

Reviews/Recensions

FUNDAMENTALS OF ADULT EDUCATION: FOUNDATIONS, PRACTICE, ISSUES

Deo H. Poonwassie and Anne Poonwassie (Eds.). (2001). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., 312 pages.

I read *Fundamentals of Adult Education* with the deliberate purpose of assessing whether it would be suitable as a class text for introducing Canadian practitioners to the adult education literature. As I read, my answer became a firm "yes." It is pleasantly readable, covers many of the diverse topics one might expect, discusses both practice and theory, and invites further discussion and investigation. The editors intend the book to be of particular interest for beginning students at universities and colleges, and I believe it will be.

The book has three sections and twenty chapters, each by a different author. The first section, not surprisingly, explores "Foundations." The reader encounters a little history, philosophy, social theory, and learning theory as it relates to adult education. The second section, "The Practice of Adult Education," presents some current views on needs assessment, program planning, and adult teaching as well as an overview of events in familiar institutions. Here, the reader finds accounts of both the "technical" and "contextual" elements of adult education practice. The third section, "Issues," presents a variety of new and continuing concerns ranging from access to the social role of lifelong learning in civil society. Although the topics and authors are diverse and do not follow a unifying theme, the writing styles are complementary and I moved easily from one selection to the next. References are generally up-to-date and appropriate, conveniently placed at the end of each chapter.

Because *Fundamentals* casts its net wide it cannot, of course, explore any particular issue or area of practice with much depth. Readers who are already familiar with the literature of the field will find much that is left unsaid and few new insights. Similarly, not all important issues can be included. *Fundamentals* has chapters discussing union, First Nations and feminist education, but lacks chapters on such current and important topics as health, the environment, anti-poverty, or anti-racism. Because the authors present short introductions to topics and issues, many of them tend to describe rather than analyze.

While reading *Fundamentals* I thought of the stereotype of Canadians as mild-mannered, amiable folk who are generally pleasant to one another. Part of what made the book so readable for me is that the writers generally adopted a pleasant and non-confrontational tone that appealed to my middle-class sensibilities. Even the chapters that address critical, feminist or labour education present the politics of adult education as interesting information rather than urgent calls to activism. Many of the institutions described are mainstream such as colleges and university continuing education units. Readers looking for an emphasis on critical theory, social transformation or the language of radical educators may be a little disappointed. Those uncomfortable with the idea of "marketing" adult education should be warned.

Yet just as it would be unwise to accept the Canadian stereotype, it would be untrue to claim that *Fundamentals* is without political comment. Used as an introductory text, the lack of a harsh, critical tone may make the book more appealing to adult educators not yet engaged with the political critiques of the field. Many articles certainly invite further investigation of gently provocative claims about knowledge, power, and privilege. Those chapters that lack a strong regard for social context invite comparison with articles that present alternative perspectives. This makes the book useful as an educational tool.

I was, however, disappointed with the two historical chapters. They are both reprints, one from 1984 (with an addition to bring it up-to-date) and one from 1998. Recent historical work on adult education that incorporates differing historiographical perspectives is missing. The philosophical chapter is also a reprint, leading me to wonder whether an old bias in the adult education literature is still alive and well. Roby Kidd wrote in an early edition of his popular *How Adults Learn* that he would not begin with an historical summary because his book would only provide what is useful to the adult educator. Those of us with an historical or philosophical bent might disagree with Kidd's views and welcome anthologies that present these disciplines as sources of important insights for the practice of adult education. Having a separate "Foundations" section could reinforce this bias, and perhaps future anthologies might integrate so-called foundational topics with current practices and issues.

I also noted a couple of classic problems with the language used to describe practice. One author, for example, took pains to demonstrate the ambiguous and value-laden status of the term "need," but subsequent authors often used the term without any such consideration. My pet peeve—the word

“reflection” and its cognates—showed itself here and there without much discussion. Because such terms have various implied meanings, they can easily obscure the author’s view.

As should be evident, I generally enjoyed reading *Fundamentals of Adult Education*; it is one of the few recent anthologies that I have read cover-to-cover in a couple of sittings. Although the book has an overly brief index and a few typographical errors, these are minor distractions. As a teaching textbook, *Fundamentals* should be useful as it covers many relevant topics and can easily be supplemented if necessary. One cannot know for certain how a reader unfamiliar with the literature might respond to the book, but I suspect that it would be well received. Except for some of the Issues chapters, however, the book has little new information for those already acquainted with the literature of the field. On the other hand, I found *Fundamentals* to be a good reminder of areas of inquiry and practice outside my own specialization.

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