

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS THE 21ST CENTURY: WHERE ARE WE AND WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

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Abstract

In contrast with the early 20th century, there has been growing emphasis on academic research in adult education. However, recent publications in Canada indicate that university professors are only part of the research picture. Four themes are extracted from these publications which, together with several questions to foster reflection, can guide educational research into the next millennium.

Résumé

Contrairement à ce qui prévalait au début du siècle, on accorde aujourd'hui une importance croissante à la recherche universitaire en éducation des adultes. Or, des publications canadiennes laissent entendre que les professeurs d'université ne constituent qu'une partie du tableau de la recherche. Quatre thèmes sont dégagés de ces publications, de même que quelques questions favorisant la réflexion sur la recherche éducative dans le prochain millénaire.

Dr. Chad Gaffield, the urbane president of the Humanities and Social Science Federation (HSSF), observes:

Two trends characterize the changing vocabulary of public discussion about the universities: the preeminence of the natural sciences, engineering, and the bio-medical sciences; and the influence of the marketplace. In neither case have the humanists and social scientists effectively contested the new vocabulary. Moreover, we have not been able to reconstruct the language of teaching and research so that our disciplines are seen to be central to the universities of the post-industrial society (1998, p. 1).

This verdict is scarcely news for beleaguered adult education professors. Our intellectual seismographs have been registering the "influence of the marketplace" in our sinews and minds at least since the world oil crisis.

We are bobbing around like corks in the sea. This might be a good time to think about where adult education research fits into the big scheme of things. In this brief reflection, I focus on two recent publications in the

Canadian academic community—the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*'s special issue on "Adult Education Research in Canada" (Blunt, Carlson, & Tremblay, Eds., May 1995) and the CASAE sponsored publication, *Learning for Life* (Scott, Spencer, & Thomas, Eds., 1998). The editors of *Learning for Life* present the text as "definitive for the field." The special issue of CJSAE is a rather frank accounting of where we are as a research community. Both texts are fine accomplishments; the special issue was composed heroically against time constraints and the vagaries of our strangely complex field; *Learning for Life* is full of passion, insight, and a never-say-die spirit. In a period when the prevalent knowledge-culture is characterized by wild fragmentation, doubt, and a multiplicity of approaches to everything under the sun, the adult education knowledge-culture manifests remarkable consensus. Those who are writing thoughtfully about Canadian adult education in historical and social context agree on many themes. The authors of the articles and chapters in these texts portray the idea that adult educational research is not exclusively a preserve of academia and that historical examples contrast sharply with current trends; from this I extract four themes that can serve to sharpen adult educators' scholarly reflection.

Research Goes Beyond the Academic

The two texts make it pellucidly clear that no matter how hard we adult educators have tried, we have not succeeded in establishing a full-fledged discipline of adult learning in the academy, despite millions of dollars of research monies, lots of empirical work, and reports generated within Thomas Kuhn's normal science paradigm. Moreover, as Alan Thomas often points out, even the widespread adoption of lifelong learning discourse by politicians, policy spin doctors, and CEOs has not resulted in good times for academic adult education. There almost seems to be a perverse relationship between security in the academy and the importance of "learning" to the System's policy-makers. The more important adult learning is to the System managers, the less likely they are to seek the counsel of academic adult educator spoilsports. Another monumental problem for academic departments of adult education (a version of the good news/bad news joke if ever there was one) is the marvelous way whereby "learning" has never been more central to what so many in the humanities and social sciences are up to in their scholarship. Who is the greatest living learning theorist? Jurgen Habermas, that's who, and he is usually known as one of the greatest living philosophers and social theorists.

As professors and graduate students of adult learning, we are increasingly aware that knowledge-production is not the exclusive privilege of the university anymore. My examination of the American Commission of Professor of Adult Education proceedings from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s indicates that our colleagues dreamt for a time that adult education could be established as a positivistic discipline with nicely delineated boundaries and scientifically validated methodologies. Well, it didn't work, did it? Three decades down the road, professors of adult education are more battered and more modest in the way they understand what they are doing in the academy.

First and foremost, we should see ourselves as one small part of a broad and complex process of knowledge-production. Even some of the ancient disciplines, like philosophy, recognize that the most significant forms of ethical reasoning and problem-solving occur in life activity itself. Academic philosophy is largely irrelevant to the real problems people face in the current global age. Medical doctors are producing knowledge all the time in the course of the everydayness of their interactions. Avant-garde workers in telecommunications create knowledge as they solve particular problems. No university can aid them. Those in the adult education field who have been steeped in popular education and action research are really onto something when they affirm the wisdom and knowledge of the people themselves.

Those of us who are privileged to be in the academy ought to be pretty humble about what it is that we do. We can no longer be modernity's legislators; at best we are interpreters with our students. We have no scientifically definitive framework to impose on our students' common-sense understandings. But our privileged removal from the trenches of common practice provides us with time to scan and scour the knowledge-culture for illuminations. If many scholars in the unruly and messy world of collapsing disciplines are preoccupied with learning in variegated dimension, then, perhaps academic adult educators can weave some of these strands together. Reading texts to read the text of the world—that's what Paulo Freire taught us. We gather the traces of learning—be they in brain research, evolutionary biology, history, social psychology, or critical theory—and spin them into patterns. If we are reading well, we create rare forms of luminescent learning community that pushes us towards the renewal of self and world. So our peculiar activity of gathering the traces is good; but it isn't everything. I recall Habermas's (1994) quip, "In the search for enlightenment, there are only participants" (p. 101). We should value the quality and nature of this dialogic process in itself. We should resist getting caught up in judging what

we do in terms of the dominant ethos of the late modern university. Our success may not register in the upper echelons of university administrations or even bedazzle our colleagues in the medical school or physics departments. The true test of our work will be the small contributions we make to the renewal of Canadian and global democracy and whatever clarifications we achieve in the teaching and learning process.

Historical Examples Contrast with Current Research

The Antigonish Movement did not do anything akin to what today passes for scholarly research. In fact, Father Jimmy Tompkins and his younger cousin, Moses Coady, as well educated as they were, railed against the irrelevance of the university to people's suffering. As Tompkins (in Lotz & Welton, 1997, p. 22) wrote: "Adult education that does not issue in something practical, especially in these days of poverty and depression, has little attraction for the sons of men [sic]." Most of us would agree with curmudgeonly old Jimmy here, except for his sexism. The Antigonish Movement was a genuine movement to establish a "people's economy." Jimmy Tompkins, Moses Coady, Sister Marie Michael, Sister Irene Doyle, Ida Gallant, Kay Thompson, A. S. MacIntyre, A. B. MacDonald, and Alex Laidlaw were the movement's organic intellectuals. Their lives were rooted in the suffering of their own people in Nova Scotia in the 1920s through the 1950s. They were incredibly well read and travelled. They didn't worry about the state of adult education theory; they worried about the state of people's lives, their debt, their misery, their poverty, their exploitation, and their unhappiness. They were on constant lookout for new methods and ideas. They did not imagine that adult education would become a course in the university. In fact, in the late 1940s when Dr. Roby Kidd told Ned Corbett that he was going to teach a course in adult education at the Ontario College of Education, Corbett wondered whether there was enough material to study adult education. Our strong tradition of the adult education leader who crafted language simply and elegantly to address the ordinary people on the central issues of the day ought to be renewed.

Sometimes the Antigonish Movement leaders were criticized for not doing enough research. Coady worried that doing endless surveys or trying to get the correct economic theory were dangerous activities because they would more than likely end up resulting in doing nothing. University professors do not like doing very much. Coady imagined eastern Nova Scotia as a "social laboratory" where the people learned in action. The people's intellectuals believed fiercely in the power of books. Leaders like Tompkins

and Coady read everything they could on subjects pertinent to the lives of people in the movement. But they saw their task as mediating these book forms of knowledge to the people so that they could build and sustain a vast network of people's organizations. As important as texts were to this movement, knowledge for its own sake had little place. Study had to issue in action! The people's most powerful and significant learning occurred in the process of building a lobster cannery or starting their modest people's banks. As Coady (1942) explained in a letter to George Creed, he believed that co-operative activity gave people a

chance to develop their intellectual activity necessary for the discharge of their civic duties. In other words through adult education and co-operation the people can be conditioned to the point where they have the intelligence and the strength to put through laws bringing about the money reform you asked for.

In short courses in numerous communities, the big leadership training sessions at St. Francis Xavier University, and the famous Rural and Industrial conferences of the late 1930s, men and women deliberated together in these communicative spaces about their common problems. The entire movement process was one massive learning generator—a social laboratory indeed!

Few professors have done any scholarly investigation of the Antigonish Movement (sociologist Dan MacInnes and economists Pluta, Kontak, and Sandaro are the exceptions). This is unfortunate because we need detailed empirical investigations into the movement's belief and practices—research conducted in such a way that it does not merely build up what Touraine (1981) calls a “secondary ideological language on the basis of a first ideology” (p. 143). A halo glows round the movement and critical scholarship must ask hard questions. Canadian adult education researchers and teachers continue to teach a potted, oversimplified Movement history. But it is not just empirical studies that are needed. Touraine suggests that academics might be able to play critical roles through exposing present movement actors to their own action through challenging their expressed opinion and action during intervention. He provides an interesting methodology to help us. Touraine thinks that some university researchers need to leave the university to be present with movement actors and struggles, both as agitators and critics. We can't all do this. Some of us, however, may want to experiment with new ways of doing our work. Those of us who work in the contemporary technocratic university are under incredible pressure to conform to the dominant ethos. Just being a professor, with its teeming workload and responsibilities, means that our thinking is

inevitably shaped by the prevalent societal division of labour, which splits "theory" from "life activity." Some of us apportion exorbitant amounts of time to scholarly work; few of us are completely at ease with theory for its own sake. We need to think specifically about how the critical functions of intellectual cultural work can be more present in the life activity of Canadian society in the 21st century.

Themes To Guide Scholarly Publication

I suggest that it is worthwhile to consider four salient themes in *Learning for Life* that can serve as premises for scholarly reflection by the Canadian academic community. First, many Canadian academic adult education theorists believe that adult education is at a crossroads. There are several dimensions to this ethos of angst. Thomas explains that in the last decade or so, we have experienced the "sharp reduction in public support for education in general, and for 'general education', which seemed to be even more severe with respect to adults" (p. 355). He also notes the disappearance and/or "radical alteration of many academic departments of adult education" as well as the "fragmentation of provision of adult education," and the "rise to prominence of vocational training for adults" simultaneously with the "radical dislocation and 'downsizing' of industrial workers and managers" (Thomas, p. 355). Solar argues that our field of study and action has no "single identity" (p. 84). Academic departments of adult education are under considerable pressure to continue to professionalize and credentialize in order to meet system-defined learning needs. But Miles counsels adult educators to "keep our sense of adult education open and permeable to all its practice; to develop a multi-centred, dynamic sense of the adult education world, with no margins and no single centre" (p. 250). Good advice, and good-bye to the dream of unified field theory. Personally, though, I will continue to maintain that the social learning frame is what we need so that adult education does not drain out of the academy like a broken dam in the desert.

Second, many of us believe that adult education is at a crossroads largely because globalization in its current neo-conservative form is ruling the day. We haven't got around to thinking more optimistically about what possibilities open up for us when the world becomes more interconnected and holistically perceived. Morin speaks of a "capitalist restructuring of the global economic system that has dramatically impinged on society, including the work of adult educators" (p. 59). Morin and I both think that in the current neo-conservative era, the "logic of the market" has become ascendant

and begun to permeate every domain of the lifeworld. Morin maintains that the "adult learner" has been reduced to a piece of human capital by corporate-driven learning society proponents. The demands of vocational training, credentialism, and alleged needs of the global economy have derailed us from our "social roots and emancipatory aims" (p. 13). Selman argues that this market-orientation "generally does not support programs about citizenship, family life or other socially relevant areas" (p. 34). Collins represents most of the authors in *Learning for Life* when he asks: "What prospect is there now for a reconstructed modern adult education that can lever...[our emancipatory aims] back on track?" (p. 48).

Third, Canadian adult educators are questioning the dominant training ideology that prevails in our country and elsewhere. The Canadian adult education tradition, exemplified in workers' education (Spencer; Martin) and the Antigonish Movement, has asserted the right of working people to control their work organization. This old socialist theme of workers' control of their work organization has been obscured by the current rhetoric of the learning organization. Bouchard points out that when the dust settles in all the training talk, "employees are not infrequently kept out of the decision loop" (p. 139). Fenwick argues convincingly that the learning organization masks an underlying authoritarian work organization; "critical scrutiny is deflected from the power structure and the learning organization ideology itself is focused on the individual" (p. 149). Martin's nitty-gritty, *I've been there* trade unionist's view highlights the ideologically candy floss nature of a concept like the learning organization. He says, "The idea that unions might have a central voice in skill training, equal with that of employers, simply enraged many people" (p. 157). He should know! What values and perspectives do we, as academic adult educators in Canada, want to uphold in our prolonged crisis of the work society?

Fourth, many of us are calling for the radical renewal of democratic citizenship in the global era. Recovering our social roots, rather than being the maintenance crew for the Titanic or its mop up gang after it cracks in two, means recovering our traditional, deep commitment to the person as active citizen. As a personal sidebar, I am convinced that our action-oriented research for the next decade ought to be concentrated on elaborating the conceptual tools to renew deliberative democracy. We need lots of energy from lots of different centres to chart the actual way citizens participate in contemporary culture and society. How do we as individuals arrive at our decisions about how we actually live together in society? What research should we do on/with new social movements as strategic learning sites?

What new kind of relationship is required between the state and civil society? How does civil society learn and exercise influence in the system realms? Do we as academic adult educators have anything specific to offer here? We have reached an impasse in our thinking. The old welfare state has run out of gas and the ability to inspire anyone. Where are the post-welfare-state ideas that do not simply jettison what we gained after the horrific 1930s? Critical adult education has always been in the business of defending the lifeworld. It must take a deep breath and get on with imagination and verve.

Questions To Guide Our Further Reflections

I believe that the most important research we can do will be linked to understanding how we can foster a public culture within which men and women feel healthy, free, and confident to speak, act, and listen. The renewal of democracy in the 21st century requires the enabling of communicative infrastructures within existing institutions, associations, and public spheres. What thinking and action is required to revitalize our participatory, deliberative democratic traditions? What are the new learning forms and forums in the cyber age? Will the struggle for a vital and tolerable civil society channel our energies in the Canadian adult education movement? Will we succeed in being present in our universities in new and exciting ways? What will happen to our self-understanding as academic adult educators as we begin to imagine ourselves as part of a growing solidarity network of global citizens committed to resisting unfettered market rule?

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