly pertinent to their work: program evaluation/critical appraisal; aboriginal programming; workplace learning in healthy organizations; technology; social context; facilitation of learning. Other aspects of this discussion included the improvement of practice and the possible need to develop a research agenda.

3) Nature of Research

The nature of research on UCE was seen as problematic: What is knowledge? Whose knowledge has value? How do you validate knowledge? These questions involve issues of power and control in regard to who decides on the knowledge of most worth. Further, there is a need to both consume and produce more valid and reliable research.

4) Identifiable Body of Research

An identifiable body of research is based on the multi-disciplinary dimensions that define the field of adult education, including psychology, educational leadership and program development and administration, sociology, philosophy, history, and political science. International education and technology are areas for further study and research.

5) Hegemony

An issue for UCE is how to challenge and change (rather than contribute to and be part of) the various forms of oppression (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism including invisibility, and violence) in contemporary society. But even more important is how to

change the cultural norms, values, behaviours, and practices within institutions and UCE units with respect to the value of research and the “real” job of practice.

6) *Impact of Changing Societal Context on Research on UCE*

Geographic, demographic, socio-economic, educational, and cultural factors influence research on UCE. As these factors change, opportunities for research emerge. The small “p” and big “P” political agendas have an impact on research on UCE as does the extent to which there is national-level or provincial-level coordination of education and CE activities. The globalization of the economy and the lifelong learning concept have put UCE on the main agenda. Major long-term and short-term projects related to these contextual factors are able to attract funding and may create high visibility for UCE.

7) *Human and Other Resources*

Human and other resources, including money, time, goods, and services are critical to advance, improve, and enhance the body of knowledge in the field. Identifying sources such as granting and funding agencies, and partners who have a similar philosophy and similar goals and objectives will advance the research agenda.

Faculty must participate more actively in research. Currently, however, in UCE there is ambiguity about what the “real” job entails. For example, in some UCE units, program development (which is defined in isolation from any research component) is to occupy about 80 percent of job time and research the remaining 20 percent. The types of appointments or staff configurations complicate the issue even more. Staff without advanced degrees are not normally expected, or required, to produce research. In addition, the terminology of academic vs. non-academic staff, according to one participant, has created a “hard board vs. a glass ceiling.” Clearly, a status-gap exists, which results in non-academic colleagues being automatically excluded from participation in research activities.

Although a critical mass of graduate students presents a particular set of challenges (for example, acquiring and providing adequate long and short-term fellowships to students, and expecting a time commitment from part-time students), they are viable resources for developing a research program.

8) *Major Projects*

Major short-term and long-term funded projects conducted in collaboration

with communities, individuals, organizations, and other faculties can be catalysts for developing successful research agendas.

9) *Dissemination/Interaction Strategies and Mechanisms*

Publication, conferences, postings to web sites, the creation of research directories are all important in disseminating research results. Extending the concept of research to include an action research model was proposed as a way of grounding research in practice and involving more staff in research.

10) *Publication strategies*

Because of the importance of publication in universities, it is critical to identify strategies for publishing research both to raise the profile of UCE and to advance faculty careers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH ON UCE

The following characteristics were identified: research projects were long-term and funded by grants; projects were done in partnerships or in collaboration with other colleagues; staff were not only dedicated to research but it was also their real job; leadership within the unit was sympathetic to research and its importance, and created opportunities for staff to conduct research; graduate students were available to work on research projects; research undertaken was problem-based, appeared to be grounded in experience, and stimulated ongoing motivation; and high quality research was facilitated by adequate time allocation and resource utilization.

PRIORITIZING AND DEFINING ISSUES ON RESEARCH ON UCE

Discussions among the participants resulted in the combining of research interests and issues into three main areas: 1) issues that relate to the individual; 2) issues around working within the institution and across institutions; and 3) the role of UCE in the community and broader society.

1) *Individual Issues*

Recommendations included: developing graduate programs, examining workload and organizational structure to determine their impact on individuals' research capacity; exploring alternative models to enhance

research capacity; and encouraging a research culture and developing a reward structure, policies and practices which will support individuals in doing research.

2) *Issues Within UCE Units and Across Institutions*

Recommendations included: establishing a position of director of research in each of the four UCE units; developing grant proposals; forming intra- and inter-unit and institution collaboration; developing an electronic journal, a research interest group web site and listserv; providing a research stream in conjunction with the national CAUCE conference; developing a policy for collaboration with external organizations and faculties; and encouraging leadership from deans.

3) *Issues Related to the Role of UCE in the Broader Community and Society*

Recommendations related to: forming national, regional, and provincial research networks; developing partnerships with industry, business, and educational institutions; creating adult education streams in degree programs; collaborating on research proposals at national and regional levels; and publishing and promoting international work.

ACTION PLANS

Symposium participants developed the following concrete action plans:

- 1) *Create a Listserv.* The University of Manitoba will create a listserv for researchers (in the four units and from other institutions where there is interest) as an open forum for discussion.
- 2) *Hold an Annual Research Meeting* attended by active researchers from the four institutions.
- 3) *Work Towards Developing a Formal Research Network Proposal for Funding.*
- 4) *Implement a Prairie Research Symposium Web Site.* The University of Alberta will maintain the web site established for the Symposium.
- 5) *Develop and Share a Critical Appraisal Template (Program Review).* Participants agreed to develop a process of shared program review or critical appraisal. The basic idea is for each institution to identify at least one program annually and to invite one or more people from other institutions to work with internal staff to look at

the program from a critical and future-oriented perspective. Reviews would be research-oriented and empirically based, conducted according to a general model or template, and would be expected to lead to reports that were publishable both in quality and in interest, as well as being useful to program staff in all the institutions.

- 6) *Report on the Symposium*. The papers commissioned for the Symposium, a follow-up paper by Mark Selman, and a report of the symposium (this article) will be published in the Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education. In addition, a report written for SSHRC will also be provided to the four universities for circulation within the CE units and to the Vice-Presidents Academic and Research.

BIOGRAPHY

Atlanta Sloane-Seale, is an Assistant Professor and Program Director, at the Continuing Education Division, the University of Manitoba. Her areas of research interest are in program planning and accessibility, including disadvantaged adult learners and women and career progress.

Atlanta Sloane-Seale est professeur adjoint et directrice de programmes à la Division d'éducation permanente à l'University of Manitoba. Les domaines l'intéressant en recherches sont l'établissement et l'accessibilité des programmes, y compris les apprenants adultes défavorisés, les femmes et le développement de carrières.