

Editorial: Adult Education in our Country

We are delighted to introduce the latest edition of Canada's premier journal in adult and continuing education. With a new editorial team, an updated list of Consulting Editors, a revised editorial policy and a new publisher, we are convinced that the Journal will both stimulate and benefit from the resurgence of interest and enthusiasm for the scholarly study of Canadian adult education.

The four articles in this issue of the Journal deal with some of the most pertinent issues of our time—literacy, health, technology and gender relations—each of which profoundly affects the provision and effects of adult education. In “Approaching Canadian Literacy Research as a Community of Practice”, Ralf St. Clair starts from the premise that adult literacy is still under-researched. Despite the growing recognition that adults' literacy abilities significantly impact many areas of their lives, he notes that practitioners and researchers still function in relative isolation. He explores how the notion of “communities of practice” might encourage research capacity, stimulate broader areas of practice, and promote deeper understandings of both.

Cancer remains one of the major diseases affecting North American adults. Yet, despite the myriad studies on its possible causes and potential treatments, we still know relatively little about the experiences of cancer sufferers. In “The Self-directed Learning of Men with Prostate Cancer”, Kathleen Rager looks at how those diagnosed with a disease that affects one in six American men, comprehend and deal with such a potentially debilitating crisis.

The increasing availability of information and communication technologies in remote and rural communities is encouraging governments and communities to use them to enhance the provision of health care and other social services. In “An Exploration of Technology, Health Care and Preventative Education in Coastal Newfoundland”, Darlene Clover and Lorraine Sheehan explore such an attempt in five isolated communities in one of Canada's most remote regions. They identify a pervasive suspicion that technology will erode rather than enhance existing health provision and document a variety of technical difficulties and educational concerns. However, they recognize that the inherent force for survival of such communities and an underlying philosophy of care among healthcare providers could be combined to wrest greater control over mere technological problems.

Leona English and Catherine Irving provide a comparative review of the Canadian literature on gender and adult learning. They find a growing body of knowledge in feminist theory, immigrant women, workplace education, technology and learning and community development and adult learning. They note with some pride that the Canadian contribution to the international literature on gender and learning is being sustained and that Canadian scholars have produced a significant body of work that is both accessible and helpful in its range depth and scope.

We also publish two book reviews: one on adult learning in the digital age and one on Canadian literacy education. Finally, we maintain a long-standing feature of the Journal: listing the recently-awarded graduate degrees and the titles of graduating theses produced by students in adult education from universities across the country.

Examination of the titles provides yet another view of the rich and broad sweep of Canadian adult education. We look forward to soon receiving many manuscripts based on such work.

Although this issue of the Journal incorporates several new changes, it will continue to reflect the enduring issues that are most important to adult educators, practitioners and learners throughout Canada. This is a conscious and deliberate choice. It is now widely appreciated that we learn continuously throughout life. As adults, we recognise that we learn from experience but more from experiences we reflect upon. We also appreciate that our lives, while often seeming mundane, are far from routine. Even when we try to make them routine, they evade our attempts. People are forced out of work or decide to accept new challenges; they discover they have a disease that may be chronic or terminal; they cannot read or write and find they are missing opportunities to grow; their children require new kinds of supports; they decide to move; they become aware of environmental and ecological and environmental issues; they decide to upgrade a computer, learn a new language, seek out new friendships—these all provide myriad opportunities to reflect and each requires new learning. The kind of learning that is necessary depends on peoples' backgrounds and whether they think of learning as something that happens only in a classroom, or also possibly in a support group, a community centre, a library, a website, in a family or a neighbourhood. Perhaps learning might occur by watching television or by reading or by becoming more active: perhaps participating in an art project or public speaking or yoga courses or by taking part in a support group or a rally or demonstration? These are the everyday rhythms of peoples' lives, but they are not always considered when adult educators think about the rhythms of learning. The Journal will seek to redress this by encouraging manuscripts that focus not only on the local and particular but also how they are related to their underlying causes and more complex societal structures.

We will also encourage manuscripts that address adult education as a professional field of study. This has long been contested territory—although perhaps less so in Canada than elsewhere. In such a large and diverse country, it would indeed be unusual if Canadian adult educators did not differ on the priorities and approaches of their field. Debates usually centre on differences of opinion about learning: some accept the necessity of outside direction and control, others believe that to be effective, it can be only self-directed. Others are more concerned with adult education's goals and purposes: is it a force for social change or should it prepare Canadians to be more productive citizens? Should it, like most other forms of education concentrate on the individual learner or does it have a greater social mandate? Such polar opposites have long characterized the study of adult education and the tension between them prompts debate, reflection, and research.

Because the field of Canadian adult education is often fragmented, there are too few opportunities for public debate of these issues. Hence, we offer the Journal as one such space. We believe that debate and challenges to received ideas are both healthy and necessary. What becomes the focus for our field in the next decade will be shaped by the ongoing debate between those who believe we need to prepare ourselves to adapt to the future and those who believe we need to struggle to change the future. We do not suppose to pronounce on the correctness of one view over another. In our view, the study and practice of adult and continuing education should be informed by a multiplicity of voices

and perspectives. How else could a journal such as this reflect such a complex endeavour as the practice of adult education in a country as complex as Canada? However, in the articles we publish we do intend to be guided by what the a recent introduction to the Canadian contexts of adult education call “the main and enduring traditions of Canadian adult education”:

A set of unyielding social purposes, informed by passion and outrage, and rooted in a concern for the less-privileged; a systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis that develops the abilities to connect immediate, individual experiences with underlying societal structures; and a keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes and analyses are made real in the lives of Canadians. (Fenwick, Nesbit & Spencer, 2006, p. 17)

For us, as them, the practice of adult education in Canada is not the manifestation of a set of abstract concepts but one part of a broader and vital mission for “really useful knowledge” that helps create a more equitable world at individual, family, community and societal levels. We hope you agree.

The Editors

Reference

Fenwick, T., Nesbit, T., & Spencer, B. (Eds.). (2006). *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.