

Perspectives

ADULT EDUCATION WITHIN THE NETWORK OF SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINES: A ROUNDABOUT WAY TOWARD A PARADIGM OF ADULT EDUCATION

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I

In his Edward Douglas White Lecture on citizenship and education for freedom, at Louisiana State University in 1941, Robert Hutchins spoke of the "rabbit theory of education."¹ He quoted a 'Mr. Butler of Columbia' thus: "Any infant is encouraged to roam about an enclosed field, nibbling here and there at whatever root or flower or weed may, for the moment, attract his attention or tempt his appetite... Those who call this type of school-work progressive reveal themselves as afloat on a sea of inexperience without chart or compass or even rudder." Hutchins adds: "Obviously we should not look to rudderless rabbits to lead us through the mazes of the modern world."

Does adult education have a compass or a rudder to direct our investigations with the universities? Is our association with the different scientific discipline utterly random? Do we behave like rabbits nibbling here and there at whatever academic flowers attract our attention?

The declaration on citizenship and adult learning of the Canadian Association for Adult Education envisages "a learning society led by learning adults."² If learning adults are to lead through the mazes of the modern world, it should be evident that the research done on adult education within the intricate network of scientific disciplines at universities would be facilitated if its leading principles, or paradigm (to use the fashionable but practical term of Thomas Kuhn³) were clarified. To this end I will start with some historical remarks.

II

Every highly developed society today tends to establish its important roles and functions by professional training and academic career patterns; every important and powerful profession extends its professionalization process into the universities and the realm of science. The first European universities started with a school for lawyers (Bologna in the 13th century) and developed into universities which included faculties of theologians, lawyers and doctors. Centuries later the natural sciences were added to this mix. Social science is an even later child of the 19th century. Teacher training came to require a professional university training after World War II. Professionalization and the move to make a science of each area of study are twins in modern societies. Even a well-informed academic is unable to know and distinguish the host of new-born scientific disciplines: their subjects, their methods, their practical orientations, their findings. Among these disciplines—which create not only research, theories, and bodies of knowledge, but also career patterns and certification requirements—adult education is a baby. What is more, this infant is not a child of the scientific disciplines but was born of the practice of adult education and its importance in modern society.

One cannot say that adult education is a loved or recognized child within the scientific world. No wonder its scholars and students are often confronted with the slightly confused question: "What are you studying—adult education? What's that? What is it for?" Often the answer is a roundabout explanation which doesn't convince the questioner. Indeed, there is some confusion about the position and function of adult education within established scientific disciplines. In addition, there are open questions concerning the relationships of adult education as a field of social practice and adult education as a scientific discipline.

Although adult education is established at many universities with training programs and chairs, the legitimation and reputation of adult education seem unsatisfactory. Even colleagues at the same university, working in the very same institute, may hold completely different, sometimes contradictory, ideas about adult education and its function within the university. Metaphorically speaking: is adult education caught in the web of other disciplines as an easy prey, or is adult education becoming a part of the scientific network itself? With the intention of elaborating on these questions, I will discuss the German development of adult education and its professionalization process as an academic career.

III

Although adult education in Germany may look back on a rich and complex history over 200 years (its roots are to be found in the Enlightenment), it was not until 1969 that adult education became part of the university program. Although it might be boring from a Canadian or American point of view, I would like to outline the circumstances surrounding this development.

In Germany in the sixties, the traditional and venerable pedagogy changed into a science of education (*Erziehungswissenschaft*). The former 'art of education' was transformed into a scientific discipline. Education then received its own, and separate, university programs. Students could study the science of education within an eight-semester program leading to the title of *Diplom Pädagoge*. If they so desired, they could step into a doctoral program to achieve the *Dr. päd* or *Dr. phil.* At the same time, adult education was established as one main focus of this new education program. That was the way our discipline was given birth: as one focus in the science of education. Chairs of adult education were funded and established, an adult education curriculum was created, a new population of students grew up (mostly students who had already finished a previous vocational training program), a small scientific community of adult educators built up, new journals and publications dealt with adult education, and so on and so forth. All these consequences and circumstances emerged from the **political** decision to create adult education as a university program. It is very important to realize that this happened as a result of general social developments and political decisions. It did not result from an inner differentiation of the established disciplines, which looked upon it a brat.

Hence, it is reasonable to examine the social and political background of these developments and decisions. I will emphasize two factors. After World War II, a deep-rooted and widespread belief took hold: that societal and political planning and decision-making have to be based on scientific research and analysis. Scientists became the indispensable counsellors of politicians. The rationality of science became the paradigm of politics, society, and economics. Scientific rationality, knowledge and methods, and social and political progress were not contradictions. Science was the **means** of progress and the route to a fuller understanding of humanity. Not only did this belief (or should I say myth?) concern the natural sciences and technologies; it also held sway in the realms of the fantasies of education, communication, and learning. This mentality is epitomized by the

term, *homo faber*--man the maker. It has been a world-wide phenomenon. The second factor is peculiar to Germany. Since the beginning of organized and institutionalized adult education in the early 19th century, a bewildering set of institutions and programs has come into being. In a euphemistic manner this complex has been called a "pluralistic system." That means: adult education is a playground of unions, churches, political parties, companies, associations, etc. A contradictory variety of interests, world views, and practices have ruled the field.

In the late sixties this pluralist system was partially transformed into a public educational system by controlling and domesticating the plurality. Of course, this was accomplished by money and laws. Nearly every Land of the Federal German Republic launched a special law to promote adult education. Qualification criteria for adult educators were established. Certain programs got money, other programs got no money or less money. Adult education organizations had to fulfill certain criteria of planning and programming if they wanted access to diverse promotional programs. No wonder that the bulk of adult education institutions tried to satisfy these criteria.

I will not continue outlining the consequences, since the only purpose of this description is to identify the historical point at which adult education was forced to join the scientific world and define its relationship to other well-established disciplines at universities. Although there were laws and promoting programs, there was no elaborate body of knowledge of adult education which could help to create and generate subjects and theories and research. The funny thing that happened was that an academic program was established which had to create its scientific foundation *after* its birth.

So, what happened next? In Germany two models (or ways for adult education to become scientific) were realized. The advantages and disadvantages of these different ways of coping with the fact of an established discipline which lacked an elaborate body of knowledge may be of interest to a Canadian adult educator. The first model I would call the umbrella model; it is established at most German universities. The second model I would call the network model; it is in place at the University of Bremen.

IV

the umbrella model

As mentioned above, adult education found a place under the roof of pedagogy, or the science of education. Adult education could furnish

its own room under this roof, but it had to adopt the style of the place. Pedagogy was a well-established discipline; everyone knew it. All teachers had to study it as part of their professional training. Its historical and institutional context was defined. It belonged to the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft*. In being subsumed under the modern form of pedagogy, adult education could be understood as a mere differentiation of this old and well-known discipline. It could take over the traditional themes of pedagogy, modifying them to the peculiarities of its own field. That fitted into the political assumption that adult education should be analogous to the school system. Like pedagogy, it could use other disciplines as quarries. Especially psychology and sociology were mined for blocks of knowledge (for example, learning theories or development theories already supporting educational psychology). The results were of greater interest than the methods. Such disciplines gained the status of assistant disciplines which served up the contents for studies in adult education. One result was that the autonomy of adult education became the autonomy of using findings from other disciplines without producing contents of its own. Obviously, some really important problems and peculiarities of adult education did not receive sufficient attention within this model. Problems like working with special target groups (e.g. the unemployed), or teaching in non-age-graded classes, or learning on completely different levels of competence (e.g. illiteracy plus political autonomy in one person) did not get adequate attention.

This umbrella model tends to neutralize the political and societal realities and implications of adult education. The second model, which I call the network model, attempts to escape these disadvantages.

the network model

This model tries to knit a new fabric, drawing threads from different disciplines within the net of science. It holds that the conditions of adult education are quite different from those of public schools, colleges, or even universities. It assumes that adult education needs its own paradigm in order to create its own body of knowledge. And it asserts that the range of disciplines cooperating with adult education should be broadened. It is moving toward a new form of the science of adult education; it has a vision. The reality works this way. Scholars from different disciplines—psychology, sociology, economics, political science, history, philosophy, education—who were experienced in various practice fields of adult education were brought together in the late seventies. These scholars brought experience of adult education in the unions and in the so-called *Volkshochschulen* (evening classes). Their main focuses included vocational, political, and cultural adult education. Every scholar was expected to keep up the tension between

his or her discipline and his or her practice field while teaching and researching. They comprised a team of twelve professors. In the course of time, a curriculum and study program were born from their controversial discussions. The basic and shared philosophy of these professors can be outlined as follows:

1. Since the Enlightenment, adult education has been deeply intertwined with **democracy**. There is a fundamental interdependence between political culture and the education of adults. The cultural and educational standards of adults (knowledge, values, world views, etc.) determine—at long last—the public educational systems, from schools to universities. This is quite different from, say, a feudalistic or dictatorial system where the ruler or dictator determines the educational patterns.

The old and famous phrase of Wilhelm Liebknecht, "Knowledge is Power and Power is Knowledge" (it was 1872 when Liebknecht gave his famous speech to workers of Saxony) was a **political** program but became also a leading program of adult education. It expresses the interdependence of education and political culture.

This philosophy assumes that it is dangerous for a society to restrict adult education to an agency which imparts knowledge. Rather, adult education seems to be the melting pot of democracy, overseen by the people themselves. In adult education knowledge, values, fantasies, behaviors, and the processes of thought are assimilated in the *sensus communis* (common sense of the people). And without such a common sense there is no democracy. The German (untranslatable) word *Bildung* expresses this aspect of the basic philosophy behind adult education.

2. Adult education is regarded as an important economic factor. The standard of education among adults, the quality, speed, and flexibility of continuing and recurrent education throughout one's life often determine not only the private income of an adult but also the profitability of a company and even the economic productivity of a society. There is a growing link between adult education and a manpower approach. Modern communication technologies will empower education—but probably education in a very restricted and narrow sense. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to link the economic dimension of adult education with its political, democratic dimension because the antagonism between a democratic culture on the one hand and technical and economic progress on the other hand becomes increasingly dangerous. It is not self-evident that technical and economic progress promotes democratic structures.

3. The 'sovereign' of adult education is any individual adult; education is an individualized process. Although one can (and should) organize adult education for certain target groups, or sub-cultures or ages, the real education process lies in the work and the achievement of an individual, of one person with an intricate background, emotions, history, life perspective, and autonomy. The rules and subjects of adult education therefore cannot be set in an abstract way as if the learning person were only a recipient of something. Adult education has to take into account the **biographical** situation of the learning adult. Hence, it depends on its ability to analyse social and biographical situations (as periods and episodes) and to transform these conditions into learning situations and processes. Socialized subjectivity is the starting and finishing point of adult education.

V

Regarding just these three points from a basic philosophy of adult education, it is obviously impossible to build up an adult education program by simply adding together some plausible parts and findings from different disciplines and calling the result a new discipline. Practitioners will discover useful additions on their own without the direction of students or scholars. Those academics who have the advantage of being able to view the whole field of adult education have a responsibility beyond that of patching together course work. Given the three philosophical dimensions of democracy, economic, and biography, scholars of adult education might begin to weave a paradigm (in Kuhn's sense) for the field from these threads.

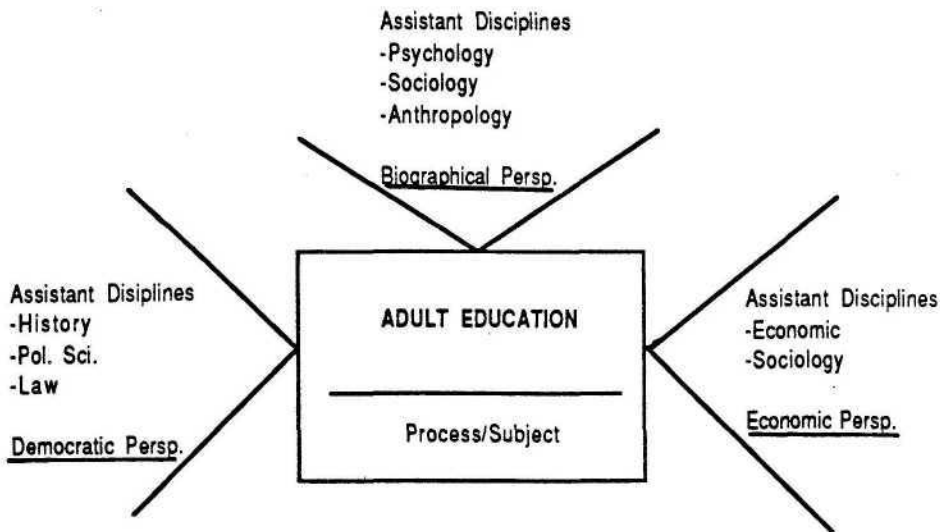
I would design it this way:

Education of adults (process, subjects, conditions) is that which has to be explained: the topic.

Democracy, economics and biography are the **perspectives** (the question marks of looking glasses which precede paradigms from which may arise questions, theories, methods) to look at adult education.

Scientific disciplines are the **tools** to qualify the perspectives (not to provide findings) into a real paradigm.

A diagram may illustrate this vision.



It is not possible to fully elaborate here on this scheme, but I will suggest some short examples arising from the biographical perspective to illustrate how the paradigm might be created.

The learning process of an artist depends on age, life-experience, self-constructs, sex, social strata, etc.

Normally, scientific disciplines such as the social sciences would transform these factors into variables and then isolate them in order to find correlations. The results of most empirical research are well-tested correlations of a very few, separate variables. These findings are not useless. They are true within the definition of this method.

But all these aspects, called variables, are inseparable in a concrete adult. The learning adult is an **identity** of age, sex, social strata, self-construct, history, life perspective, etc. It is impossible to isolate identity as one variable among others.

Identity epitomizes the whole impact of the biography. Because adult educators have to work with adults, the central point of this work should entail a biographical perspective. A biographical perspective is an approach to identity (which itself is only realized by philosophizing about it on a

metatheoretical level). However, it remains quite feasible to take a biographical perspective on education. The 'assistant disciplines' can lend support to this approach with their life-course psychology, or life-span theories, or cohort-analysis.

The crucial point is that knowledge taken from other disciplines must first be transformed into such a biographical perspective before it is useful for understanding and analyzing the real education of adults. The essential question is to find out how to mediate the processes and subjects of adult education through a biographical approach—how to see the artist as the integrated person he or she is.

I do not deny the difficulties in such a 'joint venture' method of establishing a paradigm of adult education. It takes many years of co-operation. But what is the alternative? If we do not generate a real paradigm of adult education or if we reject trying to do so, it does not make sense to insist on, say, a research institute of adult education or a Department of Adult Education or a study program of adult education. Without our own paradigm, it would be better to distribute scholars and students among other departments. In my own University of Bremen, we are confronted with everyday problems which hinder the realization of such a project, but everybody is convinced of the necessity to keep trying.

Real interdisciplinary research and teaching is time-consuming, highly communication-oriented, less method-bound, and more problem-solving. Who is willing to spend many years in such a project? There is a big seduction to withdraw into the known and safe harbour of one's basic discipline. In addition, when working out the political dimension (the democratic perspective), the political stances and opinions of every scholar and student influence the co-operation. With regard to this principle of democracy: are we able to work together with colleagues of opposite political camps and avoid useless factions? Or do we hold—against reality—that scientific work does not have a political dimension? Withdrawal into the safer field of an original discipline sometimes gives shelter, but it produces a neutralized understanding of adult education which does not meet the real conditions of adult education practice.

Another aspect we have had to struggle with is that the scientific reputation of a scholar normally functions within the traditional field of a discipline and its accompanying scientific community. When researching and publishing, a scholar cannot neglect this fact. In Bremen, we do not have solutions as yet, but we have learned that these kinds of problems and questions do not arise for those who work under

the umbrella model. Our model, the network model, forces us to clarify if a paradigm of adult education is desirable and possible. We remain convinced that there will be no reasonable adult education at universities without a distinguishable, discussible paradigm which generates research questions, provides methods and identifies perspectives of interpretation. Lacking this we are superfluous as a somewhat autonomous body within the universities. The rabbit theory of education—scholars nibbling here and there on whatever attracts our attention—does not work.

Reference Notes

1. Hutchins, R.M. 1944. *Education for freedom*, p. 90. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press.
2. Canadian Association for Adult Education. n.d. *Declaration of citizenship and adult learning*. Toronto: CAAE.
3. Kuhn, Thomas. 1970. The structure of scientific revolutions. In *Foundations of the unity of science*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2, by D. Neurath, R. Carnap, and C. Morris (eds). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.