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Learning from the Past and Looking to the Future: A Conversation between Pamela Tate and Robert Deahl about the Past 35 Years in Adult Learning

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Edited by Rebecca Klein-Collins

This special issue of the *CAEL Forum and News* is in part about remembrances. As we recognize CAEL's 35th anniversary, we have also invited many of our authors to honor the memory and contributions of one person to the field of adult learning with articles on their current work and the future of the field. David Justice was a special person to our CAEL family for most of our 35 years. He served on the CAEL Board of Trustees, worked with us on countless initiatives, and was a good friend and advisor.

Robert Deahl, dean of the College of Professional Studies at Marquette University, recently spoke with David's wife, CAEL President and CEO Pamela Tate, about the past, together identifying milestone or watershed moments in adult learning that the two of them witnessed along with David over the past 35 years. Bob and Pam also discussed what is noteworthy about the current stage in our history, as well as what challenges and opportunities lie ahead.

Bob: Pam, adult and lifelong learning have been an emerging focus in higher education for several decades now. Who would you say are some of the key figures - nationally and internationally - who have shaped and influenced this landscape?

Pam: I would have to start with Morris Keeton, the founder of CAEL. Morris really was the most influential person in linking adult learning to experiential learning. I really believe that adults and how they are served by higher education became front and center in the 1970s largely because of his focus on learning assessment and experiential learning. He was a thought leader and a writer in the field who influenced a lot of people and convinced major foundations to get behind this idea.

I would also hold up Jim Hall, who founded the National Center for Adult Learning. This Center and the research that it funded, particularly in the 1970s, was very influential in shaping the field. Jim was able to pull together many important voices through the Center and give attention to the subject of adult learning. Bob, I remember that you and David were both charter fellows of the NCAL!

When I think about other individuals, I cannot help but think of some of the people that CAEL has already honored with the Morris T. Keeton award. I cannot mention all of them, but people like Art Chickering and David Kolb have both been important thought leaders. Kolb has put forth theories about experiential learning and brought attention to it in the context of adult learning theory [see article in this issue by David Kolb and Alice Kolb], and Chickering has been a leading force in innovative practices for adult learners that are well grounded in theories of adult learning and development. I must also mention Barry Sheckley, whose creative thinking and research on the human brain and learning has influenced many of us in this field.

The Keeton award has also recognized important practitioners like Joel Reed of Alverno College in Milwaukee, and Ben Massey at the University of Maryland, both of whom practiced the principles we espoused on their campuses.

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There are so many other people in early leadership positions at institutions who took the lead and laid new groundwork. That's where David [Justice] fits in. He worked during these early years at the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), and in his role there, he funded adult learning and experiential learning experiments at many institutions. Other early leaders at FIPSE - Virginia Smith, Chuck Bunting, Russ Edgerton, Rusty Garth, and Alison Bernstein, to name just a few - were also an influence on colleges by funding this very important experimental work on campuses.

So, in my mind, there are the philanthropic funders, the policy makers who created FIPSE, the campuses, and the researchers/writers. All of them have played a role in shaping the landscape.

Bob: I like the way you've organized your answers in this category. When I think back to my years at Alverno, not only was Joel Reed influential, but so was Austin Doherty, who championed faculty development and outcomes-based learning - and I believe served on the CAEL Board for some years, including serving as Chair. I think of Marcia Mentkowski, whose longitudinal studies showed how adult learners are affected five years out and beyond. I also recall David's and my work with NCAL. The first time I met both of you was at the NCAL, and since then you and CAEL have had so much influence on the field and our work, giving insightful wisdom on how our work in adult learning should take shape.

I would also include those who helped convene people in the field. For example, Norman Longworth from the University of Stirling in the UK has been instrumental in convening businesses and institutions around the world, hosting several global conferences on adult learning. And I would also include people like Parker Palmer, who had what I would call a "spiritual" influence on the field. He saw our role as teachers as a vocation, and he talked about how our commitments can be engaged in a way that helps shape students' lives.. Also noteworthy was Lee Shulman at Carnegie, who helped move us from pedagogy to practice and then back again. His call for reflective teaching practices has influenced many of our faculty as they teach adult students. I'm sure we're missing so many others, but these were really key individuals.

Pam: What's interesting in looking back at these individuals is that their innovative work all seemed to blossom at the same time in the 1970s. Even the creation of entirely new institutions like Empire State College, Thomas Edison, and Regents College (which is now Excelsior) occurred during those years. Experimentation was everywhere during this stage. We've been building on their early work ever since.

Bob: When would you say that adult learning became a workforce development issue for businesses and for state governments?

Pam: When I think back to CAEL's early work with companies and labor unions starting in 1984, I have to say that we were probably ahead of our time. Lifelong learning was not an economic development or workforce issue for employers or policy makers back then. But probably the first time we saw companies, labor and higher education coming together on the topic of adult learning was in the formation of the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners (CNLL). The idea for this Commission arose in 1994, with the activities of the Commission taking place in 1996-1997. By that time, ten years after CAEL had started working with companies, it was evident that we had to bring together all of these groups to create a vision for lifelong learning in the U.S.

The CNLL was an exciting development. You might remember that Vice President Al Gore spoke at the 1997 national CAEL conference which was sponsored by CAEL and its partners in the Commission work – the former Regents College, Empire State College and the American Council on Education. That was a big moment because it was the first time that someone in a major position in government was paying attention to the issue of lifelong learning. Had Gore advanced to the presidency in 2000, we can imagine that the work and recommendations of the Commission might have really taken off, since he really understood the link between economic competitiveness and learning.

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When that did not happen, we experienced a bit of a hiatus until around 2004-2005 when a different kind of alarm bell was rung in national research reports and by people like Thomas Friedman in his book *The World Is Flat*. These reports and publications put a spotlight on the fact that the U.S. is falling behind other nations in degree production – an issue that in the late 1990s was not even on anyone’s radar. Suddenly, there was lots of action from government. States and their governors started initiatives designed to “grow our own” college graduates, and they began campaigns to get more adults into college. Just witness initiatives like Job Ready Pennsylvania, Education Pays and Go Higher in Kentucky, and Oklahoma’s Reach Higher initiative. All of these states began to see the connection between adult learning and economic success, and most of these initiatives have only come about in the last five to six years.

I cannot help but think about how dramatic the shift in thinking has been, especially over the past 25 years. When CAEL started working with Ford and the United Auto Workers in 1984, many of our members and our board were really puzzled by what we were doing. Many wondered what companies and unions had to do with adult learning and CAEL’s mission to help adults access a college education. What strikes me is that no one would ask those questions today. Everyone now knows that workforce development and higher education are totally intertwined and that adult learning affects an individual’s career opportunities in a big way. And of course, we need to engage with business because that is where the adult learners are. I think that’s a sea change, I really do. I don’t think there’s any one single event that caused it, but I do believe that CNLL was a watershed moment as it was one of the first multi-sector events of its kind, with Morton Bahr, President of the Communications Workers of America, as its Chair and with many influential individuals from business and higher education serving as commissioners.

Bob: Your reflection on the impact of the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners is interesting to me because, from my own institution’s perspective, the Commission did, in fact, have immediate and long-lasting impact. For one of the Commission’s presentations in Washington D.C., I had reached out to several of our other 27 Jesuit universities. Together, colleagues from Marquette, Georgetown, Creighton, Fairfield, Regis and Loyola, New Orleans presented to CNLL about how Jesuit education was having an impact worldwide in helping adults access an educational experience that can truly be life-transforming. Since then, our 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in North America have continued to network with businesses in the U.S., with the 29 Jesuit colleges and universities in Central and South America, and with Jesuit institutions throughout Asia and Europe. We are now talking about forming a virtual Jesuit college together. CNLL was a seminal moment for us and it triggered so many great activities for our network.

Pam: It is encouraging to think that even though we did not have an impact at the federal level, we might have influenced activities that we do not even know about. It would be interesting to learn what else may have happened in institutions and at the state level.

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Bob: Do students see themselves differently now than they did, perhaps, 25 or 35 years ago? And if so, what are some of those differences?

Pam: Back then, adults were such a minority, and so they were a lot more willing to take whatever colleges offered. Today, though, adults are more savvy consumers of education. There are a lot more of them, so they naturally have a larger voice. But they are also more assertive about their needs.

Another difference is that now colleges are reaching out to more underserved and disadvantaged adult populations, especially community colleges. One result is that we now serve younger adult learners. They are not just in their 30s or 40s; rather, they may just as likely be in the 21-28 year old range. Although they are young, they have families and jobs and heavy responsibilities. They often do not have much money, and they are holding down multiple low-wage jobs to support their families. Back in the 1970s, the adults we were serving were primarily from the middle class—those who could afford tuition or whose employers were paying. These are different times, and it feels like a big change.

At last year's CAEL conference, Linda Thor from Rio Salado College spoke about another change in the student population. She differentiated between "digital immigrants" and "digital natives." Digital natives are the individuals – and I think by definition we are talking about younger populations – who are much more comfortable with using technology for learning. The adult student population today spans everyone from their 20s to their 70s, so colleges need to cope with people who have very different comfort levels with technologies. Twenty years ago, colleges did not have to take that into account.

Bob: We are seeing all of that in Milwaukee as well. I would add, too, that another trend we are seeing is that adult learners in their 30s and 40s are asking for service learning opportunities. Even though these individuals are struggling to balance work, family and daily life, they also want the opportunity to reach out in a civically engaged way. They want to know if they can make that a part of their educational experience. With the Obama Administration's similar focus on service, we may be entering a brand new era of civic engagement. At our Marquette University College of Professional Studies, we are exploring ways in which we can more intentionally integrate civic engagement and social responsibility into our curriculum and our programs.

Pam: I don't know if you saw the recent study by Metlife that examined what baby boomers intended to do after retirement. A huge percentage of them wanted to do something they would call public service – teaching, healthcare and working in other fields that contribute to the public good. Maybe the trend you are observing with this younger cohort is a combination of the call from the president and a group of people born to the baby boomer generation for whom service was important.

Bob: We have seen some of the service focus in the older population as well. Marquette has assumed delivery of a 30-year-old program called Future Milwaukee, which is an opportunity for working adults from different professions to take part in an 8-month leadership program. People have been saying that we need to develop a second tier— maybe something like Wisdom Milwaukee – for people in the older age group who want to give back but don't know how to get started.

Bob: From your perspective, what are some of the key trends that are shaping how we view teaching and learning today?

Pam: I think the first big one is the trend toward learning online and social networking. Online learning has represented a major change in the way education is delivered, and I don't think that could have happened without the investment of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. For a period of about 10-15 years, Sloan has given millions of dollars to colleges to develop these delivery systems. That has made an enormous difference in making online learning opportunities more widely available. This, combined with the advent and spread of broadband access and the rapid rise in the use of social networking tools for learning and research, has truly transformed traditional education.

Another trend is simply the growing number of adults that make up the student body. When you have adults comprising almost half of all students on campus, it can't help but drive change in systems and services. For example, I see renewed interest in prior learning assessment. Sure, there were a lot of colleges doing PLA in the 1970s, but now we are seeing a new group of institutions offering it because companies who offer tuition benefits to their workers don't want to pay for training that's been done already. Acceleration and shorter time-to-degree are also more important now and result from the drive to lower costs and achieve greater efficiency. Companies care about these issues now. They didn't ten and twenty years ago.

As an aside, I want to share that CAEL has been noticing more and more how companies are really valuing postsecondary education now. In this current recession, very few firms have eliminated training and tuition assistance as they tended to do in past downturns. That didn't happen this time, and it's the worst recession we've seen.

Bob: We've noticed the same thing here. As you know, Marquette has had a relationship with Harley Davidson for the past 14 years, and even though Harley has had lots of layoffs, they aren't cutting their education budget either. There is a value there that wasn't recognized 20 years ago, and that's good to hear.

Back to the topic of online learning... what's interesting to me about this trend is that it is allowing us to reach a global student population. On the one hand, this means that adult learners in the U.S. are exposed to people in different parts of the world. There is great potential from cross-pollination of culture, and we are probably at the early stages of seeing what we can do with that. On the other hand, universities are seeing that there may be social justice aspects to reaching learners in different corners of the world. As one example of this, with the help of a philanthropic supporter and in partnership with five of our North American Jesuit universities, the Australian Jesuit university is delivering online learning programs to refugees on the border of Burma, extending opportunities to people who would never have access to it otherwise.

Bob: How do you see the world of online learning - exploding as it is all over the globe - changing the way we think about education, personal development and professional training?

Pam: Your Burma story is a great example of what the internet and online learning can do globally for people who don't have opportunities. In addition, we are seeing how professional associations and professional training programs are being transformed by having global online reach. For example, CAEL is working with the Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) - these are the people who manage

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intellectual property that is produced by faculty research within the university; they help obtain patents and translate those patents into commercial ventures. The AUTM has been interested in forming an international curriculum for training university technology managers, and making it a certified profession. To do this, they are forming a federation of similar organizations worldwide which will develop an online academy for people to be enrolled all over the world. They would never have been able to do this without the reach of online learning. They've never had a chance to communicate common standards until now. So the lesson from this example is that it is not only formal education that is changing, but also professional development. Before now, a professional wanting this kind of training would attend a conference or take a workshop. That is not sustainable for a field that has become so global and so important.

Looking at it from a completely different angle, we need to acknowledge how online learning has changed instruction more generally. We've learned that when instructors go through the process of converting their material to an online format, it forces them to think about how to integrate different kinds of interactive approaches. You cannot see the students, you cannot call on people like you do in the classroom, and so primitive ways to achieve interaction are no longer an option. This forces instructors to think differently about engaging students, and this carries over into their classroom teaching as well.

Bob: Also, from the student's perspective, online learning is giving millions of students a voice. For students who might not normally be very vocal in the classroom – the online environment gives them a more comfortable way to have a voice.

Pam: Exactly. But it must also be said that even in our programs where the entire degree is online, students still want to have a way to meet. In the online degree programs we manage for the National Coalition for Telecommunications Education and Learning (NACTEL), the telecommunications workers come to graduation at Pace University because they want to meet each other, as well as the staff and faculty at Pace, after all this learning on line.

Bob: ...which goes to Parker Palmer's point that education is a community experience. People want that experience, even in an online program.

Bob: Finally, as we look to the future, what would you say is one key way in which education will be different in the next 5-10 years?

Pam: I think that one profound change is that knowledge creation is increasingly happening outside the academy – one of the best examples is information technology. The implications of this are that people must figure out a way to recognize learning and knowledge created outside of education, coming from many places. I don't want to see colleges and universities merely as credentialing bodies; they should still create knowledge. But they can't be the only ones. This suggests the rebirth of prior learning assessment, and perhaps also less arrogance about who can create knowledge. We should expect to see more egalitarianism in terms of knowledge creation.

Additionally, I would point to the erratic and unpredictable behavior and life patterns of individuals in our society. People's lives don't follow the normal patterns we expect people to follow. Work, learning, family, interaction with community... they are all occurring in very unpredictable ways, even for younger students. At the same time, the world is a much more difficult place to navigate. So it becomes hard to imagine many people following the old pattern: graduate from high school, then four years of college paid for by parents, then a full-time job and career in a single field. It just isn't like that anymore for the vast majority of people. That traditional vision will soon be seen as the nontraditional vision, perhaps reserved only for the privileged among us. This will mean that colleges will need to reinvent not only their teaching delivery systems, but their student services and outreach mechanisms.

Bob: I've also been thinking of the emergence of social networking as a key indicator/metaphor for where things are going. These are vehicles in which people self-select and build a community. I see education inching into that realm, where learning and degrees are defined from the bottom up. With the difficulties of modern life, the linear model doesn't work anymore. Now we have more organic, self-selecting operations, and this will push institutions to operate differently.

Pam: Social networking is definitely something that we will probably need to emphasize and learn from now, but it's certainly not the "silver bullet." While people can twitter and text message, they may not necessarily be able to read and write well. People still need to have the capacity for effective communication and complex thought - what colleges and universities teach better than anyone. Traditional institutions' ability to integrate the tools of and lessons from social networking - and other technologies - into their own operations may be an important way to serve adult learners in the 21st Century.

Bob: While neither of us has a crystal ball, I suspect the changes we will witness in the next 5 to 10 years will match and surpass the great sea of change that we have been a part of for the past 35 years. Exciting times indeed!

About Robert Deahl

Bob Deahl has been involved with adult and experiential learning for the past 25 years including the past 15 years in his role as the dean of the College of Professional Studies at Marquette University. Bob is a Charter Fellow of the National Center on Adult Learning, past and founding Chair of the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) Executive Committee, and past president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) deans of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE). Bob has been an active participant and presenter at both CAP and CAEL and was part of the faculty at Alverno College in the late 1980's. Bob earned his Doctoral Degree in Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy and has studied and worked in Paris, France, Jerusalem, Israel, Cape Town, South Africa and Calcutta, India.

About Pamela Tate

Pamela Tate is nationally and internationally recognized for her work in facilitating workforce education and training programs among educational institutions, business, labor, government and economic development agencies, and for her efforts in assisting colleges and universities to develop systems of Prior Learning Assessment and quality assurance in adult learning programs. Tate has been directly involved with the design and implementation of CAEL's tuition assistance management and employee learning programs since 1986, when CAEL launched its first education, training and career counseling program for what was then U S WEST Communications and the Communications Workers of America. As a presenter, she is regularly sought out for her vision and insights into adult learning and workforce development and their vital relationship to the competitiveness of our workforce and the future of our economy. She graduated from the University of Illinois at Champaign with masters' degrees in both English and Journalism. She completed her doctoral coursework at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania. In 1996, Tate was acknowledged for a career devoted to expanding lifelong educational opportunities for adults with the Doctor of Humane Letters honoris causa, conferred by SUNY Empire State College, Saratoga Springs, New York. In 2005, Tate was recognized for her lifelong contributions to the field of adult learning and workforce development with the Doctor of Humane Letters honoris causa, conferred by the School for New Learning of DePaul University. In 2007, Tate was awarded a third degree, Doctor of Humane Letters honoris causa, by Thomas A. Edison State College in Trenton, New Jersey, in recognition of her success in building CAEL and removing barriers to adult learners.