Adult Education & Social Change: Considerations for the Future

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Abstract

Canada’s recent economic uncertainty has forced our society to change the way we perceive the field of adult education. On a daily basis, more and more adults are forced to train and retrain for jobs that may not be lucrative in the long term. This socio-economic climate of vocational uncertainty has given rise to a multitude of questions. Privatized adult education offers an expedient exchange of knowledge for a relatively low financial cost. In contrast, community based colleges provide a more holistic approach to education, with opportunities for students to increase their employability and become more socially responsible. As environmental, economic, political and sociological dilemmas have descended upon our nation, the importance of quality adult education has never been more obvious. In the next twenty years our society will either move towards environmental, political and social awareness, or we will continue to struggle under the yoke of consumerism and personal debt. For the most part, the decision to work towards a better future or to continue struggling with economic uncertainty is reflected in how our society values and utilizes the potential of adult education. With these issues in mind, the author will examine adult education providers and social change with its considerations for the future.
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Introduction

Today, adult learners who have yet to finish high school encounter a variety of challenges before they enter a classroom. In most cases, they must independently decide whether it would be best for them to enroll in a private career college or pursue academic upgrading opportunities at community colleges. Essentially, this means choosing between the pursuit of more comprehensive education represented by the community college model of adult education, or more specific, job related skills training often found within the confines of a private career college. Education that includes the social sciences as well as job specific training has been described by Derek Briton (1996), as, “…an end in itself, rather than a means to an end – employment” (p.7). In contrast, the job specific career college style of education is described by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities as follows: “A private career college is an independent business that prepares students for a specific job, or gives them specific skills, such as computer skills” (Private Career Colleges section, para. 2). Essentially, the private model promises to provide students with academic credentials, such as a General Educational Development certificate, in very little time for a variety of fees. This option can seem very attractive to a person who has recently become un-employed, underemployed, or physically unable to continue working their current job. In contrast, taking a longer time, community colleges offer more meaningful programs through the use of a holistic approach to education, highly skilled educators, personalized curricula, financial support and access to local social service agencies, to list only some of the major advantages of this route.
Deconstructing the Current Situation

In order to accurately determine which methods of adult education are most beneficial to vulnerable adult students one must first break each educational choice down into smaller parts. In Ontario, most private career colleges design their programs to meet three main goals. These include academic upgrading for workforce re-entry, high school equivalency certificates and college preparation. For example, the private community college named TriArch Educational Services (2010), which according to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2012) is one of the 500 registered in the province, (Private Career Colleges), states the following concerning their General Educational Development program:

TriArch Educational Services’ General Educational Development (GED) Preparation Program provides individuals with an academic foundation to succeed in passing the GED test. The Independent Learning Centre (ILC) is the sole provider of the GED testing services for the province of Ontario. Once you write your practice test with TriArch Educational Services, you must complete your official GED Test with ILC (GED preparation section para. 1-2).

What TriArch fails to mention is the fact that the Independent Learning Center offers numerous full credit high school courses that can be completed in the home setting and tutoring for grades nine to twelve by educators who hold an Ontario Teaching Certificate and have years of experience. This means that the ILC is able to provide a more personalized and efficient model of academic upgrading. According to the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (2012) this choice is especially attractive for adults over the age of 18, or young adults who have obtained a leaving letter from a
conventional high school (How to enroll section). The main reason why the ILC is so valuable to students is the fact that it offers the same courses and credits that a student could obtain at any Ontario high school. In terms of college preparation this path is extremely valuable because students can take courses specific to their needs and personal goals. In contrast, a business like TriArch Educational Services (2010) offers courses that are based on the results of student’s intake tests in order to help them prepare for the General Education Diploma (G.E.D) examination.

On their website, the Canadian Information Center for International Credentials (2012) posts a list of fact that, in my opinion accurately and concisely summarizes the history of publicly funded education in Canada. The highlights of it are included in the following points:

- Ontario’s history of postsecondary education began in 1827 with the founding of King’s College, which would later become the University of Toronto.
- Many other institutions would follow and most of them were affiliated with and funded by religious organizations until the 20th century when they began to pursue provincial funding.
- Veterans returning from the Second World War had quite an impact on adult education in Ontario because the labour market changed drastically in the postwar period. Our educational infrastructure expanded rapidly.
- The nineteen sixties and seventies also saw an increase in the number of publicly funded institutions.
- In recent years, our system of adult education has diversified to the point where we have many colleges and universities with the ability to accommodate both official languages.
- Our educational system is again experiencing a period of rapid growth with proliferation of private career colleges and training institutes that provide ‘market driven postsecondary programming’ (History section para. 20).
- Various other forms of accessible education have been initiated with the goal of province wide open learning in mind. They include programs such as Contact North and the Franco – Ontarian Distance Education Network.
From the above history of post-secondary education in Ontario, many institutions that were conceptualized in the mid 20th century are now marking milestones, such as what can be seen on Confederation College’s Academic Upgrading department (2012) in Thunder Bay, Ontario, which recently celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Its conception, in 1967, was a direct result of the Federal Technical and Vocational Training Act passed in 1965 by then Premier John Robarts, as well as the support and funding offered by Bill Davis, former Minister of Education, who is heralded by the college as the, “architect and champion of Ontario colleges” (History section para. 1). Since that time Confederation college has grown into an institution with approximately 3,400 full time students with satellite locations located in many small communities across Ontario’s northwest including Dryden, Fort Francis, Kenora, Geraldton, Marathon, Red Lake, Sioux Lookout and Wawa. The Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities Training Branch oversees the education of students in the Colleges’ many apprenticeship programs including the following: Automotive Service Technician, General Carpenter, Cook, Electrical Construction and Maintenance, Industrial Electrician, Heavy Duty Equipment Technician, Industrial Mechanic and Millwright, Roofing, Truck and Coach Technician and Welding. The college also offers more than eighty post-secondary programs in Aboriginal Studies, Aviation, Business, Community Services, Engineering, General Arts, Health Sciences, Hospitality, Media Arts, Natural Resources, Protective Services, Skilled Trades, English as a Second Language, Continuing Education and of course, Access and Academic Upgrading (Programs and Courses section).
Confederation College’s (2012) version of academic upgrading mirrors the ILC approach to adult education and could be seen as quite innovative for a variety of reasons. Students are able to study on or off campus and have access to a wide variety of programs and services, many of them free of charge or subsidized, including transportation and childcare allowances. Students benefit from being in a truly academic setting with the opportunity to take advantage of student unions, academic/career advisors, apprenticeship programs and easy access to funding from Employment Ontario (Academic Upgrading Program Info. Section para. 1-6). When one couples these benefits with the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education in the same setting, the possibility of a student pursuing a lifelong approach to education is greatly increased. As stated on Confederation College’s website:

The Academic Upgrading Program prepares students to meet their educational and/or employment goals. Through the Academic Upgrading Program students can take all course requirements for admission into college, university, and apprenticeship programs or employment (Academic Upgrading section para. 1).

The promise of such opportunities differs greatly from those of Private Career Colleges in that there are seemingly no limits to what an individual can accomplish through the use of this model of education. By advertising vast educational possibilities and giving the student the power to plan and pursue major life goals Community Colleges offer more than hours of training in exchange for money. They promise students the ability to create a better life for themselves.

In contrast, to a community college approach is the for-profit privatized career college. According to former chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS)
(2008) Shelley Melanson, “For-profit businesses offering credentials prey on immigrants, undocumented students and first generation Canadians” (Quotes section para. 1).

Included on the CFS website was a bulleted list of facts pertaining to the grim reality of privatized adult education:

**QUICK FACTS**

- Many 'Private Career Colleges' charge tuition fees that are 4 to 5 times as high as the average tuition fees paid by students attending public colleges.
- 'Private Career Colleges', though not funded by the government directly, siphon money from the public system because students attending private colleges are allowed to apply for and receive loans through the publicly subsidized Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).
- In 2007, the OSAP repayment default rate for 'Private Career Colleges' was 6.5% higher than the rate for public colleges and 13.2% higher than the rate for public universities.
- According to Statistics Canada, private college certificate holders earn roughly the same amount as high school graduates.

(Quick facts section para. 3)

This list of quick facts is crucial in understanding how private career colleges turn education into a commodity and market it to students as consumers. They take advantage of government funding not only for upstart businesses, but funding that is supplied to the students, with the understanding that it be used for meaningful educational opportunities. Judging by the statistics listed above, private career colleges provide no more education and employability than regular public funded high schools. One can only extrapolate that they would fall well short of community colleges in terms of graduate earning power.
These facts represent a stark contrast to what the Ontario Association of Career Colleges would like us to believe. They clearly portray career colleges as being much more educationally centered judging by their website and the following list of statements found there. Their claims include the following:

**What Are Career Colleges?**

Career colleges are private (both for-profit and not-for-profit) post-secondary institutions that provide career specific, outcome based programs. Graduates of career colleges can earn a diploma or certificate. Over 60,000 students enroll annually in Ontario's career colleges alone!

**What Makes Career Colleges Different?**

The educational focus of career colleges is on meeting student need and providing career specific training. The range of programming that a career college offers is as general as business, health care and technology to as specific as travel and welding. Despite the wide variety of programs available, career colleges are unified by the characteristics that set the sector apart:

- Small class sizes,
- Intensive training with short duration
- Flexible timetabling
- Multiple intakes throughout the year

**Who Are Career College Students?**

Like the career colleges themselves, the types of students who choose to attend a career college is quite diverse. While some students enter a career college directly out of high school - the average age is approximately 27 - roughly 30% are over the age of 35 and 40% have previously attended a university or community college.

Students use a variety of options to fund their course of study including personal funds, Employment Insurance (EI) funds, WSIB sponsorship, or government-sponsored student loans (OSAP).

**Why Choose A Career College?**
The demand for highly skilled employees is on the rise. Employers, more so than ever, are demanding that new graduates have obtained the skills necessary during their training.

The specific outcome-based nature of the training offered by career colleges ensures that graduates are ‘job ready’ upon graduation.

The nature of work today is constantly changing and growing; so too are the needs of employers. Given the inherent flexibility of the career college sector, it is able to adapt quickly and efficiently to the shifting landscape of the career environment.

Hence, career colleges not only meet the flexibility needs of the student but are also constantly changing to reflect the demands of the employer and marketplace.

(Why choose a career college section para. 5-8)

These broad, sweeping claims are eerily similar to an advertising campaign that one might read in a magazine or hear on the television. The statements portray career colleges as being everything that a student could want from an educational institution and they simply cannot be one hundred percent true.

During my time working in a private career college, I very quickly came to understand that the intake assessment was the single most important aspect of curriculum planning within the organization. It was from this assessment that my superiors gained all the information they needed to compartmentalize, isolate and identify a student’s educational shortcomings. Areas where students fell short indicated the areas where instructors focused. These intake assessment methods included determining the basic grade level of the student in terms of literacy and numeracy, finding a number of text books that corresponding with this level and photo copying pages out of them for the
student to work through, completing assignments and tests that were marked and returned to them with limited follow up.

I feel compelled to shed light on what I see as a manifestation of social issues that influence many lives, including those beyond the adult students. On the surface, private career colleges appear quite productive and useful to those who are in need of basic skills training in areas such as literacy, numeracy and computer skills. In reality, students who pay for these courses receive a product that is clearly inferior to educational services offered by community colleges. In order to cut costs, the private career college where I worked did many things that negatively affected the education of its students. Cost cutting measures included everything from hiring instructors whose English language and literacy skills were far below those of the students, using antiquated technology in terms of word processing, internet and computer technology and openly neglecting to purchase assistive technologies that could greatly improve the efficiency of its students. Issues such as these would have likely been addressed quite quickly within community colleges as these institutions have access to forms of financial assistance that are just not available within the private sector.
Education as a Commodity

In *Designing The Just Learning Society: A Critical Inquiry*, Michael Welton (2005) discusses the concept of, “the religion of the market” (p.188). Essentially, he believes that society has become so immersed in consumerism that every aspect of our lives is controlled by money. This can be seen quite clearly in the following passage:

Thus, the new theology teaches us that business activity is right and just because the market made us do it and that value can only be adequately signaled by prices. We sacrifice our time, our families, our children, our forests, our seas and our land on the altar of the market, the god to whom we owe our deepest allegiance. Forsaking the consumer paradise for a life of poverty, wandering with an empty begging bowl or a life devoted to alleviating the plight of others is scarcely an option for most religious persons (p. 189).

According to Welton, society operates without a moral centre, blindly pursuing financial prowess while openly compromising the concept of social responsibility. When one applies this theory to adult education, the Private Career College stands out as manifestation of our obsession with consumerism. They provide a service for money that they claim will allow the student to make more money in order to satisfy the intense desire to appear successful amongst peers. As Welton and others believe, this does absolutely nothing to help solve society’s abundant inequities and injustices. It simply feeds consumerism and legitimizes the adult learner’s desire for a quick fix. Once we become members of the work force our learning becomes much more focused and centered, but not on self improvement, or social responsibility. Our learning becomes dominated by productivity. This can be seen when Welton (2005) writes:
Harnessed to the money-code, the business organization is actually learning disabled. It is intensely pressured to learn along a single trajectory: to enhance shareholder profits and interests. It accentuates the economic at the expense of the social. It appears to be immature and resolutely stupid at learning how to care for the environment or equalize the distribution of wealth (p. 100).

This pejorative assessment of the overall quality of the education that people receive from their employers lends us to believe that life-long learning in relation to the working class is in fact a myth. It could even be said that in our consumption based society it pays to avoid life-long learning especially when it concerns social responsibility and private career colleges survive because these factors endure. The community college model also offers education in exchange for money; however, the opportunities found within that model include a higher understanding of social issues. Adult learners are essentially given the right to choose whether they want to submit themselves to wage slavery or engage more advanced levels of learning. Theoretically, these advanced levels of learning could be initiated in the community college setting where learners will be exposed to basic level studies in the social sciences and humanities.

Dr. Welton’s sentiments are echoed by Derek Briton (1996) in *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: A Post Modern Critique*. This is quite apparent when he states:

…an instrumental or ‘mechanistic’ vision of adult education has come to dominate the field. I learned this quickly when I began my studies in adult and higher education. This instrumental understanding of adult education, however, contrasted starkly with the understanding that I brought to the field, an understanding tempered by my own experience as an adult learner. Unable to accommodate my direct experience within the field’s vocation-centered,
instrumental vision, I subsequently found myself driven to question its integrity (p. 2).

In this passage, Briton expresses his belief that many of us no longer learn for the sake of learning or personal development beyond that which serves to increase our socio-economic status. He insinuates that learning has become centered on the work force and in doing so only serves to perpetuate current social dilemmas like poverty, inequity, discrimination and dissolution of the democratic process. As with the Welton text, this passage and the book as a whole helps us understand the intricate nature of adult education and its influence on the student’s political, social, psychological and economic well being. Within the context of Briton’s writing, the Private Career College fails where the Community College succeeds for many reasons. Primarily, academic upgrading allows the learner to engage the world of academia outside of the vocational setting. Thus, it is much closer to Briton’s ideal model of adult education as, “a means of social change” (p. 2).

The promise of an educational solution to poverty has become quite marketable in recent years. This is why people in my home town initially showed quite a bit of interest in the local private career colleges. The general public accepts them as viable educational solutions because of careful marketing and advertisement. In my experience, private career colleges do not offer anything valuable to the general public besides helping them understand the basics of customer service and computer literacy. Both of these are skills that would quickly be acquired through employment at local big box stores or restaurants during the first few weeks of training. Our society has come to
associate our level of education with socio-economic status and unfortunately, the two rarely correlate. By claiming to be a college they trick the consumer into thinking they are receiving an education that is comparable to the programs offered at community colleges and nothing could be further from the truth. In my experience, private career colleges do absolutely nothing to help a person improve their socio-economic status. Instead, they serve to solidify and perpetuate social problems such as political apathy and ensure that the working class has no ability to pursue more lucrative employment opportunities. Private career colleges can limit a student’s potential by providing extremely limited learning opportunities that leave little room for educational advancement and personal development.

When I look back at my community college education I remember things such as career fairs, visits from representatives of the local university and its programs, speeches delivered by prominent members of the community and large employers. There was a general atmosphere of positivity that included everything from parenting classes to fitness opportunities all accessible through the possession of a student card. The emphasis was not on how we can be more successful in our customer service jobs; instead, it was on how we could learn more about the world and become more responsible citizens, in search of self actualization, self esteem and a balance between our careers and our own personal development. In addition, the prominence and visibility of a functional and well supported student union ensured that students had representation when addressing issues like tuition fees, the quality of facilities, educational programs,
employability and workplace readiness. Although private career colleges conduct exiting surveys it has been my experience that they really do very little to reflect upon their practices and benefit from the opinions of their graduates.

According to Alexandra Posadzki of the Canadian Free Press (2012) students of private career colleges are beginning to speak out. On the subject of career college complaints she writes the following, “Complaints filed by students about some of Ontario’s private career colleges allege that harassment from teachers, inadequate instruction and lack of proper equipment are hurting the quality of education at these increasingly popular institutions” (para.1). Lack of professionalism and attention to detail only compounds the fact that these institutions are operating without the basic tools needed to accomplish the goals they supposedly set out to achieve. In addition, the article contains quotes and anecdotal evidence from several critical students in regard to private career college’s employees, atmosphere, curriculum planning and resources:

‘I strongly believe I smelled alcohol on her [instructor’s] breath, one student alleges.’

‘Since being at this school I have been put on antidepressants and have been having a hard time sleeping, it has caused a huge amount of stress.’

‘Since starting at Everest [a private career college] I have discovered that I was misled,’ the complaint reads.

‘The program is strictly self taught and the equipment room no longer has any equipment. Essentially my classroom time is spent reading a book.’

(Posadzki, 2012)
From this recent piece of journalism, one can see a good representation of how privatized adult education negatively affects students. Many students are upset by the fact that they have received a relatively useless education from people who were unqualified to deliver it in the first place. The emphasis was placed on taking money from the students, quickly pushing them through a program that is ill equipped to prepare students for the working world, and exposing them to situations where they are treated with no respect or dignity.

From my personal experiences, when profits were scarce, employees suffered through job loss, reductions in pay, inadequate teaching materials, limited training opportunities and pressure from management to struggle on despite obvious inadequacies. This had a catastrophic effect on the students involved. As profits dwindled, enrollment suffered because the institution gained a negative reputation within the community. It was seen as a waste of time by most students and some of them quit because they could tell that they were not really being taken seriously by the company involved. As a result, students were prone to disruptive behavior, vocal outbursts and even threats of violence. This in turn limited my ability to manage the classroom effectively as I was also beginning to lose faith in the organization as well as myself as an educator. Staff turnover was also an issue because it limited continuity of care for the students and contributed to a students’ general lack of confidence in themselves and the company. It can safely be said that such conditions were not favorable in terms of creating a positive and productive learning environment.
The exact opposite situation is demonstrated by the following success story found on Confederation Colleges’ website:

Suman Verma graduated from the Literacy and Basic Skills upgrading program in July 2001. Suman then went on to complete the Early Childhood Education program through Confederation and graduated this June 2003. Suman is presently enjoying her work with the youngsters at the Harbour View Child Care Centre.

Shortly after settling in Canada from India, Suman was directed to the Literacy and Basic Skills program by DOORS to improve her English skills. Suman was a high school math teacher in her home country in India, graduating from Kwrukshtra University. Suman wanted to continue teaching and working with children when she came to Canada.

After completion of her LBS upgrading program in 2001, Suman was directed to the Program Coordinator of the Early Childhood program where she was encouraged to enroll in the fall 2002 semester. Suman was highly motivated to complete the LBS upgrading program and the ECE program, and is now seeking her credentials to teach math and physics in the College Access programs. In addition to her studies, Suman also tutored Confederation College students in math this past year.

Suman’s two daughters Himali (12) and Alisha (13) are both very proud of their mother and look forward to completing their education and carrying on to the post secondary level as their mother has done.

This example shows that Suman was not only able to complete English language training at Confederation College, she was also able obtain a college diploma and is now a
content and contributing member of the community. Speaking from personal observation, I sincerely doubt she would have been able to accomplish what she has today should she have decided to enroll in a private career college when she first arrived in Canada. Her story proves that publicly funded community colleges can produce gainfully employed members of society as expediently as private career colleges. Her story also helps us understand that a more comprehensive approach to education benefits students, their families and the community as a whole.

When I graduated from Lakehead University with a three year undergraduate degree and failed to gain entry into an Ontario Teacher Education Program I knew that I was really in trouble. Much like Suman, I wanted desperately to do what I loved and I loved to teach. Like her, I decided to enroll in the Early Childhood Education program at Confederation College and am quite thankful to say that I was able to get a job, albeit in another city, one month before I officially graduated. Although I have held positions with a private career college since then and have begun a career as a counselor with a Northern Ontario developmental services agency, I am immensely proud of my college diploma and how it gave me a feeling of self worth. It gave me the sense of dignity and confidence that comes with the knowledge that you possess a skill that is valuable to society.
A Personal Perspective

Knowing that you are capable of being a positive influence for families and children is truly gratifying and like Suman, I owe much of this self confidence to hard work and Confederation College. My experience working at a private career college from 2008 to 2010, which in part must be attributed to the fact that many community colleges in the region had faced cut backs and are not hiring, was completely different. In the first stages of my employment with the career college I was excited about the job and thought that I would be helping people learn and improve their lives. As time went by I came to realize that I was really only passing on small pieces of knowledge, such as computer literacy, that would help the students rejoin the labour force as customer service representatives. Many of the students were quite aware that they were not being given the opportunity to pursue post secondary education, such as a college diploma because it would cost their sponsoring agency, normally the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, too much money. In other words, the government did not want to retrain the injured workers for jobs that would suit their personalities, only jobs that would quickly reduce the amount of money needed to support the individual.
The Political Agenda

In Adult Education And Political Systems, W.E. Styler (1984) provides us a shocking interpretation of how governments shape what and how we learn. He explains that, “political education is universally a weak element in adult education” (p. 143). Such a condition serves to leave the general population unable to understand the complex social and political systems that dominate their lives. This can be seen when he states:

The frequently repeated and usually eloquent assertions that adult education makes a significant contribution to effective democratic citizenship are hard to justify. It is when the term adult education is used more widely to include measures to instruct and mould people to ensure that they fit into the requirements of state – or more precisely a party which controls the state – that it assumes substantial proportions (p. 144).

In other words, adult education in North America mainly serves the government’s current agenda, which is quite obviously the ruthless pursuit of fiscal solvency. Private Career Colleges do just that as they take advantage of the poor and undereducated by pushing them through G.E.D. programs and workplace readiness programs that provide no social or political education. This gives the graduates of private career colleges the ability to work a minimum wage job that in turn allows the government to justify cutting or removing financial supports including Welfare or Workplace Safety and Insurance Board benefits. The end result reinforces citizens who must constantly work minimum wage jobs in order to sustain themselves and live with the understanding that they will never, barring fortunate circumstances, be able to improve their socio-economic status.
Such a viewpoint is also prevalent in *The Training Trap: Ideology, Training and The Labour Market*. According to Jennifer Stephen (1996), “Policy responses to high unemployment in Ontario and federally have combined apparent enhancement of labour adjustment and training efforts with massive cuts to government spending and the public sector” (p. 223). In other words, adult education in Ontario and Canada in general has become a tool used by the government in order to focus learners on workplace skills that serve to strengthen the economy. Coupled with massive cutbacks to social programs this political strategy allows the government to save money. Private Career Colleges have emerged and survived because of policies that undermine the benefits of public education for all citizens. This can be seen in the Stephen (1996) text when she writes:

Such programming has reshaped the meaning, content and purpose of training constructed through community organizations, adult education centres and other postsecondary public education facilities. Training for unemployed workers has been a growth industry, with private for-profit training outfits popping up like mushrooms in the Greater Toronto Area, inflating program costs in direct proportion to the maximum per capita available from the public trough. And of course, this is deliberate policy. **For-profit training is the Trojan horse, brought in to destabilize community-based and public education agencies as part of the ongoing drive towards privatization** [emphasis added] (p. 229).

Although it may be frightening, we must be aware that both the federal and provincial governments favor a vocationally centered system of adult education. An uneducated working class serves to maintain the status quo and supports conservative ideals. Perhaps what is most frightening is the fact that the uneducated masses seem to buy into the philosophy without even knowing the political implications behind it. The promises of the private career colleges that include fast paced courses are simply too tempting for
those who are in dire need of money. Unfortunately, it makes economic sense for students to patronize these educational companies and take their place in the consumer oriented model of capitalism. Sacrificing the relatively homelike atmosphere of the community college, with its subsidies, funding, child care, distance education and opportunities for life-long learning is relatively easy when one is offered a G.E.D. for a few months worth of work.

During my employment at a private career college I became noticeably critical of our current political climate. I was upset that I had a poor working environment because the Workplace Insurance and Safety Board was forcing people, many of them in the latter stages of mid life, to retrain for jobs within the customer service sector. Many of these people were men who had been miners, truck drivers, foresters, carpenters, welders and farmers for many years. They really did not appreciate the fact that the government, in the form of the Workplace Insurance and Safety Board, was forcing them to retrain for a job at the local big box store, or grocers produce department. I began to empathize with them to the point that I became quite unmotivated to go to work myself. Some students were so depressed by the prospect of working a customer service job that they were prone to threats of suicide. Many were also suffering from financial as well as marital issues at the same time and felt betrayed and abandoned by a government that appears determined to decrease deficits no matter what the cost. Unfortunately, our federal and provincial governments appear to be in favor of cutting funding from community colleges in order to support private business that serve to perpetuate a consumer driven economy that
keeps the working class from attaining any form of political awareness or upward financial mobility.

In a 2011 article found in the Toronto Star entitled *Private career colleges keep operating illegally: Auditor*, author Tanya Talaga (2011) writes the following:

Ontario’s private career colleges are getting a free pass from government inspectors — who claim to not have the time or funding to police schools. As a result, some colleges that were ordered shut down due to a number of violations are still offering courses, Auditor General Jim McCarter’s office found in its report released Monday (para. 2).

In other words, the provincial government knows nearly everything it needs to know about the inadequacies under which our private career colleges suffer from but it is powerless to do anything without further federal government support in the form of regulations, inspectors and clearly defined procedures for dealing with offending institutions. Talaga also offers a list of interesting facts on the subject:

- Private career college abuses was recently the subject of an extensive *Toronto Star* investigation.

- There are only eight inspectors and they are supposed to focus on student contracts, admission requirements, instructor qualifications, advertising, student complaints, program compliancy and insurance requirements, according to the report.

- The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities admits that, in order for inspections to be effective, between 150 to 200 of them should be conducted every year.

(Talaga, 2011)
Clearly, inspectors are few and far between and they most likely do not have the resources they need in order to do their job properly. Regulation appears to be lacking within an industry whose motives are purely aimed at making large sums of money as quickly as possible.
Social Implications

The negative social implications of a massive private adult education industry could begin to include an increase in the division between social classes, continued and intensified economic distress fueled by consumerism and the possibility of socio-political turmoil. These thoughts are also quite evident in the works of D. Little (1991) when he writes:

Contemporary society embodies social pathologies such as anomie, alienation, and personality disorders which are manifest in a variety of human and natural phenomena. Humans abuse themselves, their children and others both physically and psychologically; they degrade their culture; and they violate the natural environment – all in the mindless struggle to achieve success as measured in terms of power and money (p. 103).

Private career colleges can easily be seen as a manifestation of our insatiable desire for money and power. By devaluing social responsibility and reducing adult education to vocational training, the government of Canada has in turn created a myriad of social problems that can be linked to a consumption based, capitalist society. Many individuals who are thrust into direct competition with each other react in the ways listed above. This behavior is especially true if they are economically vulnerable. It is highly unlikely that a situation such as this could exist if the majority of the population had the opportunity and desire to understand the basics of political and social structures found in most courses offered by community colleges. Instead, because there is a value on making an income versus a true education, people are held ransom by the myths of capitalism.
Students seek the fastest way to compete and unfortunately that way is usually a private career college.

Government agencies like the Workplace Safety and Insurance board have the ability to strip an injured worker of their source of income by revoking their rights to benefits and monetary support should the worker not participate actively in the retraining process. I have observed injured workers, or new students, display a strong tendency to give in to the demands placed upon them by their assigned case workers. These demands include that they attend private career colleges as a means of preparing them for a new job that will supplement the benefits they receive as employment insurance claimants. As these people are in such a vulnerable state they simply go through the motions dreading graduation day as it means that they will inevitably have to accept the shame and humiliation of working a job that they feel is waste of their skills and experience. I observed very few students being encouraged to pursue post secondary education at community colleges because that would cost the agency far too much. Only the students who already had high school diplomas with good grades were even considered as candidates for post secondary schooling. The rest were forced to be trained on the utilization of cash registers and how to address customers within a big box store environment.

According to Michael Collins, such rampant and merciless destruction of what Jurgen Habermas described as the life-world is very much an issue to be studied by adult educators. The life-world is described by John Sitton (2003) as the, ‘‘phenomenology’’ of
“the world” (p. 62). This means, in part, that the *life-world* represents how we perceive the structures that comprise our social existence and define our physical world. Collins (1991) claims that valuable adult education must seek to merge the *life-world* with the system world, or the institutions of government and administration (p. 56). Such a viewpoint is illuminated when he writes:

> Apart from engendering critical discourse among professionals about professionalization and identifying problems induced through an unexamined technical rationality that undermines vital aspects of our everyday life-world (including that of professionals), adult educators can light upon locations and concerns where a **thoughtful pedagogy would help sustain life-world interests** [emphasis added] (p. 64).

The realization of such pedagogy may never happen if Canadian society continues on the path it is currently following. Surprisingly, these widespread social problems have had no impact on the manner in which our government conducts its ruthless austerity measures. Now, more than ever, our government is showing us that it values trained individuals rather than educated ones. Instead of funding community colleges and other schools of the social sciences and humanities it has placed an emphasis on funding training initiatives that provide a quick fix for unemployment. There is a focus on the citizen as a tool of our consumer based economic system, rather than an active social and political participant.

Unfortunately, it is more likely that in the future the destruction of our environment will force us to re-evaluate our consumerist economic model. Once this
happens, where do all the minimum wage retail workers trained by Private Career Colleges go? Collins expresses a particularly optimistic point of view when he writes:

> It is to be hoped that in subsequent phases of their development, and this is where adult education can surely help, they will place more emphasis on transforming bureaucratized and governmental structures into a means for supporting and enhancing precious dimensions of the life-world exemplified by genuinely democratic interactions. **People create the structures of the system-world; people can bring them in hand** [emphasis added] (p. 67).

Such utopian ideals could indeed be possible. The characteristics of Confederation College’s Academic Upgrading program speak to these interests when one considers the range of services offered.

However, the problem of apathy still remains. Just because a person has been given the opportunity to learn in an publicly funded college, has opportunity to fund this education, get assistance for transportation, child care, academic advising, a student union and in some cases health care benefits - in addition to a broader and more thoughtful program that attends to skills and theory, including some courses that are eligible for direct university transfer - does not mean that they will become active participants in the democratic process. It simply means that it is possible they may become more interested in being an active and involved citizen who is more knowledgeable of societal issues. Active citizenship is something that takes time to develop. As I have observed, it takes time for people to understand just how active governing bodies are in our daily lives. Sometimes it takes a negative experience like an injury at work and problems with employment insurance and other government benefits
to motivate a person to get involved in the democratic process. It requires exposure to a number of different ideas, facts and opinions with the intent to understand them further and form logical conclusions, in the epistemological style of scholars like Briton, Welton and Rebick, to create active, democratically aware citizens.
Addressing the Issues

According to Jurgen Habermas (1971), “As we know, the academic stratum, shaped by a uniform mentality, has dissolved in connection with long-term structural changes in society.” (p. 3) Commoditized education and education consumed solely for the purposes of participation in a flawed economic system does nothing to critique society and is therefore reduced to serving as a function of the structures that limit our ability to grow. Although education with a clear political agenda is equally disturbing, we must not allow our classrooms to become void of social purpose. As Habermas (1971) writes of modern universities:

If the university were exclusively adapted to the needs of industrial society and had eradicated the remains of beneficiant but archaic freedoms, then behind the back of its efficient efforts, it could be just as ideologically effective as the traditional university used to be. It could pay for its unreflected relation to practice by stabilizing implicit professional standards, cultural traditions, and forms of political consciousness, whose power expands in an uncontrolled manner precisely when they are not chosen but result instead from the ongoing character of existing institutions (p. 4).

Critical inquiry and reflection are much more likely to occur in the environment that has been carefully created and studied by Canada’s community colleges than in the private career college setting. In the previous quotation, Habermas is referring to the university setting. The fact that many courses obtained by students at community colleges are considered acceptable for credit at Canadian universities and those obtained at private career colleges are not illustrates that the community model is inherently more successful in terms of providing quality education.
Personally speaking, private career colleges, who often operate out of cheap commercial rental units and obscure office buildings or strip malls are someone’s idea of an easy way to make a fast dollar at the expense of the working class. They hire unqualified employees, maintain inadequate learning environments, use antiquated forms of assessment and curriculum planning and most definitely ignore social issues. Their recently popularity will hopefully be short lived. It may be ironic, but education and awareness is the only way for us to help the general public understand that much more than jobs and financial stability, or lack thereof, is at stake when they patronize such establishments. We run the risk of devaluing education as a whole and this is far more dangerous than any federal or provincial book balancing cutbacks or political posturing.

In order to be the catalyst of positive societal advancement adult education must introduce and maintain a social climate of inquiry, critique and reflection by encouraging citizens to practice these traits while taking part in the functions of society that their vocations represent. If we desire positive social change it is crucial that what we teach in adult classrooms reflects a politically aware society. In Toward a Rational Society Habermas (1971) writes:

The influence of interpretations provided by the social sciences and humanities on the self-understanding of the general public can be seen easily. Today the hermeneutic sciences, no matter how positivistically disciplined in their methods, cannot in studying active traditions completely escape the constraint of either continuously reproducing them, or developing them or critically transforming them (p. 2).
In order to induce positive change we must continually evaluate our concept of socio-political education in an attempt to ensure positive outcomes for the future. When we neglect to study social sciences and humanities in favor of quickly gaining fragmented pieces of knowledge and employment centered skills we risk losing touch with the values and liberties we had to fight to attain. Our past, be it positive or negative, is reflective in our educational practices.

Now more than ever it is clear that humanity will face issues much more complex and potentially devastating than an economic crisis. Consequently, it is imperative that we ask how we prepare for such issues. As Leon McKenzie (1979) states:

The extrapolative process involves inferences from what is known to what is unknown. In this process trends and patterns are observed and projected into the future. What can be extrapolated from existing trends, it is suggested, is a possible future state of affairs wherein people will be more collaborative out of necessity (p. 64).

The dangers of approaching such a future as a largely uneducated and fiercely competitive society need not be explained. We, as Canadians and global citizens, will face the future one of two ways. We will either go forward, facing world-wide issues as competitive individuals, whose sole purpose in life is personal gain and power, or we will learn to value the lifeworld, ourselves and our planet.

There are signs of positive change and hope for the future as many people have had similar experiences with adult education in Canada as I have and they too have decided to act. On Wednesday July 23rd 2008 the Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges
and Universities was forced to close a private career college, for a variety of reasons, with a number of branches in the Greater Toronto Area. In an article on the subject, then chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students (2008) mentioned the following:

Students expect that, by studying in Canada, they will be protected from the type of dishonesty and fraud that tends to be associated with private, for-profit companies selling education. We have an excellent public system of colleges and universities and these fly-by-night outfits undermine the quality of education in Ontario (para. 4).

Hope for the future lies in the hands of voters as we obviously require strict regulation and scrutiny of privatized education in order to ensure that business owners obey our laws. A more direct approach is called for by the C.F.S. when the article states:

The Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario is calling on the provincial government to find spaces in public colleges for former students of the now closed diploma mill so they can complete their studies at no additional cost. The province should also implement a moratorium on any new private career college approvals and take steps towards eliminating for-profit private colleges (para. 2).

Although a situation such as this would be welcomed by many individuals, it is unlikely that private career colleges will be completely removed from our educational reality. Although the removal of the for-profit career colleges will likely not occur, it is encouraging to note that people do care and that the public is becoming more knowledgeable and critical of our educational institutions.

Our system of adult education must strive to reflect the ever changing nature of society and life in general. Technological advancements, economic uncertainty and global environmental issues have forced us to become much more dynamic and multi-
skilled individuals. According to Dr. Welton (2006), “The best of adult education research traditions affirms that human individuation requires structures that permit human beings to express their many-sided potentials” (p. 216). Experience and research has led me to believe that privatized adult education is completely incapable of meeting these societal needs on a long term basis. This can be seen when Dr. Welton (2006) writes:

Without good work and active citizenship, infused by a sense that life is worth embracing, life goes sour and the pathological consequences reverberate in and out of the lifeworld. The actually existing structures of work in a just learning economy must permit us to do and create useful things and services for others. And civil society is still a fundamental training ground for adults to unfold and express their capacities as authentic speakers and decision makers (p.216).

If we do not help people integrate themselves within our society and provide opportunities to grow within society, with freedom of expression then the values that we hold as a society have become compromised. When people are unable to seek and achieve sources of self-actualization they act in ways that are devastating to society and to the pursuit of social awareness and the elimination of political apathy.

As I have observed during my time as a private career college instructor, people respond quite negatively to a lack of flexibility in education. Adults, both young and old, have a greater understand of what the world has to offer. The human brain craves knowledge and understanding. Our curiosity and adaptability has propelled us forward throughout the generations and has given us an intrinsic desire for self improvement at any age. We must continue to embrace these traits collectively in order for our society to
overcome current perils and future challenges. Education must empower us rather than limit us as individuals. According to Dr. Welton (2006):

Our critical inquiry has exposed, however, the gap between the inspiring rhetoric of the learning society and the grim realities of wasted human potential littering the global landscape. This tour through the contemporary intellectual world reveals the impossibility of thinking about a just learning society apart from the power, greed, and privilege of those who hoard the goods and skew the learning processes in the service of the money-code (p. 210).

Although a complete separation between what Welton calls the “money-code” (p. 210) and education would most likely be ideal it is unlikely to happen for quite some time. Until our governing bodies begin to value education to the point where they are willing to provide it freely to their citizens there must be some form of common ground identified. The elimination of privatized adult education would represent a bold and significant improvement, allowing us to elect the policy makers that would shape our society’s view of education and social advancement.

Ultimately, change lies in hands of those who cast their ballots during elections. If we are to proceed in a positive manner and expect a productive, stable, future we must become active members of democracy. Such a point is reinforced by Judy Rebick (2000) when she writes the following:

Democracy is the most powerful tool for social change history has ever seen. We must set out some proposals for how we can move in the direction of truly democratizing our society. We must learn how to take the best from our current form of government and combine it with ideas about direct and participatory democracy that have been developing around the world. Let’s call the result active citizenship (p. 41).
Change will never occur unless our society can come together and collectively express what it is that we want from our government. Society is both the subject and the potential catalyst of the changes that we want to see. According to Rebick (2000), “Our civil service is still based on a hierarchical military model of command. High level civil servants develop policy options for their ministers and implement them once decisions are made” (p. 42). Opinions and concerns of the general population are rarely taken into consideration until issues become crises. As Rebick (2000) notes, “Public consultation is viewed as an ordeal to be suffered rather than an opportunity to unearth new ideas and solutions to difficult problems” (p. 42). The solution, or at least an understanding of what needs to happen in order for society to move forward, lies entirely within our desire to embrace the democratic process or ignore it.
Conclusion

A future based on community, respect for life and the environment will never be achieved as long as we continue to accept GEDs and workplace readiness programs offered by private career colleges as a meaningful form of education. They are simply money making ventures created by people who would rather take advantage of a problem than be part of a solution. They represent problems that our government will not invest the time or money into solving because it would involve a massive re-organization of conservative values. Although the Community College model of education is not perfect it represents what could be seen as social progress. Thirty years ago colleges rarely offered the range of services that students now come to expect from institutions like Confederation College. On their website, the Association of Canadian community colleges proudly lists a set of guiding directives:

**Vision, Mission, Values and Operating Principles**

**Vision**

ACCC will be the most respected voice in post-secondary education.

**Mission**

ACCC will champion and support the learning provided by member institutions.

**Values and Operating Principles**

- Member-centered.
- Communications excellence in both official languages.
- Politically non partisan.
- Entrepreneurial.
- A learning organization.
- Deliver on commitments and be accountable, consistent and transparent.
- Value the diversity of members and their learners.
- Advocate with a united voice.
- Demonstrate ethical practice: respect, integrity and trust.
- Practice good environmental stewardship.
- Provide innovative leadership.
- Build healthy, consultative and collaborative relationships.

(Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2012)

These guiding principles make such colleges irreplaceable in terms of their value to the future of our society and clearly more valuable to the field of adult education than privately run, profit oriented companies that sell bits and pieces of knowledge to desperate people. We must continue evaluate and strive to understand the socio-political factors at work in the structure of our systems of adult education, as Derek Briton (1996) writes:

The commonsense assumption that the modern practice of adult education is a disinterested, scientific endeavor that need not, indeed, should not concern itself with moral and political questions has become all but impossible to question because the field’s normative base can no longer be addressed within its narrowly defined, depoliticized, dehistoricized, technicist, professional discourse (p. 9).

We must understand that our democratic, socially minded, humanitarian ideals are being tried and tested by our system of economics as well as our current system of government. Our system of education, no matter how hard we try to fool ourselves, is not immune to these factors.
As democratic citizens, we must be aware of the guiding principles of our academic institutions in order to ensure that they reflect our common social goals. Otherwise, our social principles and beliefs will fall to the pressures of consumer oriented capitalism and resource exhaustion, an important consideration for the future.
References


