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CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION
IN TRANSITION

Keynote Speech
at the Symposium on
Workplace Learning and Performance in the 21st Century

University of Alberta
Institute for Professional Development

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Continuing Professional Education: Where Have We Been?

I am honored to address this historic assembly at the University of Alberta. In my university world where getting two departments to talk to each other is a major event, you have managed to seat at the same table the major provincial stakeholders in continuing education. We have leaders from workplaces, professional associations, provincial regulatory bodies, professional schools, and many individual professionals. But as we begin our discussions, let's keep our eye on the prize of what is truly at stake in continuing education. Professionals, who constitute 20-25% of the workforce, teach our children, guide our businesses, manage and account for our money, settle our civil disputes, diagnose and treat our mental and physical ills, fight our wars, and help mediate our relationship to God. The bottom line of continuing education is to improve the practice of these teachers, physicians, managers, and clergy. Although we will talk mostly about your roles as providers of continuing education, it is wise to remember that we also have a stake in effective continuing education as people.

It is instructive to contrast this bottom line with the picture of the most frequently encountered form of continuing education painted in the words of a Dean of Continuing Education at the University of Chicago: "...it is dominated by the informational 'update.' In what is typically an intensive two- or three-day short course, a single instructor lectures and lectures and lectures fairly large groups of business and professional people, who sit for long hours in an audiovisual twilight, making never-to-be-read notes at rows of narrow tables covered with green baize and appointed with fat binders and sweating pictures of ice water" (Nowlen, 1988, p. 23). Anyone who has participated in continuing education has to admit that the only thing missing from this picture is the pen engraved with the hotel's name. Days, weeks, or months later when using this engraved pen, you try to recall, what, if anything, you remember from the program.

This picture is as universally recognizable to people in any profession as it is criticized for being largely ineffective in improving the performance of these same professionals. Indeed, the familiarity of this picture would be funny if the importance of continuing education were not so great.

We definitely start out on a high note in the early stages of professional education. The best and brightest are selected through rigorous screening and are given unquestionably the best initial education in the world at our universities' professional schools. An incredible amount of resources, financial and human, are used to support three to six years of initial preparation. Until recently, however, little systematic thought was given to what happens for the following 40 years of professional practice. Many believed that three to six years of professional education, along with some tune-ups every 5000 miles, were sufficient for a lifetime of work. Professional leaders basically said, "we've educated you, now you're on your own. Good luck and Godspeed."

However, with the rapid social changes, explosion of research-based knowledge, and technological innovations, leaders saw the need to continually prepare people for 40 years of professional practice through continuing education. Beginning in the 1970s, we began to see embryonic evidence for systems of continuing education. For example: 1) several professions proposed plans for systems of lifelong professional education, 2) all professions now use continuing education as a basis for relicensure, 3) all professions have systems of accreditation for continuing education providers, and 4) billions of dollars are spent on providing and attending continuing education programs.
While the picture of “a single instructor lecturing and lecturing large groups of professionals” is easily recognizable, we do not yet have a similarly recognizable picture of a system of continuing education that is effective in today’s complex world. The major reason for this lack of a unifying picture of effective continuing education is that the professions are in a transitional stage, experimenting with many different purposes, forms, and institutional locations for the delivery of continuing education. These systems, such as they are, are incredibly primitive. I would characterize them as 1) devoted mainly to updating practitioners about the newest developments and 2) transmitted in a didactic fashion 3) by a pluralistic group of providers (workplaces, for-profits, workplaces, and universities) that 4) do not work together in any coordinated fashion.

Relatively speaking, systems of continuing education are in their infancy. By way of analogy, at the end of this century continuing education is in the same state of development as pre-service education was at the beginning of this century. Medical education serves a useful point of comparison. In his 1910 report on medical schools in Canada and the United States, Abraham Flexner found that only 16 of 155 schools expected that their incoming students would have any previous college education and he recommended closing the ones that did not (Flexner, 1910). It is unlikely that anyone in 1910 would have predicted the structure of medical education today. Likewise, I believe, systems of continuing education will grow through this transitional period to achieve an equivalent coherence, size, and stature as the pre-service stage of professional education.

My message today is that while systems of continuing education are in transition (Young, 1998), there are many opportunities, and responsibilities, for the stakeholders who are involved in building these systems. I do not intend to offer a single answer to the question, “Now What?” However, by exploring the terrain that we will collectively negotiate, I will illuminate the choices that must be made in building systems of continuing education.

**Five Trends That Are Changing the Face of Continuing Professional Education**

I would like to be able to describe accurately the face of continuing education, however I cannot. The providers are as varied as they are pervasive and no repository of statistics exists describing the number of providers, participants, or the amount of money spent. However, the outlines of the emerging terrain can be seen if we look at a more abstract level and recognize four major providers: universities and professional schools, professional associations, workplaces, and independent for-profit providers. I have identified five trends that are changing the face of this terrain.

**Trend 1: The amount of continuing education offered at the workplace dwarfs that offered by any other type of provider, and probably all other providers combined.**

Employers such as businesses, hospitals, social service agencies, and government offer a tremendous amount of education to their employees. In 1996, $60 billion was spent on providing formal education to 59 million people in the U.S., the majority of whom were professionals and middle/upper management ("Statistical Picture," 1997). The corporate average spent on employee education is about 1.5% of payroll and 1% of gross revenues. The consensus among observers is that these figures grossly underestimate both the amount of dollars spent and people trained. The amount spent on employee education would be about $210 billion if indirect costs, such as wages while studying, and fixed costs, such as building construction, are included. The estimate of the
number of people attending programs only accounts for formal education and says nothing about the non-formal on-the-job training that is universal in work settings.

To get a perspective on the size and growth of this "shadow" educational enterprise, the number of corporate employees receiving formal budgeted training in 1992 grew by nearly four million people (Davis & Botkin, 1994): "On average each of these people had 31.5 classroom contact hours annually, an increase of 126 million additional hours of employee learning in just that one year. If this kind of growth occurred in higher education, it would be the equivalent of almost a quarter million additional full-time college students. To house this many new learners on a college campus, 13 new universities the size of Harvard would have to be built to handle a single year's growth in corporate education.... This remarkable growth in employee education often goes unnoticed because it is submerged in the workforce, takes place part-time, and is not very glamorous. Yet, the numbers will only increase" (p. 88)

Some corporations, especially those that employ many professionals are particularly education-intensive (Davis & Botkin, 1984). For example, 1) Arthur Anderson, a $5 billion accounting and consulting firm, spends more than $300 million, which was 6.5% of 1992 revenues. This is comparable to the University of Virginia budget and larger than the budgets of Purdue and Syracuse Universities; 2) Motorola spends 120 million or 3.6 % of its payroll. The company calculates that for every $1 spent on training, it gets $30 in productivity gains over three years; and 3) If the education arms of GE, AT&T, or IBM were spun off as public universities, their revenues would exceed the budgets of Ohio State and Michigan, and I daresay, the University of Alberta.

Trend 2: Universities and professional associations are active and important providers, with an increasing number of programs being offered in distance education formats.

Nearly every university sponsors continuing education programs either through its various professional schools, such as medicine, social work, and engineering, or through a university-wide continuing education unit, such as the Institute for Professional Development. We are seeing a good deal of growth in the amount of continuing education offered by universities. The Council on Graduate Schools reports that: "In particular, certificate programs, which issue documents of completion and sometimes an accreditation to students who have completed a specified course of study, are growing in enrollments by about 20% annually" (Koss-Feder, 1998).

The major growth area is, without a doubt, in distance learning programs. There are 1200 degree and certificate distance learning programs from 900 accredited colleges (Koss-Feder, 1998). For example, Western Governors University, a completely virtual college based in Salt Lake City and Denver, is offering its first courses this fall (Koss-Feder, 1998). Started by governors from 18 Western states in the U.S. and encompassing the state universities in those areas, WGU will initially offer continuing education courses by the Web and satellite TV. Students from all over the world will be able to enroll in programs and courses will come from a range of sources, including corporations and universities. The State of California has privatized its virtual university, turning it into the California Virtual University Foundation. The Foundation includes the state's university systems and several high-tech companies such as Sun Microsystems, Pacific Bell, and Oracle. The Virtual University provides students a choice of 1600 courses and 100 complete degree or certificate programs, all of which are
available entirely on-line. ("California Spins," 1998)

Professional associations also are a major provider of continuing education. In fact, education is one of the major, if not the primary function of associations. There are over 5000 American and Canadian associations and many more state, provincial, and local associations that are either organized independently or are affiliated with the national body. A recent study of 5500 national associations by the Hudson Institute on behalf of the American Society of Association Executives (Maurer & Sheets, 1998) found that 90% of associations offer continuing education to their members and the public. They spend $8.5 billion to offer courses on technical and scientific matters and business practices.

Trend 3: There are increasing collaborative arrangements among providers, especially between universities and workplaces.

Long-lasting educational trends often come not from the work of educators, but from larger political, economic, and cultural movements that push our educational institutions in certain ways. One movement that has accelerated in the past decade is that public universities are under great pressure to play a larger role in the "economic development" of their province, state, or region. Clearly, continuing education is part of the economic development strategy and so universities and businesses are actively collaborating in structuring continuing education programs. For example, about 90% of education that employers ("Statistical Picture," 1997) offer to professionals, executives, and middle managers is developed through collaborative arrangements, as opposed to using only in-house staff. Studies of universities and professional schools (Cervero, 1988; 1992) have found that anywhere from 60% to 85% of their programs involve some form of collaboration. Similar surveys have found that about 50% of professional associations and 85% of independent providers engage in collaborative programming.

One example is that New York University and IBM started a partnership in November 1996 to provide information-systems courses over a global computer network to IBM and non-IBM professionals worldwide. Twelve courses have already been offered and 18 more will be offered by 2000. Also, "An increasing number of companies are customizing courses for their employees in conjunction with major universities. The former Coopers & Lybrand in the newly named PricewaterhouseCoopers, for example, has offered three-day and five day executive education for its partners at Dartmouth's Amos Tuck School of Business Administration and the Harvard Business School" (Koss-Feder, 1998). These collaborative relationships also span the globe. For example, Oxford has received a $820,000 grant from the Paul Allen Virtual Education Foundation to develop and offer courses on-line. Oxford's continuing education director notes that "The classes...for the first time brings the Oxford tutorial within the reach of the distance learner" ("Oxford University," 1998).

These collaborative efforts are not limited to universities and businesses. In the early 1990's, the DuPont Corporation contracted "all of its training and development to the Forum Corporation, spending between $300-500 million a year. Corporate executives felt they were spending too much money, the quality was variable and there was lots of duplication and no way of measuring impact. They also believed that training was not a core competence for them and they should contract it to a global player. To lower its costs, DuPont moved training from a fixed to a variable cost so that training budgets became allocated to individual business units and weren't carried as corporate overhead. To raise quality, it repositioned training from a developmental tool for individuals to a strategic tool for the entire business" (Davis & Botkin, 1994, p. 92)
Trend 4: There is an increasing amount of money to be made in continuing education.

I assume there must a great deal of money to be made in continuing education because business are beginning to directly compete as an independent, for-profit provider of continuing education with universities and associations. For example, IBM has just set up a separate business unit, the Global Conference Group, that has only one function, "to manage and provide CE to other firms." In my interviews with a variety of continuing education providers, I found out that there is a tremendous amount of activity in mergers and acquisitions of continuing education firms in the private sector. Of course, professional schools have a long legacy of using profits from continuing education programs to support what their leaders consider the core university functions of research and teaching. In fact, the historic battles between centralized and decentralized models of continuing education in universities revolve largely around the question of who will receive the profits from programming efforts, the professional school and its departments or the university-wide continuing education unit.

If you don't think this is big business, note the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) unveiled its final guidance for industry-supported continuing medical education after six years of revision and amendment. The impetus for this regulation came in a 1991 letter from then-FDA commissioner Dr. David Kessler published in the New England Journal of Medicine that "detailed agency concerns over the independence of CME and pharmaceutical research. Citing the enormous amount of money spent on symposia funded by pharmaceutical firms, Dr. Kessler expressed the need for greater vigilance in the industry" ("FDA Issues," 1998). The document describes how the pharmaceutical industry can support CME without running afoul of the FDA. While the FDA has no direct authority over CME providers, its mandate does include regulation of pharmaceutical labeling and advertising—and, by extension any drug company activity that the agency perceives as promotional. The key is in the appearance and classification of programs. The FDA says that they are looking for "the difference between scientific and educational programs versus promotional programs."

Trend 5: Continuing education is being more closely integrated into the lives of professionals.

The first four trends have focused on the institutional provision of continuing education. However, all professionals who participate in continuing education are also important stakeholders in the development and growth of this effort. Continuing education touches us in many ways and increasingly is being integrated into the fabric of professionals' lives. Perhaps the most obvious example is the growth of state and provincial use of continuing education as a basis for relicensure. What started in the 1970s is now widespread such that "every profession, whether licensed or certified, uses some form of mandatory CE" (Collins, 1998b, p. 13). For example, the number of states requiring continuing education for relicensure has risen consistently for the past two decades: certified public accountants grew from 23 states in 1976 to 49 today, lawyers going from 10 to 37, and pharmacists going from 14 to 47.

There are also innumerable certification programs that are "voluntary." In the securities industry the regulatory bodies such as the New York Stock Exchange now require mandatory CE for their employees (Collins, 1998b). The securities industry now requires each organization that employs security dealers to develop an annual training plan based on a systematic needs-assessment and has to specify how many hours of continuing education are required by each firm. All 21 medical specialty boards have re-certification requirements that include either continuing education. I think more professions are going to follow the example of the Royal College of
Physicians and Surgeons of Canada who have developed the "Maintenance of Competence Program" for re-certification. This system allows physicians to use activities such as participation in audits of practice and a personal learning portfolio, which is a database of items of new learning recorded during the past year. The profile describes the area of expertise that "reflects the quality of the continuing professional development since initial certification by the Royal College" (MOCOMP, 1995, p. 11).

Three Issues to be Negotiated in Building Systems of Continuing Education

The task before us in building systems of continuing education is fundamentally more complex than what faced leaders earlier in this century as they successfully built the magnificent systems of pre-service professional education we have today. First, whereas pre-service education takes place in a relatively short period of time, continuing education must help professionals for years of professional practice, which is characterized by not only constant change, but often competing values. Secondly, whereas pre-service education is predominately controlled by universities and professional schools, there are multiple institutions that offer continuing education, all of which stake a claim to being the most valid and effective provider.

I turn now to some of the ways these issues manifest themselves, illuminating some critical choices that are before us in building systems of continuing education. While we cannot predict what these systems will look like, they will certainly be shaped by efforts like the University of Alberta and its partners are undertaking today.

Issue 1: Continuing education for what? Struggle between updating professionals' knowledge versus improving professional practice.

The most fundamental issue that we must continually address is "What is the problem for which continuing education is the answer." If the picture I painted at the beginning is the answer, then it is clear that the problem has been conceived as "keeping professionals up-to-date on the profession's knowledge base." In fact, keeping professionals up-to-date is as close to unifying aim as continuing education has (Nowlen, 1988). I am sure you have seen many courses, such as these at the University of Georgia: "You and Your Patients Heart: Update on Cardiovascular Disease and Therapy" or "Update for Gifted Teachers." This educational model flows from the deeply-embedded view that professional practice consists of instrumental problem-solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique. This scientific knowledge is produced by researchers, and the foundation is laid in professional school, with the additional building blocks added through 40 years of continuing education. In a sense, continuing education becomes an extension of faculty members' lines of research. Yet we know that problems in the world are not organized according to the organizational chart of the University of Alberta.

I am sure many in this room have said themselves that most of the problems we face as professionals are "not in the book." If so, you would be echoing the research literature on how professionals solve problems in practice. Donald Schon's studies of professional practice led him to say: "In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is
that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large...while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern" (Schon, 1987, p. 3).

What does it mean for education if we believe that professionals conduct most of their practice in the swamp of the real world? Some professional schools have begun moving to more problem-centered curricula. For example, in providing the rationale for Harvard’s new problem-centered, as opposed to subject-centered, medical school curriculum (one which was inspired by McMaster University), the president noted the growing change in perception of how physicians go about making their characteristic decisions of diagnosis and treatment: “Few doctors are now inclined to think of themselves as simply arriving at logically determined conclusions by applying scientifically tested truths to experimentally derived data...Considerations of many kinds are often jumbled together to form a picture full of uncertainties, requiring the most delicate kinds of judgments and intuitions” (Bok, 1984, pp. 37-38).

Continuing education has a great advantage over other stages of professional education in seeking to promote effective practice. It occurs when professionals are most likely to be aware of a need for better ways to think about what they do. But if we are to exploit this natural advantage and move our systems beyond the update model, we need to find ways to better integrate continuing education, both in its content and educational design, into the ongoing individual and collective practice of professionals. As systems are being built, the purpose of continuing education will be negotiated at multiple levels, from the individual course and an institution’s total offerings to the profession as a whole and the state as a regulator of professional practice.

Issue 2: Who benefits from continuing education? Struggle between the learning agenda and the political and economic agendas of continuing education.

In a sense, this issue is also about the purposes of continuing education. While the first issue dealt with the various educational purposes for continuing education, this issue recognizes the reality that continuing education is about many things in addition to professionals’ learning. I believe that we all recognize that continuing education can and often does improve professionals’ knowledge and positively impacts our organizations and communities (Umble & Cervero, 1996). However, if you have any illusions that continuing education is only about learning, let me offer you a story. I was recently told that Harvard set up a conference that was attended by several hundred professionals. The fundamental purpose of this conference was to meet the needs of a single individual. This dean told me he thought it was a successful conference because his professional school received a “high seven-figure check” from that individual at the conclusion of the conference.

The point is that continuing education offers many benefits to individuals and organizations. Any director of continuing education for a professional school knows that she will be expected to generate surplus revenues to be used to support faculty members’ travel, research, and instruction. Any director for a professional association knows that his programs will need to generate revenues to fund staff salaries in non-revenue producing activities, such as lobbying, maintaining certification programs, and promoting the public image of the profession. We know that training programs are an important benefit that can help to retain employees, as one survey found that: “Among the many benefits offered to their employees, continuing education is considered the most important after health insurance. More than 90% of the companies surveyed currently offer CE as an employee benefit and 97% plan
to offer their employees this benefit by 2000” (UCEA, 1998). My own department offers a certificate program in “Human Resource Development” of which we are very proud. In addition, it helps recruit students to our graduate programs and provides us access to a wider network for student internships and faculty research possibilities.

Hopefully, these realities are neither surprising to you nor distasteful to discuss. There is no reason to expect that education can, or even should be, immune from the political and economic agendas of our institutions and the wider society. If we do not recognize these realities as we build systems of continuing education, it will be like crossing a crowded intersection with our eyes closed. To address these realities, the first question any institution needs to ask is “What is the mission of my institution and where does continuing education fit in that mission.” Second, you need to ask “Whose interests will be served by offering continuing education and what are those interests”? Finally, “What are the political relationships at my institution and how will they enable or constrain implementing the vision for continuing education.” This struggle between the learning and the political economic agendas will always exist. However, by answering these three questions, we will better able to negotiate a successful resolution to this struggle.

**Issue 3: Who will provide continuing education? The struggle for turf versus collaborative relationships.**

Most continuing education is provided through some sort of collaboration between two or more institutions. A central finding of the body of research on this topic is that any understanding of collaboration for continuing education has to recognize the larger organizational goals being pursued through the formation of such relationships. For example, a study of collaborative programs in engineering (Colgan, 1989) found that while the respondents believed that the programs were needed to keep engineers up-to-date with the new technologies, the university-corporation relationship was driven by larger institutional issues. For corporations, the benefits included access to university students as employment prospects and more direct and regular access to university faculty and research. For universities, the programs provided a mechanism to secure research contracts and faculty consulting, provided a means to secure student internships, and generated profits to subsidize other institutional functions. In a similar vein, other research (Cervero, 1984; Maclean, 1996) has found that a primary reason medical schools have extensive collaborative relationships with community hospitals is to increase the number of patient referrals to the university hospital, which results from faculty members speaking at these programs.

While there is general agreement that collaborative programming is a good, even a “politically correct” idea, the central question is always: “Who’s in charge.” This governance issue is always negotiated in partnerships and the central issues typically revolve around: 1) Who controls the content of the program, and 2) How will profits and losses be shared. These enduring issues are being played out in the brave new world of technology-assisted instruction. The growth of distance education has raised the questions of who owns the course material created by professors and who should benefit from the profits gained by the sale of multimedia course materials and Web-based courses? For example, in 1994 the Extension Program at UCLA signed a 10-year contract with the Home Education Network. The contract granted the company exclusive rights to distribute and market video recordings of UCLA’s extension courses. In 1996, the contract was amended to include on-line courses as well. In May, 1998 the company changed its name to OnlineLearning.net. The central questions in this case is who owns the content of those courses and who will share in the profits: UCLA central administration, its Extension Program, the
faculty members, or OnlineLearning.net (Guernsey & Young, 1998)?

Collaboration is a strategy that has been used extensively and will continue to be used to develop systems of continuing education. However, astute leaders recognize that the formation of collaborative relationships is fundamentally a political process in which costs and benefits must be clearly weighed, including those involving organizational agendas other than those connected to the continuing education program. Thus, effective partnerships will develop not from a belief that collaboration is the right thing to do, but from a definitive understanding of the goals to be achieved by the partnership, a clear recognition of the benefits to be gained by each institution, and the contribution of equivalent resources by each partner (Cervero, 1988; Collins, 1998a).

**Concluding Note**

I would like to end where I began. You are all important stakeholders at the planning tables of continuing education in Alberta. As leaders of workplaces, professional associations, universities, and provincial government, you have both a tremendous opportunity and a clear responsibility to further develop the systems of continuing education in the province. As professionals yourselves who will be learners in these systems, you stand to benefit from the exciting new purposes, educational designs, and institutional locations for your own continuing education. Most importantly, I believe, you stand to benefit as people from the new products, more effective and efficient services, and higher quality of life offered to all citizens as a result of better educated professionals. I truly hope this symposium is the beginning of a fruitful conversation between the University and its partners about building systems of continuing professional education.
References


