

Book Reviews/Recensions

LEARNING FOR LIFE: CANADIAN READINGS IN ADULT EDUCATION

Sue M. Scott, Bruce Spencer, and Alan M. Thomas (Eds.) (1998). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

This volume presents a broad overview of the field of adult education from a uniquely Canadian perspective, from its historical beginnings as a social movement to the current direction of educational provisions as market-driven consumer goods. Some of the major influences examined are theories (such as transformation) and trends of practices (such as self-directed learning, competency-based education, and prior learning assessment and recognition). This is a welcome addition to the field. It portrays adult education as a field that is continually re-inventing itself; however, the book is limited in that the portrayal it gives has some disturbing exclusions—exclusions that speak to the distance this field has yet to go if it is to ever capture the full meaning of this field's impact in Canada.

The text is organized into three main sections that are further divided into two or three parts. In total there are 29 chapters with contributions by 24 researchers and practitioners in adult education.

In the first section "Context and Aims," the six chapters trace the vitality, vision, and contribution to democracy of earlier adult education organizations, practitioners, and philosophies as well as the current challenges of professionalization, capitalist restructuring, social justice issues, and postmodern ideas. The second section, "Purposes," is the largest with 14 chapters covering a wide range of concerns such as learning organizations, workplace and labour education, transformation theory, prison education, education for older adults, spiritual dimensions of adult education, and English as a second language. The final section "Challenges and Future Visions" with two parts and six chapters charts developments and concepts such as self-directed and competence-based learning, prior learning assessment, and distance education; it concludes with arguments for what is needed for the future of adult education.

Threaded throughout the chapters is a concern with adult learners: what, how, where, and why they learn. These concerns are examined within their historical perspective and also from the perspective of current and future needs. Authors such as Selman and Morin draw attention to paradigm shifts that have had major influence on learners. The traditional emphasis on connections between individuals and their society are abandoned in favour of a market-driven field of practice which has resulted in a focus on meeting the needs of individuals. This shift supports a move away from perceiving learners as producers of information and knowledge to learners as consumers of education. Evidence of this shift is found to a greater extent in formal learning sites and less so in community learning sites—for example with NGOs, where the social action purpose of adult education is seen to be upheld. Attention is drawn to the

vocabulary used to describe this shift in paradigm: *capitalist restructuring* and *commodification of education* are explicitly putting a new political and economic face to the field.

The influence of different paradigms is also taken up by other authors such as Collins, Haughey, and Mezirow who comment on the divergent paths taken by the academy. Universities, they argue, offer primarily off-the-shelf educational experiences, based on a scientific paradigm. This contrasts with the preoccupation of practitioners (professors, community workers) to maintain a humanistic perspective on the field of practice. Concerns are also expressed about the trend towards professionalization of the field, which moves away from the goal of the adult education movement and lifelong learning to lifelong schooling.

Another connecting thread that binds the essays together is the conflict over support of the status quo (skills training, professionalization) and promoting social change (grass roots practice). Various authors argue that the traditional goals of adult education—such as social justice and ecological sustainability—are in conflict with the goals of institutional providers of adult education. Control over learning sites, delivery systems, and the role of government in keeping adult education on the national agenda are debated in a variety of ways in several chapters. The historical role of adult education as a social enterprise is pitted against increased popularity of scientific-technological-based practices. Several writers (e.g. Clover, Collins, Cranton, Thomas, Welton) suggest ways to reverse this trend as well as the trend towards education as a commodity. The debate offers, as a resolution to this conflict, ways to sustain the viability of the societal and cultural purposes of adult education through emancipatory pedagogy or critical adult education in the academy.

Another concern raised at various places in the text relates to the influences of government and private industry on the provision of learning opportunities for adults. Validation of adult education as a conventional academic discipline is a moving target. The standing of university-based adult education programs has changed and continues to change as a result of downsizing, program consolidation, and other forces such as marginalizing the position and often the viability of these programs in the academy. Public, para-public, and private institutions are competing for many of the same learners while institutional adult education is competing for funding within a restrictive public budgetary context. Several key tensions are mapped out: an individual's need to know in order to better one's life and access to learning opportunities; a democratic society's need to have a knowledgeable citizenry and how this is reflected in its public policies on education; and the manpower needs of the market place and the goals and policies of its unions and enterprises.

No single volume can ever cover all aspects of a discipline's activities. *Learning for Life* is no exception. The editors claim that "the chapters in this book represent the state of thinking in adult education today" (p. 14). Although the contributors present a fair overview of what has transpired, what is currently

taking place, and some thoughts about the future, some significant areas are noticeably absent. For example, I looked for but failed to find inclusion of the current state of adult education and related learning activities for First Nations' peoples. The ongoing struggles of First Nations in their negotiations with the Government of Canada for respect of their historical treaties presents countless opportunities for learning activities for the life of these communities. The lack of educational opportunities for youths and adults in some of the more remote communities and the consequences of high dropout levels of young people from school are just a few examples of the vital role of adult education in First Nations communities. Yet this volume is silent on this topic.

The essays dealing with learning opportunities in the corporate world left me wondering about the positive consequences of such experiences as skills upgrading, workplace literacy, professional development for union leaders and managers and employee assistance programs. Although the topic of learning in the corporate world is dealt with, the presentations are biased and negatively stated.

One other topic strikingly absent from this volume is adult education in Quebec. Because of its unique two official languages culture, adult education in Quebec presents a challenge. The quality and quantity of learning opportunities offered in the English speaking sector differ substantially from those in the French speaking sector, particularly in the formal institutions. This is true for community offerings and workplace education. This issue, although primarily of concern in Quebec, is an interesting and important one to the field of adult education. Some discussion of this would make a sensible addition to this volume.

After reading this book one is left with the sense that the field of adult education is reinventing itself. The role of the students, the providers, and the learning sites are changing with the ever-changing inventions of the new delivery systems and the emphasis on "just in-time" learning for whatever purpose. The book is rich in references to writings that touch on a significant number of concerns within adult education: immigrants and their struggles to live as foreigners in a strange society, women's learning sites and their contribution to the social movement, the debate around the value of self-directed learning, the concept of human capital and the viability of the learning organization, and labour education for union operations and management are some examples.

I believe the book is useful as a source of readings on these important issues and concerns—for professors teaching courses, for students interested in learning about some past experiences and current thinking in the field, as well as for anyone interested in the research and practice of adult education.

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