

## BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

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### **THE LITERATURE OF ADULT EDUCATION: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY.**

Cyril O. Houle (1992). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

*The Literature of Adult Education* is the culmination of a fifteen year project by one of North America's most distinguished professors of adult education. Houle's purposes in writing the book were to: (a) identify the distinctive knowledge base which supports the work of adult educators, (b) discover how the literature might be organized, and (c) present the literature in a framework that allows for a greater understanding of the relatedness of its component parts. His overarching intention was to document adult education's knowledge base in order to demonstrate its existence.

*The Literature of Adult Education* identifies 1,241 books written, in the English language, by adult educators for adult educators. Houle's bibliography includes only books, a category which includes small monographs, some as small as 26 pages. The exclusion of journal articles and conference proceedings was necessary for obvious reasons but I feel uncomfortable in accepting the claim, even for marketing purposes, that books, and only English language books, comprise the literature of adult education.

The book is organized into 3 parts, totalling 11 chapters. In addition, there is a reference list of the 1,241 books in alphabetical order by author, an author name index, and a subject index. Part 1, which contains 4 chapters, addresses the emergence and growth of the field of practice and the literature of adult education. Part 2 includes 5 chapters concerned with the providers and goals of adult education. Part 3 is comprised of 2 chapters concerned with books on the practice of adult education. Written as a bibliographic essay *The Literature of Adult Education* offers a coherent, dense, readable overview of adult education knowledge that has been painstakingly winnowed from probably every adult education book published in the English language. In less than 319 pages, at a gross average of approximately 4 books per page, Houle, from his personal perspective, captures the essential contribution of each book. Some books merit a single sentence while others receive more extensive coverage. As examples of the coverage of books in particular subject areas, 1½ pages are devoted to *Women's Education*, 4 pages to *Community Development*, 3 pages to *Education for the Elderly*, and 6 pages to *Human Resources Development*. Readers will either applaud Houle's broad coverage of the literature or shudder at his shallow assessment of so many books.

The subject index reveals some disturbing gaps in the knowledge base Houle presents to the reader. For example, the following areas of adult education practice and study do not appear as subject categories: *native Indian*, *ethnic*, *multicultural*, *feminist*, *black* (other than *The Black Book*), and *social class* (although London, Wenkert and Hagstrom's 1963 study of adult education and social class in Oakland is included in the bibliography). Under *Women* only 9 books are listed, under *Research* only 7, and only 2 books on *English as a Second Language* (ESL) are listed. What has

not been the focus of adult education books offers a telling critique of our scholarly writing priorities.

Although Houle's tenacity for documenting the literature is, at first glance, admirable, I find one aspect of *The Literature of Adult Education* particularly troublesome, that is the deliberate avoidance of any critical appraisal of the books reviewed. In Houle's own words, in an address written for presentation to a meeting of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education on the occasion of the launching of *The Literature of Adult Education*:

Each book is described separately in a brief statement of its aims and accomplishments. There is not enough room to balance out the values and deficiencies of a work in an even-handed fashion. I have little or no use for some of the books included although I hope you can't guess which ones they are. On the other hand, I have great enthusiasm for some books and for the outstanding attributes of others, nowhere hiding the hope that they will find new readers. (Houle, 1992b, p. 6)

In *The Literature of Adult Education* itself Houle states, "I have tried to be objective about all works mentioned, including those for which I have little respect" (Houle, 1992a, p. xiii). Houle appears to think that making a critical assessment of a book is not an objective act and overcoming the urge to point out errors of logic, poorly constructed arguments, irrelevance, insufficient evidence, and similar flaws in a book is evidence of objectivity and scholarship.

It is generally accepted that the advancement of social science is best served by critical and inquiring minds. Houle's position in avoiding any critical comment on the works that he has compiled is, in my opinion, an unusual case of converting vice to virtue. Scholarship in adult education is not advanced by the withholding of considered judgments about possible flaws, weaknesses and errors in the literature. The author's position raises a number of questions. Did Houle not detect, in his opinion, one myth to be dispelled, one flaw of logic to be corrected, or one misrepresentation by an author of the work of others? Did Houle not read any reviews of any of the 1,241 books? If not, what assumptions might be made about the value he attaches to book reviews in our scholarly journals? Why would Houle not advise, or caution, his readers to consult critical reviews of some books to meet his intention to be even-handed, or to give some recognition to the tradition of scholarly criticism in adult education?

Houle chose to write a descriptive bibliographic essay rather than a critical review of the literature as his lasting contribution to adult education scholarship perhaps because his lifelong commitment to professionalize the field became a dominant personal goal and he sacrificed critical inquiry to promote the goals of professionalization. Or are there other explanations? The project required the reading of 1,241 books over a 15 year period, that is an average of 82.73 books per year. Even in Saskatoon, the city whose residents read more books per capita than residents of any other city in North America, that level of reading activity is astounding. Perhaps critical thought and reflection fly out the window when speed reading comes in the door. Alternatively perhaps Houle simply wished to play the role of adult education's eminent librarian.

Currently many graduate programs are working to foster the development of critical and reflective practitioners and scholars. How will *The Literature of Adult Education* support this work? The emphasis on critical adult education, as reflected in recent books and the annual meetings of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE/RCÉÉA) and, in the United States, the Commission of Professors and the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), do not appear to have influenced Houle's project. Houle believes that the acceptance of adult education as an academic discipline, or field of university study, is more dependent on an extensive bibliography than intellectual debate and critical analysis, it is the quantity of books rather than their academic merit Houle uses to justify adult education's place in academe. Through *The Literature of Adult Education* the academic leaders of our field, "may be sustained by an awareness of the strength of their knowledge base. We can make a claim before any judgmental body that ours is an established field of knowledge" (Houle, 1992b, p. 8). That *The Literature of Adult Education* generates so little prestige in academe and has so little impact on social policy development is not, in my view, a consequence of too few books. I doubt that if *The Literature of Adult Education* documented the existence of twice as many books, that the academic status of adult education would be improved. Rather, I would argue, if the number of books was reduced by half, if those remaining addressed fundamental questions of the role of learning in society, and if they were based on sound and rigorous scholarly research, then the status of adult education in academe would be elevated considerably. It is a shallow premise that what our threatened university departments and programs need, to support their claims for legitimacy and recognition, is a bibliography of 1,241 books.

Will *The Literature of Adult Education* enable us to recognize the extent to which mainstream adult education and its literature has excluded women, natives, ethnic communities and the working class? Does the book inform us on the literature of adult education in such a way that will enable us to change our future practice to become more inclusionary or emancipatory? I think not. *The Literature of Adult Education* reflects the literature of an era and tradition characterized by the drive towards professionalism and normative, institutionally focused, middle class, Euro-centric adult education practice. *The Literature of Adult Education* reflects the epistemology and values of its time, that is the 1970's when Houle began the project. What then is the value and relevance of *The Literature of Adult Education* for practitioners and scholars today?

Houle has painstakingly prepared a bibliographic sourcebook of primary works in adult education that will be of value to every student, researcher and professor. *The Literature of Adult Education* will make it easier for researchers to identify otherwise fugitive literature. Scholars whose first language is other than English will in particular be greatly assisted in identifying and accessing English adult education books although the global adult education community's long term interests in resisting the hegemony of North American and European research and practice may suffer as a consequence. Hopefully the book will not be used as a reference text resulting in a reduction in the use of primary sources much as handbooks tend to. As a journal editor I implore every author to purchase *The Literature of Adult Education* and use it to ensure that their references to books, at least those in English published prior to

1991, are cited correctly, bearing in mind of course that the information will need to be restructured if the American Psychological Association (APA) format is being used.

While *The Literature of Adult Education* may not achieve Houle's purpose to improve the status of adult education within academe, it is likely that his three more realistic objectives to identify the knowledge base from adult education books, organize the literature, and present a framework to reflect the connections among the elements of the knowledge base have been achieved. Adult educators will benefit from the book being in their library and many practitioners who purchase it are likely, as Houle wished, to acquire a greater sense of connectedness to the literature of adult education which as Houle concludes "in its complexity and its tangled and interactive parts ... is perhaps best regarded as an ecosystem" (Houle, 1992a, p. 321). An ecosystem that, in my opinion and doubtless Houle's opinion too, does not yet adequately reflect the ecosystem of adult education practice.

#### References

- Houle, C.O. (1992a). *The literature of adult education: A bibliographic essay*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Houle, C.O. (1992b, November). *The literature of adult education*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education, Anaheim, CA.

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#### **ADULT EDUCATION IN CANADA: HISTORICAL ESSAYS.**

Gordon Selman (1995). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.

Gordon Selman is one of Canada's most prolific and important social historians of adult education. His book of historical essays is a selection from the work of this practitioner and academic whose career in adult education spans more than forty years. It is another fine effort by a meticulous researcher who has greatly contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the emergence of Canadian adult education. Selman provides an extensive data base for those who wish to study the instrumental, social, and cultural aspects of our field's continuing metamorphosis. He contributes a valuable resource for those interested in comparative historical studies that expose social, cultural, ideological, and political differences among international forms of adult education. Some may argue that his essays are more descriptive than analytical or interpretive. However, Selman's work must be put into perspective. As one of a handful of dedicated social historians in the field in this country his work is groundbreaking. Without the record of his research, many valuable aspects of the social history of adult education in his native province of British Columbia and in the rest of Canada would remain hidden or be lost. His work greatly contributes to studies of the foundations of Canadian adult education. It deserves to be more valued by those mainstream adult educators who too often move forward without looking back and by those publishers who ignore such work as they cater to the market demands of an overly commodified contemporary practice.