

Editorial: Adult Education in Troubling Times

Adult education is, at heart, a social endeavour and the past few months have certainly provided plenty of opportunities to reflect upon the social worlds we inhabit and how we might better learn about them. First, the extraordinary meltdown in the world's financial systems has seen economy after economy shift from slowdown to recession to slump and the planned responses move from *laissez-faire* to state intervention. Second, the continuing expectation that military intervention can create a more stable and peaceful world has helped, for example, the disputed region of Gaza move from an open prison to a mass graveyard. These are indeed troubling times—not least because they seem to have arrived so unexpectedly, so unannounced and so seemingly beyond the capacity of ordinary people to influence them. We are left scrambling to make sense of what is clearly a very different world than that of only a few months ago and feeling unprepared for an ever more uncertain future.

It's not as if we lack for information: conventional print and broadcast media, and now even YouTube and Flickr, daily document the economic downturn, the aggression that passes for diplomacy and their dramatic effects on peoples' daily lives. We can now find out the latest about just about everything with just a couple of clicks on the computer. Yet, there is a massive gap between getting information and understanding what it means. Understanding requires reflection and judgment: attributes achieved partially through education and partially through a willingness to encounter the social worlds and perspectives of others, particularly those different from ourselves. Understanding by itself, however, is not enough. As one leading social commentator said over a century ago: the point is not merely to understand the world but to change it. And change, a word on everyone's lips at the moment, requires a perception of where we want to get to and how we might move there—two more by-products of education.

The Canadian Council on Learning has just released its latest report on postsecondary education in Canada—and it recognizes and documents the current uncertainty about the future. As the report puts it, "Many Canadians are now being forced to rethink their future [and ask] themselves, 'What can I do now? Do I have the skills I need?'" Of course, the CCL report is mainly concerned with the economic aspects of the future but the same questions can also be asked of its more social, cultural and political features. The recent turmoil in global systems has encouraged many (and not just the old radicals) to question the wisdom of valuing wealth acquisition and generation above all else. While this might not, as some claim, be the death of capitalism, it certainly presages the demise of the neo-liberal project. It can also reinvigorate critiques of the role of education in creating human capital.

So, ironically, times of crisis can provide golden educational opportunities—and adult education is well-positioned to take advantage of those opportunities as the five articles in this issue show. First, Hongxia Shan's study of how 10 Chinese immigrant women negotiated their introduction to the Canadian workforce underscores the reliance of our labour markets on immigrant labour. Her study shows how workers have to accommodate themselves to often exclusionary workplace practices and the underlying currents of gender, race and language differences. Next, Patricia Gouthro explores the

notion of active citizenship. Her study profiles the life histories of eight Nova Scotia women who have made significant contributions to citizenship at local, national and international levels. Adopting a critical feminist perspective, Gouthro argues for the important role of adult education in supporting the development of active citizenship through providing and supporting democratic contexts for learning.

The third article by Peter Sawchuk brings together issues of work, labour organisations and the environment. He argues that the continued “greening” of the labour movement represents one of the key challenges of our time and provides a powerful opportunity and impetus for new forms of organising, particularly in relation to sustainable production. Next, Tanya Brann-Barrett looks at some of the methodological issues involved in conducting research with socially and economically disadvantaged young adults. She highlights specific challenges in regard to participant recruitment and retention and how they themselves might be encouraged to become more involved in the research. Her article exposes some of the inherent assumptions in research practices that inadvertently reproduce some of the inequalities they were designed to challenge and disturb. Finally, Michael Welton contributes an essay on the new forms of learning that occurred when European settlers like Christopher Columbus and Jacques Cartier first encountered new lands and strange customs. By documenting how such explorers filtered their perceptions and learning through their inherited cosmography, he offers an initial probe into how we might understand the history of adult learning in Canada before adult education was invented.

We conclude, as usual, with four book reviews: on transformative learning, non-western perspectives on learning and knowing, teaching defiance, and re-theorising the recognition of prior learning. Two of these reviews are by senior academics in our field; two by graduate students. The articles we publish in this volume are also authored by Canadian scholars at very different stages of their careers. Yet, if you didn’t know the authors personally, you’d be hard pressed to determine which was written by the veteran, which by the tyro. This has always seemed to me one of the great strengths of Canadian adult education: influence is less a matter of status than of engaged commitment and expression. If we can sharpen that commitment and focus it to encourage more adults to use learning as a way of gaining control of and shaping the economic, political, cultural and creative aspects of their lives—however dire the circumstances—we can again reinvigorate one of the essential purposes of adult education as a force for social change.

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